

# UC Davis

## Alon: Journal for Filipinx American and Diasporic Studies

### Title

The Politics of Visibility and the Politics of Appearances: Filipina Migrant Consumer Power and Its Limits

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7f0492nc>

### Journal

Alon: Journal for Filipinx American and Diasporic Studies, 1(1)

### Author

Roces, Mina

### Publication Date

2021

### DOI

10.5070/LN41152412

### Copyright Information

Copyright 2021 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

# THE POLITICS OF VISIBILITY AND THE POLITICS OF APPEARANCES: FILIPINA MIGRANT CONSUMER POWER AND ITS LIMITS

Mina Roces

**ABSTRACT.** This article examines the way Sundays at Lucky Plaza Singapore are an anomaly where conceptual hierarchies are temporarily turned upside down, albeit only one day a week. It is divided into two themes—the politics of visibility and the politics of appearances—illustrating how Filipina domestic workers have been able to demonstrate consumer power and reject society’s attempts to fashion them into invisible minorities and unattractive women. Deriving theoretical inspiration from historians writing about Early Modern Europe, this study reveals how carnival and misrule can unsettle social hierarchies temporarily as well as initiate social change despite the limits of consumer power.

When I told my Singaporean colleague that I was doing a case study of Lucky Plaza as Filipina migrant consumer space, her response was disparaging: “the presence of Filipina maids in that mall cheapens the place,” she said. Yet her response was typical of many Chinese Singaporeans. Located in the heart of Singapore’s affluent shopping district, surrounded by the high-end couture malls with international brand names such as Cartier, Miu Miu, Balenciaga, Prada, Hermes, and upmarket malls like Paragon and Tangs—the presence of a thriving shopping mall that primarily catered to Filipina domestic workers has been described as “out of place” or an anomaly.<sup>1</sup> Locals like my colleague were embarrassed by it and dismissed it as having “already lost its class.”<sup>2</sup>

I suggest that Lucky Plaza is an anomaly for an entirely different reason. The main clientele on Sundays are Filipina overseas contract

---

1. Zhang Juan, “Ethnic Boundaries Redefined: The Emergence of the “Permanent Outsiders” in Singapore,” MA Thesis, National University of Singapore, 2005, 92.

According to Zhang Juan, “Being lucky or unlucky, Lucky Plaza stands out distinctively as the only shopping center in Orchard Road that seems to be ‘awkward’ and ‘out of place.’

2. “Filipinos in Singapore,” *Business World*, February 6, 1996, quoted in Zhang Juan; “Being lucky or unlucky, Lucky Plaza stands out distinctively as the only shopping center in Orchard Road that seems to be ‘awkward’ and ‘out of place.’” Juan, “Ethnic Boundaries Redefined,” 93.

workers. This group are denied the privileges of Singapore citizenship and are considered low status because they perform domestic work. During their working days they are expected to be invisible, unobtrusive, silent, obedient, and modestly dressed. But on their day off these women descend on Lucky Plaza in huge numbers and their visibility and loud voices proclaim their presence in Singapore. At Lucky Plaza and on Sundays, they are also imagined to be a potential pool of consumers by both the transnational Filipino businesses and the Singaporean businesses who compete for the Filipina dollar. At Lucky Plaza, Filipino restaurants and eateries abound, and Filipino consumer desires rule there. Although Singaporean locals and state actors such as security and police attempt to discipline Filipina bodies who visit the mall on Sundays, they do not always succeed.

Lucky Plaza on weekdays is very quiet. Sundays at Lucky Plaza are another matter. From 7:00 a.m. in the morning until almost midnight, the mall and its environs, including the back of the mall and the streets adjacent to it, are crowded with Filipina domestic workers. They take over occupancy of practically the entire mall and fill it with noise, laughter, and chatter. The majority of the crowds can be found on the third and fourth floors where the majority of Filipino-themed outlets are located. The hours between 11:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. are the peak times. The noise from the sheer number of female voices talking at once greet you immediately as you walk into the lobby. Tagalog music blares from the shops on the third floor. The queues at the remittance centers spill over to the corridors outside the offices and you would not be able to find a single empty table at the restaurants. Here Filipino domestic workers are not only visible—they are audible.

On Sundays, a large cardboard sign carried by a life-sized photograph of a man in office clothes greets incoming customers with the words in both Tagalog/Filipino and English: “Please do not sit along the passageway. Thank you! Pakiusap wag po nating harangan ang pang publikong daanan. Salamat!” (See fig. 1):

These signs are placed strategically in the lobby entrance to the mall and on the third and fourth floors, but these warnings are completely ignored. Many sit down on the floors of the corridors or in the nooks and crannies just outside the retail outlets. They have a picnic complete with blanket, food, and books to read, and use their mobile phones and ipads to chat with friends. On Sundays, a security man is posted next to the escalators between the second and third floors, especially tasked with the unenviable job of blowing his whistle to speed up the movement of the crowds and prevent them from congregating. He works very hard to get the Filipinas to walk quickly as they stepped out of the escalators between the third and the fourth floors in order to prevent congestion between those floors. When I spoke to him, he was stressed and exhausted. It is a losing battle. On Mondays, however, the mall is deathly quiet. There are a few local customers. It seems like a totally different world. The signs that prohibit loitering are gone and the security man with the whistle is nowhere to be seen. It is as if the

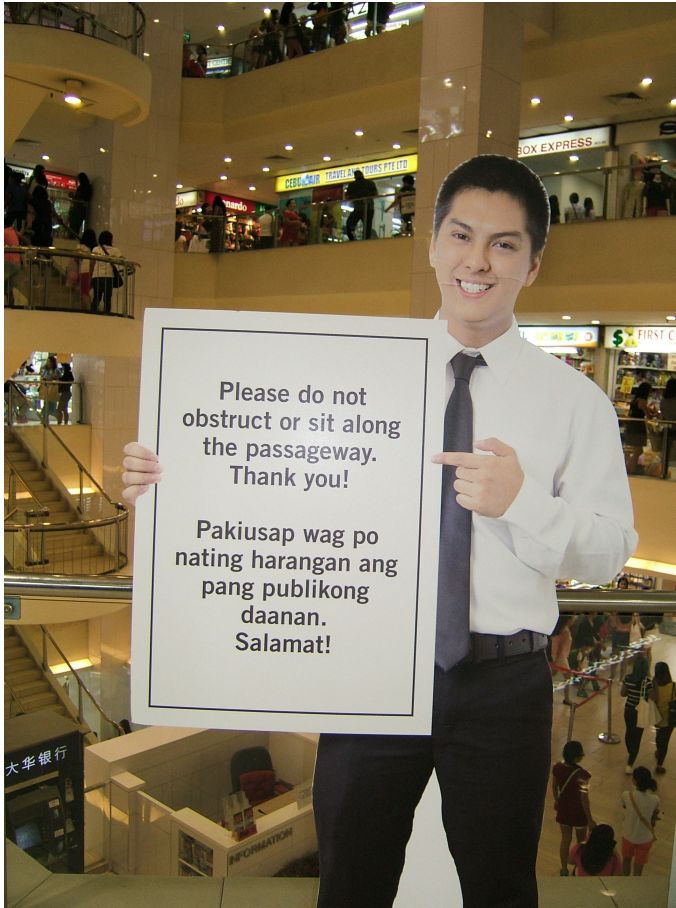


Figure 1: A life-size cardboard figure of a man greets visitors to Lucky Plaza on Sundays. Located close to the escalators between the second and third floors, the sign asks customers crowding in the landings between the escalators to avoid sitting down or congregating along the passageways. This sign only appears on Sundays and is absent on weekdays. (Photograph by Mina Roces, taken July 2017).

local Singaporeans are attempting to reclaim their shopping space only to lose it again the following Sunday.

In this article I would like to examine the way Sundays at Lucky Plaza are an anomaly where conceptual hierarchies are temporarily turned upside down, albeit only one day a week. I divide my discussion into two themes/case studies—the politics of visibility and the politics of appearances—to illustrate the ways that the Filipina domestic workers have been able to demonstrate consumer power and reject society's attempts to fashion them into invisible minorities and unfeminine women. In this analysis, I take my theoretical inspiration from the

anthropological and historical debates (especially in Early Modern European history) about the role of the carnival and misrule in overthrowing social and political hierarchies temporarily. According to Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, the carnival in Romans France in 1580 was a time when a legitimate role-reversal occurred, a kind of “world upside down” when peasants were crowned king for the day, the mayor issued a mock price list where luxuries were cheap and spoiled goods expensive, and wives could ridicule their husbands. Such temporary and approved customary overturning of the social order, Ladurie argues, acted as a sort of “safety-valve”; a release of tensions which ensured that the social hierarchy remained unchanged the rest of the year.<sup>3</sup> But for Natalie Zemon Davis, writing also about Early Modern France, “it is an exaggeration to view the carnival and misrule as merely a “safety valve,” as merely a primitive, pre-political form of recreation.”<sup>4</sup> Instead, she suggests that “the structure of the carnival form can evolve so that it can act both to reinforce order and to suggest alternatives to the existing order.”<sup>5</sup> In this article, I apply these theoretical explanations to analyze Filipino domestic workers’ consumption practices and sartorial transformations and their impacts. My case study differs from that of Ladurie and Davis because both are discussing peasant societies in Early Modern France, whereas Filipino domestic workers are temporary migrant workers in a host country which excludes them socially and politically (since they are denied Singaporean citizenship). The Filipino case study is a transnational one where outsiders try to resist the host country’s attempts to make them invisible and unfashionable. Thus, the transnational context means that, unlike the peasants in Early Modern France, the Filipino domestic workers’ everyday lives are located in a foreign host country. On the other hand, this transnational context means that the consumer behavior of Filipino domestic workers will have a potential impact on both the host society and the homeland’s culture.

I argue that Lucky Plaza on Sundays, like the carnival and misrule that Ladurie and Davis analyze, is a space where Filipino domestic workers unsettle social hierarchies temporarily as they participate in the politics of visibility and the politics of appearances. In doing so, Filipino domestic workers engage with the host society’s social parameters, and their own Filipino cultural constructions of gender and sexuality. It may be interpreted that Filipinos taking over a mall on Sundays can act as a “safety valve.” Singaporeans perhaps tolerate the way Filipinos take over their mall on Sundays because it is only one mall—not the entire Orchard Road—and this event begins and ends in 24 hours. Thus, one can argue that this fleeting take-over does not alter the status quo. However, like Natalie Davis, I propose that such “misrule” acts as both reinforcing order, but also as a way to suggest alternatives to the exist-

---

3. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Carnival in Romans*, (New York: George Braziller Inc., 1979).

4. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975, 122.

5. Davis, *Society and Culture*, 123.

ing order. There is of course a limit to these acts of resistance, but while it is arguable that these Sunday sartorial transformations and visible consumer power are fleeting, since the social hierarchies are continually maintained or reinforced on the other days of the week, there are also ways in which the Sunday habitus has some transformative potential. In this particular case study, Filipino domestic workers' consumption practices at Lucky Plaza on Sundays also alter Filipino cultural constructions of the feminine and sexuality, and have an impact on the Filipino businesses that they choose to patronize. Impacts and changes to the host society are probably much harder to find, although, at least for one day each week, Lucky Plaza is a place where Singaporeans are the outsiders. Filipino participation in a Singaporean NGO such as the Humanitarian Organization for Migrant Economics (hereafter H.O.M.E.), the organization that deals with migrant issues (whose office is located at Lucky Plaza precisely because domestic workers are there on their one day off), also means that they are not just workers and consumers; they are also activists collaborating with Singaporean organizations whose aims include improving the conditions and personal lives of all migrant workers.

Consumption histories have given star billing to women who have been identified as the ultimate consumers, especially in Western societies where "acts of exchange and consumption have long been obsessively gendered, usually as female."<sup>6</sup> Women's consumption history is incredibly important because what women choose to buy collectively alters the national histories of their countries. This needs to be acknowledged in the scholarship on consumption history that currently sees women as reacting to outside forces (like the state) rather than acting autonomously.<sup>7</sup> Among the dominant themes published on women's consumption history are consumer citizenship, particularly how the state has acted to educate women into making "correct" purchases for the household, and women's consumer movements.<sup>8</sup> Another theme is to investigate the connections between particular consumer goods and the advent of modernity such as the impact of the sewing machine in Japan.<sup>9</sup> Women have also been studied as the "private side" of consump-

---

6. Victoria de Gracia and Ellen Furlough (eds.), *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 1.

7. Rebecca Pulju, *Women and Mass Consumer Society in Postwar France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Andrew Gordon, *Fabricating Consumers The Sewing Machine in Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Enrica Asquer, "Domesticity and Beyond: Gender, Family and Consumption in Modern Europe," in Frank Trentmann (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 568-584; and Kristin L. Hoganson, *Consumers' Imperium. The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

8. Rebecca Pulju, *Women and Mass Consumer Society in Postwar France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); de Gracia and Furlough, *The Sex of Things*.

9. Andrew Gordon, *Fabricating Consumers. The Sewing Machine in Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

tion in the “commodification” of domestic space.<sup>10</sup> The transnational turn’s impact on the gendered history of women’s consumption practices is epitomized by Kristin Hoganson’s study of how elite American women’s purchases endorsed American empire.<sup>11</sup> In these studies, women consumers are not represented as proactive subjects. Instead, they are either reacting to state directives, endorsing the state’s imperial projects, or else their purchases are seen to be the barometer for measuring the nation’s ascent towards “modernity.” My Filipino women migrant consumers are proactive agents whose purchasing decisions were not reacting to state directives or involved in consumer movements that were formed in response to economic crises.

The historical literature above can be classified as belonging to the theoretical paradigm where consumers are being imagined to be victims of capitalism where “consumer culture is an instrument of domination,” the market “an arena of domination and power struggle,” and where the ruling class “reduces individuals to powerless dupes.”<sup>12</sup> Other scholars theorizing consumer behavior suggest the opposite<sup>3/4</sup>celebrating “consumption as a fundamental enterprise for self-expression, sustainability of social relations, and even negotiation of social inequalities.”<sup>13</sup> Pierre Bourdieu moved away from these binary opposites by examining the role of cultural capital and the way that different social classes exhibit distinct taste in their consumption practices, proposing instead that the social tensions did not result from the power struggle between the marketplace and duped consumers, but among social classes in the battle for what practices and tastes were legitimate.<sup>14</sup> Focusing on everyday acts, Michel de Certeau proposes that consumers act autonomously and cannot be controlled by outside forces such as state organizations and the media.<sup>15</sup> In de Certeau’s schema consumers can engage in everyday forms of resistance giving them “the agency to challenge and contest the dominating power of consumer culture.”<sup>16</sup> However, Elif Izberk-Bilgin reminds us that these empowerment discourses may underestimate the way acts of consumption are nonetheless bound by institutions and social relations.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps it might be prudent to consider the market-bound perspective which cautiously proposes that the “consumers cannot be completely emancipated from

---

10. Enrica Asquer, “Domesticity and Beyond: Gender, Family and Consumption in Modern Europe,” in Frank Trentmann (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 570.

11. Kristin L. Hoganson, *Consumer’s Imperium. The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

12. Elif Izberk-Bilgin, “An Interdisciplinary Review of Resistance to Consumption, Some Marketing Interpretations, and Future Research Suggestions,” *Consumption Markets & Culture* 13, No. 3, 2010, 304–06.

13. Izberk-Bilgin, “An Interdisciplinary Review,” 306.

14. Izberk-Bilgin, “An Interdisciplinary Review,” 308–09.

15. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

16. Izberk-Bilgin, “An Interdisciplinary Review,” 310.

17. Izberk-Bilgin, “An Interdisciplinary Review,” 310.

the encapsulating logic of the market,” but resistance can come from the individual level and appear quietly in the market-place.<sup>18</sup> This theoretical position “focuses on the lived experience of resistance and how it transforms both consumers and market agents.”<sup>19</sup> Here in this case study of Lucky Plaza, I want to explore the “the liberating aspects of resistance as a lived experience rather than the processes through which consumers can attain a critical stance to consumption.”<sup>20</sup> By reclaiming visibility on Sundays, Filipino domestic workers exercise the politics of presence. This presence is acknowledged by the Singaporean retail owners who see them as potential consumers whose dollar they want to target. Furthermore, applying Bourdieu’s model of the contests between social classes about whose taste is more legitimate, it is Filipino tastes, not Singaporean tastes, that dictate what retail outlets sell there. Interestingly, the arbiters of taste in this mall come not from the class with economic and political capital. Finally, I also argue that the Sunday sartorial transformations of Filipina domestic workers are not just an example of fashion as a coping strategy; these beauty make-overs also reject the host society’s dictates that they remain unsexy and unattractive women. These Sunday consumption practices, however, as I suggest later, can also be read as small steps in initiating social change.

The scholarship on Filipino migrant women gives us a vivid picture of their victimization and periodic acts of resistance, but so far has ignored their power as consumers.<sup>21</sup> Lisa Law uses the case study of the Sunday gatherings of domestic workers at Hong Kong Central Station and the anthropology of the senses to show that this space “is also a place where Filipino women express a creative subjective capacity with the potential to displace the hegemonic images that describe their lives and work—if only for one day a week.”<sup>22</sup> Savoring Filipino food each Sunday at these gatherings then transforms Central into “home” (the Philippines) and “the consumption of Filipino food in Hong Kong is a salient example of how everyday experience can become performative politics of ethnic identity.”<sup>23</sup> More important, Law suggests that these gatherings “allow Filipino women to define their own social worlds and their own situated resistances” with the effect that “they transgress their circumscribed role as ‘maid.’”<sup>24</sup> Law’s arguments about locating

---

18. Izberk-Bilgin, “An Interdisciplinary Review,” 310.

19. Izberk-Bilgin, “An Interdisciplinary Review,” 310.

20. Izberk-Bilgin, “An Interdisciplinary Review,” 313.

21. Nicole Constable, *Maid to Order in Hong Kong Stories of Filipina Workers* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Rhacel S. Parreñas, *Servants of Globalization. Women, Migration and Domestic Work* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2003); Rhacel S. Parreñas, *Illicit Flirtations. Labor, Migration and Sex Trafficking in Tokyo* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); Pei-Chia Lan, *Global Cinderellas, Migrant Domestic Work, and Newly Rich Employers in Taiwan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Ligaya Lindio-McGovern, *A Study of Filipino Migrant Workers in Global Cities* (London: Routledge, 2012).

22. Lisa Law, “Home Cooking: Filipino Women and Geographies of the Senses in Hong Kong,” *Ecumene* 8, No. 3, 2001, 266.

23. Law, “Home Cooking,” 276–80.

24. Law, “Home Cooking,” 280.



the politics of ethnic identity and migrant spaces also complements Rick Bonus' major study on Filipino Oriental stores in Los Angeles and San Diego (US) as one way migrants resist the host society's attempt to make them invisible.<sup>25</sup> My study of Lucky Plaza builds on these excellent studies since comparisons can be made between Hongkong, the US, and Singapore. Here I want to explore the way Filipina consumption practices reject the host country's attempts to mold overseas contract workers into invisible subjects and unfeminine women. The perspective of the politics of appearances (dress and fashion history) has yet to be included in the study of migrant consumption (with the exception of my previous work on Filipino male migrant workers' use of tailor-made suits to challenge social exclusion in the 1920s US).<sup>26</sup>

\*\*\*\*\*

I am a Filipina who was born in Manila, Philippines and migrated to Sydney, Australia as a teenager in the late 1970s, making me what social scientists label a "1.5 generation" immigrant.<sup>27</sup> I have led a mobile life—finishing my undergraduate degree in history at the University of Sydney, and my postgraduate degrees at the University of Michigan. My first academic job was at Central Queensland University in a town (Rockhampton) classified by Australia as "rural and remote." It was there where I first collected stories of Filipino women migrants for marriage who composed the majority of the Filipino community there. I was there for seven years in the 1990s, and I transferred to the University of New South Wales in Sydney where I have taught since 1999. I am a historian who has published on twentieth century Filipino women's history, and my own life experience as a mobile person has given me an empathy for the way the migrant archives interpret the past, while my Filipino upbringing, and my annual sojourns to the Philippines, have enabled me to appreciate the difference between the migration experience of the diaspora and the viewpoint of the nation left behind.

This article is the result of ethnographic field work carried out in Lucky Plaza Singapore for three weeks in July 2017 and for a weekend in July 2011. I attempted an ethnographic mapping of the shopping mall including a close analysis of the type of businesses there and the sensory landscape including sights, smells, sounds, visual markers such as billboards, posters, and advertisements, and the taste of culinary offerings. By ethnographic mapping I mean

---

25. Rick Bonus, *Locating Filipino Americans: Ethnicity and Cultural Politics of Space* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000).

26. See Mina Roces, "These Guys Came Out Looking Like Movie Actors": Filipino Dress and Consumer Practices in the United States, 1920s–1930s," *Pacific Historical Review* 85, No. 4, 2016, 532–76.

27. On the definition of Filipino 1.5 generation migrants, see Itaru Nagasaka and Asuncion Freznoza-Flot, "Introduction" in *Mobile Childhoods in Filipino Transnational Families*, ed. Itaru Nagasaka and Asuncion Freznoza-Flot (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 1–19.

the use of ethnography to make an alternative map of the place or space, and then I will juxtapose the formal mapping of the physical structures or urban planning with the lived and vernacular mapping of consumerism in the sites of study.<sup>28</sup> Gordon Mathews used this method in his ethnographic account of Chungking Mansions in Hong Kong, a dilapidated 17-story structure of cheap guesthouses that was home to temporary workers from South Asia and Africa.<sup>29</sup> I visited Lucky Plaza every day for three weeks (including three Sundays) in July 2017. Working my way from the basement to the sixth floor, I compiled a list of all the retail outlets and wrote down what items they sold or services they offered. I distinguished between those targeting Filipino customers and those who appealed to local Singaporeans. In addition, I conducted interviews with a dozen Lucky Plaza shop owners and/or managers of the Philippine National Bank, which has two branches at the mall, as well as a dozen Filipina domestic workers who shop at Lucky Plaza, and officers of the NGO HOME (which has an office at Lucky Plaza). I participated at one graduation ceremony for Filipino domestic workers who took courses from HOME, delivering an address to the graduates and handing out diplomas. I also read issues of the Manila Press and the OFW Pinoy Star, magazines directed at the Filipina domestic worker clientele. Interviews were done in Tagalog/Filipino. This work also builds on 9 years of research on Filipino migration, including research on consumption practices where I used memoirs, newspapers, and over seventy-five interviews to write a history of the Filipino migration experience.<sup>30</sup>

## Filipino Domestic Workers in Singapore

There are about 70,000 Filipino domestic workers in Singapore (as of June 2014).<sup>31</sup> In Singapore about one in five households employ or are dependent on overseas foreign workers for housekeeping and care for the young and elderly.<sup>32</sup> The total number of all foreign domestic workers in Singapore is 218,300 (or 16% of the total foreign workforce) with Filipinos comprising more than a third of this niche group. Domes-

---

28. Gordon Mathews, *Chunking Mansions Hong Kong* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Duncan McDuie-Ra, "The North-East Map of Delhi," *Economic and Political Weekly* 48, No. 30, 69-77; Duncan McDuie-Ra, *Borderland City in New India Frontier to Gateway* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016).

29. Mathews, *Chunking Mansions*.

30. Mina Roces, *The Filipino Migration Experience: Global Agents of Change* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021).

31. Anja Wessels, "Home Sweet Home? Work, Life and Well-Being of Foreign Domestic Workers in Singapore," *Research Report*, HOME (Humanitarian Organization for Migrant Economics), March 2015, 10.

32. Wessels, "Home Sweet Home?," 10. Another study estimated one in six Singaporean households hired a domestic worker. See Trisha Tsui-Chuan Lin and Shirley Haiso-Li Sun, "Connecting as a Form of Resisting Control: Foreign Domestic Workers' Mobile Phone Use in Singapore," *Media Asia* 37, No. 4, 2010, 183.

tic workers earned an average monthly salary of SGD\$515 in 2015.<sup>33</sup> My own interviews with Filipina domestic workers divulges a slightly higher average wage of about SGD\$600 with the highest paid person (working for a foreign embassy) receiving SGD2000 a month. Many Singaporean families are highly dependent on them for doing practically all the domestic and caring duties in their everyday life.

Almost 30% of people living in Singapore (in 2015) are “non-residents.” But this is not a homogenous group.<sup>34</sup> A hierarchy of three visa categories exists: (1) those with an Employment Pass who are eligible for permanent residency (for professionals such as doctors and bankers), (2) those with an S-Pass who are mid-level skilled staff and are also eligible for permanent residence, and finally (3) those classified as performing unskilled or semi-skilled work (such as domestic work and construction) and are granted a work permit but are not eligible for permanent residency.<sup>35</sup> Domestic workers belong to the lowest category. They cannot be accompanied by dependents and are forbidden from marrying Singaporean citizens and permanent residents.<sup>36</sup> The work permit is governed by strict rules that ensure that they are forever a transient work force: they receive short-term contracts ranging to a maximum of two years, there are restrictions on marriage alluded to above, and they are forbidden to give birth to children in Singapore (which is enforced through regular pregnancy tests).<sup>37</sup> Migrant domestic workers are also excluded from the Employment Act (which regulated working hours, access to leave and general work conditions) and can be repatriated at will by their employers.<sup>38</sup> A study commissioned by H.O.M.E. reveals that foreign domestic workers experienced “structurally hostile work conditions” that included long working hours (13–19 hours), the lack of rest days, inadequate sleeping accommodation, food deprivation and psychological abuse.<sup>39</sup>

Since most domestic workers live with their employers, they are also subject to a gamut of rules that govern their dress, deportment, behavior, and communication with the world outside the home (through rules about using the mobile phone, for example). Scholars

---

33. Wessels, “Home Sweet Home?”, 27. Other estimates are similar such as SBD\$500 in Chiu Yee Koh, Charaine Goh, Kellynn Week, and Brenda SA Yeoh, “Drivers of Migration Policy Reform: The Day Off Policy for Migrant Domestic Workers in Singapore,” *Global Social Policy* 17, No. 2, 2017, 196.

34. Megha Amrith, *Caring for Strangers Filipino Medical Workers in Asia* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2017), 35.

35. Amrith, *Caring for Strangers*, 37.

36. Brenda S. A. Yeoh and Shirlena Huang, “Transnational Domestic Workers and the Negotiation of Mobility and Work Practices in Singapore’s Home-Spaces,” *Mobilities* 5, No. 2, 2010, 223.

37. Chiu Yee Koh, Kellynn Wee, Charmaine Goh and Brenda S.A. Yeoh, “Cultural Mediation Through Vernacularization: Framing Rights Claims Through the Day-Off Campaign for Migrant Domestic Workers in Singapore,” *International Migration* 55, No. 3, 2017, 93.

38. Koh, Wee, Goh and Yeoh, “Cultural Mediation,” 93.

39. Wessels, “Home Sweet Home?”

have labelled these constraints on mobility, living status, and social activities as—a “total institution.”<sup>40</sup> Since they encounter constant and daily surveillance in the private sphere, domestic workers feel that they can only express themselves in the public sphere on their days off where they can be free from the prying and judging eyes of their employers.<sup>41</sup> But their presence in public places is not welcome either. The common perception of locals is that their “maids” (the word used by locals to refer to their domestic workers) are only temporary workers and therefore have “no part to play in public life and therefore no place in the public arena belonging to the citizenry.”<sup>42</sup> Employers experience anxieties that, away from their watchful eyes, their domestic workers will find boyfriends, get pregnant, and have to be repatriated—resulting in the loss of the security bond of \$5000.<sup>43</sup> Thus, it was only in 2013 that a law was passed giving domestic workers a day off per week. The law itself is still unenforceable and employers are allowed to have an opt-out compensation-in-lieu of the day off paid to their staff.<sup>44</sup> At the present writing (2020), NGOs such as H.O.M.E. are still advocating for a true 24-hour day off since many employers interpret the day off as an 8-hour day requiring their domestic workers to complete their chores before 9:00 a.m. and expecting them to return home before 7:00 p.m. to cook dinner.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, since the implementation of the day-off policy surveys have shown an increasing access to days off (from 12% in 2011 to 41% in 2015).<sup>46</sup>

Singapore’s civil society is considered a “closed” system, meaning that it is difficult for domestic workers (perceived to be aliens or outsiders) to lobby for migrant rights.<sup>47</sup> Thus, it is usually the NGOs such as H.O.M.E. and Transient Workers Count Two (TWC2) who advocate on their behalf.<sup>48</sup> Taking the “day off” campaign as a case study is illuminating in this regard. In an excellent article on the topic, scholars Chiu Yee Koh, Kellynn Week, Charmian Goh, and Brenda S.A. Yeoh explain the success of the crusade as due to the “vernacularization” of the claims discourse which deliberately framed the need for a day off not in terms of rights, but in terms of maintaining Singapore’s competitive edge in attracting the migrant workers needed for economic devel-

---

40. Lin and Sun, “Connecting as a Form of Resisting Control,” 183–84.

41. Amrith, *Caring for Strangers*, 142, and Brenda S. A. Yeoh and Shirlena Huang, “Negotiating Public Space: Strategies and Styles of Migrant Female Domestic Workers in Singapore,” *Urban Studies* 35, no. 3, 1998, 585.

42. Brenda S. A. Yeoh and Shirlena Huang, “Negotiating Public Space: Strategies and Styles of Migrant Female Domestic Workers in Singapore,” *Urban Studies* 35, no. 3, 1998, 588.

43. Yeoh and Huang, “Negotiating Public Space,” 583–602.

44. Chiu Yee Koh, Charmian Goh, Kellynn Wee and Brenda S.A. Yeoh, “Drivers of Migration Policy Reform: The Day Off Policy for Migrant Domestic Workers in Singapore,” *Global Social Policy* 17, no. 2, 2017, 197.

45. Speech of Jolovan Wham, Consultant, H.O.M.E., Graduation Exercises for H.O.M.E., Singapore, July 23, 2017.

46. Quoted in Koh, Goh, Wee and Yeoh, “Drivers of Migration Policy Reform,” 191.

47. Koh, Wee, Goh, and Yeoh, “Cultural Mediation Through Vernacularization,” 89.

48. Koh, Wee, Goh, and Yeoh, “Cultural Mediation Through Vernacularization,” 89–104.

opment, and by focusing on the benefits the day off can have on the maid's productivity for the employers (which included using the day off to learn new skills such as cooking and sewing, courses offered by NGOs such as H.O.M.E.).<sup>49</sup> This political situation underscores the marginal status of foreign domestic workers who have to depend on NGOs to advocate on their behalf and/or as a refuge when they become victims of abuse including emotional abuse and non-payment of salaries. The NGOs themselves are acutely aware that a rights discourse approach to their legal advocacy would not be popular in the Singaporean political and cultural environment.

Outside the confines of their employers' homes, workers still have to contend with social discrimination. With no place to go on their time off, they colonize the available public spaces, a practice that Singaporeans frown upon. Shopping malls, public parks, the botanical garden, public swimming pools and picnic areas, and some nightclubs, bars, and pubs occupy the top choices in the very short list of available free entertainment areas. Filipina domestic workers I interviewed tell me that they have to go to Lucky Plaza in order to remit money because it is much cheaper than relying on Singaporean banks. This necessity makes the site the most practical meeting place for them to catch up with friends. Since there is nowhere to sit, they simply choose to sit on the floors in the many corridors and corners of the entire six floors of the mall. This colonization of Lucky Plaza by Filipino domestic workers is tolerated by local Singaporeans. Brenda Yeoh and Shirlena Huang's article on the way female domestic workers negotiate public spaces in Singapore showed that 27.5% of locals surveyed resent the Filipino crowds at Lucky Plaza claiming that it is a "social nuisance." They complain about the "crowds," the "hordes of maids milling around," the "noise" and the "litter."<sup>50</sup> Locals tend to avoid Lucky Plaza on Sundays. The disparaging remarks that are made about Lucky Plaza are not just about social discrimination against a class they judge to be below their own, but also a reflection of their anxieties that at Lucky Plaza they are the minority group outnumbered by Filipinos.<sup>51</sup> Cheng Ee, one of Yeoh and Huang's informants expressed this feeling of being "othered" quite well:

I didn't sort of like the feeling [at Lucky Plaza] because I felt that we were surrounded. The whole place was surrounded by them [Filipinos]. And it wasn't comfortable shopping because... it was too crowded in the first place and also [because] a lot of things [goods and services] were geared for them.<sup>52</sup>

Singaporeans also express a fear of losing public space to the marginal group. As Shanti, a local put it: "The Filipino crowd alone is

---

49. Koh, Wee, Goh, and Yeoh, "Cultural Mediation Through Vernacularization," 89-104.

50. Yeoh and Huang, "Negotiating Public Space," 593.

51. Yeoh and Huang, "Negotiating Public Space," 593.

52. Quoted in Yeoh and Huang, "Negotiating Public Space," 593.

enough to scare me out of Lucky Plaza. I feel so much like an outsider in what is supposedly “ours.”<sup>53</sup>

## Lucky Plaza, Singapore

In a seminal study about the way ethnic boundaries are created in Singapore among groups described as “permanent outsiders” (meaning those with work permits only), Zhang Juan notes that Lucky Plaza “a unique ethnoscape, separates Filipinos not only from CMIO [i.e., Chinese Malaysian, Indian, Other—the official races of Singaporean citizens], but also [from] other migrant workers of different nationalities.”<sup>54</sup> This argument suggests that Lucky Plaza is an assertion of Filipino ethnic identity through the fashioning of an ethnic enclave.<sup>55</sup> Local Singaporeans and Filipino nurses (who are eligible for permanent residency and who want to distinguish themselves from domestic workers) avoid the mall on Sundays.<sup>56</sup> But savvy local Singaporean businesses woo Filipino domestic workers for a share of their disposable income.

Lucky Plaza was built in 1978 right at the center of Orchard Road. It is the street most associated with Singaporean identity.<sup>57</sup> For local Singaporeans the “Orchardscape” (a term coined by Yeung and Savage) is the epitome of modernity, the city’s “shopping Mecca,” the nation’s “main street”—“an interesting street that contributes to Singapore’s character.”<sup>58</sup> It was originally patronized by wealthy local shoppers and foreign tourists. The retailers were predominantly Chinese and included a number of Indonesian shopkeepers (13.6% of the total).<sup>59</sup> At that time it had the reputation of being modern and high-end. But the tenor of the mall changed in the 1980s as the shops on the upper floors that used to sell luxury goods disappeared.<sup>60</sup> Today, with the exception of the fifth floor which houses offices of health practitioners, a large number of shops from the basement to the sixth floor cater to the consumer demands of Filipino domestic workers. Most Filipino-themed outlets are concentrated on the third and fourth floors.

---

53. Quoted in Esther Wong Teck Yen, “Singapore’s “Filipina Maids Weekend Enclave”: A Case Study of Lucky Plaza,” academic exercise submitted in partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts (Honours), Department of Geography, National University of Singapore, 1998/1999, 57.

54. Juan, “Ethnic Boundaries Redefined,” 88.

55. Juan, “Ethnic Boundaries Redefined,” 88.

56. Amrith, *Caring for Strangers*, 133.

57. Henry W. C. Yeung and Victor R. Savage, “The Singaporean Image of the Orchardscape,” in Brenda S. A. Yeoh and Lily Kong (eds.), *Portraits of Places: History, Community and Identity in Singapore* (Singapore: Times Editions, 1995), 69–87.

58. Yeung and Savage, “The Singaporean Image of the Orchardscape,” 69–87.

59. Juan, “Ethnic Boundaries Redefined,” 91.

60. Juan, “Ethnic Boundaries Redefined,” 91.

## The Politics of Visibility

In the independent feature film *Remittance*, about Filipina domestic workers in Singapore, there is a scene where the white male employer undresses and changes clothes in his bedroom leaving the door open. As he goes about this private everyday habit the Filipina maid enters the room, tidies up, and then leaves. During the entire time she is in the same room with him, her presence is not acknowledged. It is as if she was not there at all. In another scene from the same movie, Singaporeans attend a children's party with their maids in tow. The host of the party does not greet them, no one acknowledges that they are there and the group of maids gather and eat separately from everybody else.<sup>61</sup> This film, which was based on interviews with Filipino domestic workers in Singapore, captures very well the way these women are expected to be there, but not there—they are required to perform the important everyday tasks that maintain the household, but they are clearly not considered part of the family and are required to remain quietly and unobtrusively in the background. This is the reality of their everyday working and private lives as they co-habit the home of their employers. This is the host country's conceptual social hierarchy that is indeed maintained in the home and during weekdays. Filipino domestic workers are considered by local Singaporeans as "just their maids." They do not have citizenship rights and are at the mercy of their employers.<sup>62</sup> Their bodies, their movements, their behavior, and their time are policed on weekdays. Many of them suffer all forms of abuse from physical to verbal insults. The shelter maintained by the Philippine Embassy in Singapore can have between a dozen to sixty Filipinas seeking refuge from cruel employers.<sup>63</sup> They face social discrimination from local society who view them as beneath them. They are seen as temporary workers whose presence is at best tolerated. In Singaporean society, their status and position is marginal, vulnerable and Other. On their workdays they are expected to remain invisible.

At Lucky Plaza, however, Filipino migrant domestic workers' presence is acknowledged. Their tastes and desires influence the types of retail outlets, products and service offered there. These businesses cater to the desires of this clientele and adjust their opening hours to suit their working and leisure hours. There are approximately 423 retail outlets inside Lucky Plaza. Of these, approximately 122 of them are geared towards a Filipino clientele. This includes banks, remittance services, grocery stores, employment agencies (advertising for Filipino maids), and real estate companies. The rest of the retail outlets that seek a local clientele include: jewelry shops (approximately forty-three), money changers and souvenir stores directed at tourists, a handful of clothing and accessory stores and electronics (approximately fifteen). Although the Filipino-themed outlets are not the majority with 122/423,

61. Patrick Daly and Joel Fendelman (Directors), *Remittance*, 2015.

62. Koh, Wee, Goh, and Yeoh, "Cultural Mediation Through Vernacularization," 93.

63. Personal communication from Cristine Santos, H.O.M.E., Singapore, July 29, 2017.

if one shifts the criteria from counting shops to counting customers on Sundays, the thousands of Filipino domestic workers who occupy almost every space there proclaim that it is indeed their territory.

Filipino fast food and restaurant outlets abound: five in the basement, zero on the first floor, which is dominated by the Pizza Hut franchise, four in level two, three in level three, eight in level four, and five in level six, including a Jollibee branch that occupies nearly half the floor. Major regional groups are represented in the restaurant choices—*Ilongo* or *Visayan* (*Inasal*), *Kapampangan* (*Kabalen* for eg), *Ilocano*, *Tagalog*—giving Filipinos from the different provinces the delicacies that remind them of home. Local Singaporeans do not generally patronize these establishments. The salesperson at *Tapa King* told me that 90% of his customers are Filipinos. Eddie Gonzalez, the owner of the *Barrio Fiesta* restaurant on the fourth floor, who has been there since 2004, says that his clientele is Filipino (domestic workers, seafarers, nurses, and professionals).<sup>64</sup> My own observations on Sundays and weekdays confirm this. There are a handful of Chinese, Indonesian, and Malaysian restaurants which also attract the locals, but only Filipinas who had been in Singapore for over a decade expressed a desire to eat there. My interviewees with those who lived in Singapore for twenty years, for example, were fond of the healthy Chinese home-made *taufu* soup and *Popiah* (Malaysian spring rolls).

The number of stores selling Filipino groceries abound and are concentrated between the third and fourth floors. I counted zero in level one, four in level two, five in level three, and seven in level four. Not all the stores are owned by Filipinos; many have Chinese Singaporean owners and managers some of whom were married to Filipinas. But the Chinese shop owners hire Filipino salespersons and keep a close eye on them. I had a difficult time talking to the Filipino salesgirls at two of the grocery stores owned and managed by Chinese. The moment I attempted to engage them in a conversation about the products they had for sale, the Chinese owners immediately interrupted me to ask what else I wanted to buy to prevent me from talking to them. Hiring Filipino salespersons, however, is obviously a marketing ploy to encourage Filipino customers to patronize their establishment. *D & C* shoe store in level 2 also hires a Filipina salesperson on weekends. The cuisine served at *Zagu* restaurant on the fourth floor is cooked by Filipinos. The Singaporean owner at the cashier station asked me politely what my order was in Tagalog. That local Singaporean owners make an effort to learn the Filipino language is remarkable given that the locals who employ these same customers as their domestic workers do not bother to learn it, since they communicate with them in English.

From my observation, all the Philippine-themed grocery stores (a total of sixteen) are selling almost exactly the same items: fish sauce, banana ketchup, *Mang Tomas* lechon sauce, *Ligo* brand canned sardines and mackerel, bottled sweets for *halo-halo* (iced dessert) like sweet

64. Interview with Eddie Gonzalez, owner of *Barrio Fiesta*, *Lucky Plaza*, Singapore, July 17, 2017.



chickpeas, nata de coco, sweet mungo beans, canned jackfruit, green mangoes, papaya, yams, banana hearts, pork crackling, Nabisco biscuits, and Filipino chocolates. It is the sheer volume of Filipino customers that ensures that all the grocery stores are able to turn a profit. If a good number of the 70,000 Filipina domestic workers have to visit Lucky Plaza to remit money, they form an enormous pool of potential customers for all sorts of retail outlets—a captive market for savvy shop-owners. Enterprising owners choose items that are easily packed in balikbayan boxes.

A primary motivation for Filipino women to take jobs as domestic workers in Singapore is to remit money to their families in the Philippines. The remittances sent by overseas workers to the Philippines in 2015 was estimated at over \$US 25 billion (quoted in Amrith 2017: 33). Remittance outlets are in Levels two and three of the mall. There are two branches of the Philippine National Bank, a Western Union, and a Banco de Oro (BDO) Remit Online office in level two and five money transfer outlets. On Sundays, domestic workers spend sometimes two hours of their precious day off in a queue waiting for their turn. I have seen the queues snaking around the main corridors of the third floor as hundreds of Filipina dutiful mothers and daughters try to send their hard-earned Singapore dollars to their dependents.

Banks are astutely aware of the huge profits they can make from overseas remittance services. Hence, they have altered their opening hours to suit the schedule of their most valued clients in Lucky Plaza. All the banks and remittance services with Filipino clients in Lucky Plaza are open on Sundays. The two branches of the Philippine National Bank at Lucky Plaza are open from 8:30 to 7:30 p.m. on Sundays. They are open seven days and hire extra staff to accommodate the Filipinos who remit on Sundays.<sup>65</sup>

Cash is not the only item that Filipino domestic workers send back to the home country. The *padala* tradition of sending regular shipments of enormous boxes (dubbed *Balibayan* boxes) containing gifts, groceries, and sundry items (including second-hand appliances donated by employers and school supplies) is compulsory for migrants because the opposite—not sending the gift box—implied that the migrant had forgotten about his/her obligations. These shipments of goods in “*balikbayan* boxes” are now a regular practice; an invented tradition. The origins of this can be traced to the custom of buying *pasalubongs* (souvenirs and gifts) that a traveler brought back to his/her family in the Philippines to give to friends and relatives as a token to mean that they had thought about them while they were away, and to share their overseas experience with them. But the *pasalubong* is meant to be a small, inexpensive one-off gift. The *balikbayan* box custom magnifies the *pasalubong* tradition into an expensive, time-consuming exercise with senders filling up gigantic sized boxes with gifts and shipping them

---

65. Interview with Cristy M. Vicentina, General Manager, Singapore Branch Philippine National Bank, and Regional Head for Asia and Oceania, Lucky Plaza, Singapore, July 26, 2017.

several times a year. The establishment of door-to-door shipping and courier businesses allows this practice to flourish. The goods that fill the boxes range from daily grocery items such as canned goods like Spam and sardines, laundry detergent, beauty products like shampoo and soap, chocolates, and clothing (new, branded or second hand) to second hand appliances (including air conditioners) and even an entire kitchen.<sup>66</sup> The boxes they send vary in size but the larger boxes are the most popular.<sup>67</sup> Singapore domestic workers fill their boxes with goods in monthly instalments.<sup>68</sup> LBC courier allows clients to make monthly visits to boxes stored for them at their warehouse (since they have no place to put them in their employers homes). Filipina domestic workers in Singapore send home boxes all year round but particularly during Christmas and New Year (to send Christmas gifts), Chinese New Year (since employers give their helpers cash and second hand items as part of the “spring cleaning” for the New Year), and the start of the school year (to send school supplies that includes notebooks, shoes and socks).<sup>69</sup> It costs SGD\$100 to send a large box of 24 x 24 x 30 box to Manila, (the same box cost SGD\$135 to send to Mindanao), and SGD\$75 to send a medium box to Manila (using LBC prices for 2017). The steep prices endow the sender with the status of generous benefactor or patron, especially if the gifts are distributed beyond the family to the rest of the community.<sup>70</sup>

Since some of the goods sent are available in the Philippines, the popularity of this custom defies economic logic. Deirdre McKay argues that through the sending of groceries and household items: “migrants remind their households of their long-distance affections and demonstrate, in a material way, how they continue to participate in these households.”<sup>71</sup> Filipino journalists label it “love in a box,” concluding that “albeit materialistic in nature, it’s living proof of our thoughtfulness, a tangible expression of care and concern across the miles.”<sup>72</sup> Migrants are prepared to send these items also because they

---

66. Clement C. Camposano, “Enacting Embeddedness Through the Transnational Traffic in Goods: The Case of Ilonggo OFWs In Hong Kong,” *Review of Women’s Studies* 21, no. 2, 2012, 16, Robert De Guzman Jr., “Balikbayan Box,” in Raquel Delfin Padilla and Jocelyn Bayubay Revilla (eds.), *Sindi ng Lampara (OFW Stories)* Manila: Allibratore Enterprises, 2012), 170. A domestic worker Milan revealed that her employer renovated her kitchen every five years and donated the second-hand appliances to her, which she sent to her family in the Philippines. Interview with Jocelyn Averion Eborra, Milan, November 22, 2015, and interview with Noeline Rivera, AFreight, Singapore, July 26, 2017.

67. Interview with Noeline Rivera, AFreight, Singapore, July 26, 2017.

68. Interview with Noeline Rivera, AFreight, Singapore, July 26, 2017.

69. Interview with Noeline Rivera, AFreight, Singapore, July 26, 2017.

70. Camposano, “Enacting Embeddedness,” 1-28.

71. Deidre McKay, *Global Filipinos: Migrants’ Lives in the Virtual Village* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2012), 103.

72. L. Rimban, “Out of the (Balikbayan) Box,” *The Investigative reporting Quarterly*, and C. Mercado-Obias, “Love in a Box,” *Smile Magazine*, both quoted in Camposano, “Enacting Embeddedness,” 2.

want to have some control over the household expenses.<sup>73</sup> The recipients of the imported gifts interpret these as a sign that they are in the thoughts and memories of their kin despite the physical separation. A column written by Frederick Arceo, a Saudi based OFW complained that the consequence of forgetting to give one person a gift is social ostracism since the offended party would sulk and then ruin the migrant's reputation (presumably through spreading gossip that the migrant was "shameless" (walang hiya)).<sup>74</sup> If buying and sending of gifts is a symbol of love, this made the sending of gift boxes compulsory.

At the same time, not sending gifts sends the tragic message that the migration project is a failure. Divine Villanueva, an overseas domestic worker in Jordan, entitled her life story "Bagahe" (Baggage) confessing that her migration narrative was one of "bad luck" because she returned home without gifts for her family.<sup>75</sup> If migrants feel pressured to send these boxes, no wonder retail stores in Lucky Plaza thrived. Filipina domestic workers buy chocolates, clothing, mobile phones, digital cameras, ipads, computers—items with status value as coming from overseas—as well as Filipino products—in order to fill up these enormous boxes.

There are no less than eleven companies that offer door-to-door boxed delivery services at the mall. My interviews with the manager and staff of two of these companies (LBC and Afreight) reveal the magnitude of the volume of items sent in this one-way traffic of goods: (1) Afreight sends ninety-one shipping containers a year and LBC sends three to four containers a week, hiring seven drivers daily (thirty jobs a day), to pick up the boxes all over Singapore.<sup>76</sup> LBC opened a second branch in June 2013 on the third floor—a clear sign that the business was prospering. And, in that same year the level one branch extended its operating hours, choosing to close at 8:00 p.m. instead of the usual 7:00 p.m. every day to accommodate their clients who can only come after work hours.<sup>77</sup> June 2013 was also the year they introduced the "Super Jumbo Box" (24 x 24 x 45) advertised as "BIGGER, BETTER, BOXIER than any other balikbayan box in the market today" in anticipation of the back-to-school season in the Philippines to enable senders to send as many school supplies as possible.<sup>78</sup> This extra-large

---

73. Camposano, "Enacting Embeddedness," 1-28, Jade Alburo, "Boxed In or Out? Balikbayan Boxes as Metaphors for Filipino American (Dis)Location," *Ethnologies* 27, no. 2, 2005, 137-57.

74. Frederick Arceo, "Kapag hindi mo nabigyan ng pasalubong eh magtatampo nay un at sisiraan ka na" in "Iba Pa Rin Sa Pinas," *Planet Philippines*, January 2011, p. 7, and Arenas Felma Joy Tadios, "Managing Transnational Families: Emotional Labour and Entrepreneurial Agency Among Filipino Migrant Domestic in Hong Kong," PhD Dissertation, City University of Hong Kong, 2015.

75. Divine Villanueva, "Bagahe," in Raquel Delfin Padilla and Jovelyn Bayubay Revilla, *Sindi ng Lampara* (OFW Stories), Manila: Allibratore Enterprises, 2012), 187-88.

76. Interview with Noeline Rivera, Afreight, Lucky Plaza, July 26, 2017, and interview with Sharon Tordesilla, Regional Manager of LBC, Lucky Plaza, July 26, 2017.

77. "LBC Open Till 8 pm Every Day," *OFW Pinoy Star*, May/June, 2013, 14.

78. "Super Jumbo Box: Sending 'More' Back Home," *OFW Pinoy Star*, May/June, 2013, 14.

box cost SGD\$135 to Manila and SGD\$170 to Mindanao. LBC also sponsored a Sports event/competition and the first ever Ms LBC Cup beauty contest in 2014 presumably as a promotional exercise and to be a step ahead of their rivals.<sup>79</sup> Air cargo companies advertised regularly in the Philippine presses; I've seen advertisements in *The Manila Press* (for K.C. Dat), *OFW Pinoy Star* and *Planet Philippines*.

When I asked the Filipina owner of the Belisse Beauty Sanctuary why there were so many Filipino beauty salons in Lucky Plaza, her response was that there were three things that were most important to all Filipinos: (1) pagkain (Filipino food), (2) padala (sending of remittances and gifts/goods to the Philippines in boxes), and (3) pampaganda (to make themselves beautiful). Her response was incredibly perceptive (and alliterative, all beginning with the letter P), and accurate. The shops catering to the Filipino domestic worker clientele in this mall (with the minor exceptions of the two real estate outlets and employment agencies) can be classified into these three categories: stores selling Filipino food, stores selling goods that Filipinos like to buy and ship to the Philippines, as well as courier stores, which enable them to mail these boxes to the homeland, and beauty salons. This indicates that in this particular mall it is the tastes of the domestic workers that are legitimate in the contest for cultural capital. Hence, their dominance as the arbiters of what will or will not sell in Lucky Plaza indicates that they have some influence as consumers and that this power is not invisible. And indeed, those businesses that acknowledged the visibility of this clientele reaped enormous profits.

### **The Politics of Appearances: Pampaganda (To make oneself beautiful)**

Yeoh and Huang have alerted us to the way the “the off-day provides the maids with an opportunity to shed their dowdy “work-day uniforms” (which are most commonly plain T-shirts and slacks or bermudas and occasionally the standard domestic maid’s uniform) and don their best clothes” and thus, “dressing upon off-days in a manner contrary to what is deemed appropriate for domestic servants thus provides the opportunity for maids to use material markers not only to assert their identity as urbane women, but also to close the gap if not invert (albeit temporarily) the positions of “ma’am” and “maid.”<sup>80</sup> During the weekdays, domestic workers are subject to the sumptuary laws of their female employers. Some of the rules are deliberately designed to make them less attractive because female employers fear that the presence of a beautiful maid (read potential seductress) threatened the marital home. Domestic workers are not allowed to wear revealing clothing such as sleeveless blouses, spaghetti straps,

79. Irene Curtis, “LBC Shows the Way with Palarong SG 2014,” *OFW Pinoy Star*, September/October 2014, 6-7.

80. Yeoh and Huang, “Negotiating Public Space,” 597.

plunging necklines, and short skirts. They are prohibited from wearing make-up, jewelry, nail-polish, and high heels. In the film *Remittance*, mentioned earlier, there is a scene where a woman submits tearfully to having her long beautiful locks cut short because her female employer demanded it.<sup>81</sup> The emotional moment captures the Filipino woman's despair at being denied the right to be beautiful. In the film, the scene portrays the trauma experienced by the domestic worker at being compelled to surrender her femininity. The day-off becomes the only opportunity for them to alter their appearance from ordinary women to fashionistas. The beauty parlor becomes necessary for these sartorial transformations. In this sense, these Sunday Cinderellas also resist the host country's attempts to mold them into submissive, unattractive, working women. At Lucky Plaza, they are all beauty queens. The dress code varies from short shorts, jeans, and t-shirts to formal dresses (see below), spaghetti straps, stilettos, off the shoulder blouses, and tight mini-skirts. They wear make-up, jewelry, and nail polish. The irony is that as they defy their employer's attempts to police their bodies, they also succumb to Filipino feminine ideals.

The beauty treatments are also important for their self-representations in the public sphere outside the workplace. Once they step out of the beauty parlor they take a selfie and post it on their facebook page alerting their friends in Singapore and their relatives in the Philippines that their migration narrative is a success. The last Sunday I visited Lucky Plaza I noticed a number of young women in long formal dresses at the beauty parlors. They told me that they were getting ready for their graduation from one of the weekend courses run by the local NGOs that updated their qualifications from "domestic workers" to "caregivers" (field notes). They had hair rebonding, hair extensions, perms, false eyelashes—the lot—and they all looked just as if they were going to step on to a red-carpet event. Their achievements are marked by new clothes and a new "look." Although this weekend look was only going to last less than 24 hours, photographs and facebook posts documented the Cinderella Day for posterity. The majority of those who posed for formal studio portraits at Lucky Plaza are Filipinas (in contrast to the more evenly ethnic division of requests for passport pictures).<sup>82</sup> Some of the photo portraits are 8½ by 12 inches or A4 size and formatted like a magazine cover. These magazine cover photos are sent to the Philippines as mementos to convey the subject's self-representation as a glamorous woman. In the shiny laminated photograph, a gorgeous "cover girl" with perfect coiffure and make-up smiles at the audience. According to Cez who owns a photograph studio on the fourth floor, these portraits declare to friends and relatives in the homeland that "maganda sila" (they are beautiful).<sup>83</sup> (See fig. 2):

There are 23 beauty salons that clearly target Filipina clientele with The Iloilo Hair Salon running four franchises. They are almost all

---

81. Daly and Fendelman, *Remittance*.

82. Interview with Cez Services, Lucky Plaza, Singapore, July 19, 2017.

83. Interview with Cez Services, Lucky Plaza, Singapore, July 19, 2017.



Figure 2. The façade of the photography studio at Ces Services exhibits photographs taken of beautiful Filipinas on their days off—from brides to beauty contestants. (Façade of Ces Services Photography, Lucky Plaza. Photo by Mina Roces, taken September 2017.

located in the third and fourth levels. On Sundays, they are crowded with clients—almost all of them Filipino women. The owners of Belisse Beauty Sanctuary and the Maganda Sexy Beauty salon told me that 90% of their clients are Filipino women.<sup>84</sup> Belisse Beauty Sanctuary hires a local Singaporean hairdresser to service the local clients, but these clients do not come on Sundays. Filipina domestic workers come to have their hair dyed, cut, and styled. One of my interviewees (pseudonym Portia) admitted that she goes to the beauty parlor once a month and spends \$35 for a pedicure, \$50 for a foot spa, and \$90 for hair dye and blow drying.<sup>85</sup> The most popular treatment is “rebonding” or straightening of the hair; a procedure that costs SGD\$130. Considering that their salaries are \$600 on average, this is a significant investment.

84. Interview with Maganda and Sexy (pseudonym), owner of Maganda-Sexy Beauty Salon, Lucky Plaza, Singapore, July 27, 2017, and interview with the owner of the Belisse Beauty Sanctuary, Lucky Plaza, Singapore, July 17, 2017.

85. Interview with Portia (pseudonym), Singapore, July 21, 2017.

Portia herself confided that the monthly beauty make-overs took up one-sixth of her salary.<sup>86</sup>

Why would women spend one-sixth of their monthly salary on a hair treatment? Cultural constructions of the feminine in the Philippines conflate beauty with women's virtue. The definition of *maganda* (beautiful—note that two of the beauty salons in Lucky Plaza have the word “*maganda*” in their names—the *Maganda-Sexy Beauty Salon* and *Maganda Genuine Unisex Salon*) refers not just to physical beauty, but to conduct that is socially pleasing. A woman who is beautiful extols the virtues of her gender. While *maganda* is the adjective used to refer to socially accepted behavior, its antonym *pangit* (ugly) is used to connote what is evil or bad, or what is socially unacceptable behavior.<sup>87</sup> Beauty queens in the Philippines are highly admired and many are approached to run for political office, capitalizing on their cultural capital as virtuous women and translating it into power.<sup>88</sup> This partially explains the huge popularity (some would say an “obsession”) with beauty contests in the Philippines and in the diaspora. In Singapore alone there are at least ten beauty contests a year. One is run by LBC cargo shipping company, one called the *She's My Girl* competition is run by OFW Pinoy Star magazine, and *Miss Fashion-nista* is run by one of the retail outlets in Lucky Plaza.

The Sunday fashionista parade at Lucky Plaza can be interpreted as both an action that challenges or defies and overthrows social behavior demanded of migrants by the host country, but at the same time it also endorses Filipino cultural constructions of the feminine. In this case, the politics of appearances resulting in the Sunday sartorial transformations, while challenging the sumptuary laws Singaporeans impose on their domestic workers, does not initiate any changes to Filipino gender constructs. But, if one looks at the connections between the beauty make-over and constructions of sexuality, this is where Natalie Davis' interjection about the potential for “*misrule*” to initiate change becomes more obvious.

Lucky Plaza is also known to be a pick-up point for potential romantic trysts. My interviews with domestic workers, published life stories by Filipinos in Singapore, and magazine articles published in Singapore reveal that male migrant contract workers (many from South Asia) visit the mall to look for Filipina women to “hook-up” with and that these dates eventually involve sex.<sup>89</sup> There is gossip about Filipino women having sex in the parking lot in the upper floors, in the stairwells. Since most of these women are married with husbands and families in the Philippines, these are stories about women's infidelity and adultery, a radical act.

---

86. Interview with Portia (pseudonym), Singapore, July 21, 2017.

87. Mina Roces, *Women, Power, and Kinship Politics: Female Power in Post-War Philippines* (Connecticut: Praeger, 1998), 17 and 168.

88. Roces, *Women, Power, and Kinship Politics*, 168-178.

89. Juan, “Ethnic Boundaries Redefined,” 106.

Filipino constructions of the feminine deny women sexual rights. As recent as 2002, Filipina feminist psychologist Sylvia Estrada-Claudio noted that a woman's right to sexuality is not sanctioned by Filipino culture and that the suppression of sexuality was an intrinsic part of the cultural construction of being female.<sup>90</sup> Women are expected to be chaste until married and to be faithful wives, while men's sexual dalliances even after marriage are tolerated. If women are imagined to be incapable of performing desire, men on the other hand, are imagined to be naturally lustful.<sup>91</sup> Migrant memoirs (some of them published under pseudonyms) illustrate the ways women have broken social taboos and succeeded in claiming sexual rights clandestinely. Filipino migrant women dismantle one of the very foundational blocks in constructions of the feminine by taking in lovers (including lovers from different nationalities or who are not Filipino) or indulging in adultery. The lack of a divorce law in the Philippines is a strong incentive to keep them from straying since they know that it is impossible to change partners if they want to be welcome in the Catholic Church. Despite this rigid atmosphere of surveillance there is greater freedom and opportunity for women to find romantic partners.

According to one memoir of a domestic worker in Singapore, "nowadays, many Filipina maids here go on the Internet to hook up with men, whom they meet on Sundays."<sup>92</sup> The website FilipinoHearts is a popular internet dating site visited by Filipina domestic workers in Singapore, and "Hotel 81" is the code name (or euphemism) for love nests or trysts, meaning they would visit a hotel that rented rooms by the hour.<sup>93</sup> Lucky Plaza is not only a Sunday gathering place for Filipinos, it also functions as a "pick-up point" for potential lovers.<sup>94</sup> On the one hand, Filipina domestic workers in Singapore complain that the spectre of loneliness is a great challenge they have to overcome while overseas, but on the other hand, they also admit that it is relatively easy to find boyfriends because many men of different nationalities (but especially South Asian men) follow Filipinas around on their Sundays off.<sup>95</sup>

The candid way that Filipino domestic workers in Singapore recount their sex lives abroad (albeit using pseudonyms) breaks a social taboo. Women's open discussions about sexual matters is considered shocking. Furthermore, the disclosure that women have not just one,

---

90. Sylvia Estrada-Claudio, *Rape, Love and Sexuality: The Construction of Woman in Discourse* (Quezon City: The University of the Philippines Press, 2002), 20.

91. See Mina Roces, *Women's Movements and the Filipina, 1986-2008* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2012), 11; Elizabeth U. Eviota ed., *Sex and Gender in Philippine Society* (Manila: National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women, 1994); Amaryllis Tiglaos Torres, *Love in the Time of Ina Morata* (Quezon City: University Center for Women's Studies, 2002).

92. "A Childless "Single Wife" Overseas," in Papias Generale Banados, *The Path to Remittance. Tales of Pains and Gains of Overseas Filipino Workers* (Singapore: Global Eye Media, 2011), 62.

93. Banados, *The Path to Remittance*.

94. Juan, "Ethnic Boundaries Redefined," 106-10.

95. Banados, *The Path to Remittance*, 62, 106, and 107.



but several lovers reveals that they are behaving more like the masculine ideal rather than the feminine one. The title of one of these migrant stories, “A Childless ‘Single Wife’ Overseas,” means that they even invented a new category to describe themselves—the single wife—to explain their romantic lifestyles. Life stories of Filipina domestic workers in Singapore openly admit to having boyfriends (and sexual relationships) with Chinese, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan, Indian, and American men.<sup>96</sup> Most of these boyfriends are married men.<sup>97</sup> For example, in Rita’s story her boyfriend Sanjay is an Indian who worked as a computer science lecturer at a local polytechnic, but his Indian wife was a doctor in Canada. Sanjay spends for overseas holidays for him and Rita at Bintan Resorts and Bali in Indonesia, Bangkok and Pattaya in Thailand, and Penang and Cameron Highlands in Malaysia.<sup>98</sup> Since neither partner is single and since the Filipina cannot obtain absolute divorce in the Philippines, the result is that they form short-term relationships, including one-day stands (since their day off from work is normally from 9:00–5:00 p.m. only, and does not include the evenings).

In these published autobiographical accounts, women are candid about their sexual encounters with boyfriends during their days off. Daisy addresses the reader in a very matter of fact way:

“I’m closing in on my 52<sup>nd</sup> birthday now. If I remained in the Philippines with my husband, I may be a grandmother by now. I haven’t been a saintly nun here in Singapore either. Like many Filipino women here, I have had a few boyfriends on the way, especially after I got the Sundays off. It is easy to find a boyfriend here. Many come behind us (sic), especially on Sundays if you go to Orchard Street, you find men of many colours and many shapes looking to hook up with a Filipina—sometimes just one day (not night) stands.... I have had Bangladeshi, Malay, Chinese and angmoh [white] boyfriends and got on well with them. But they were all married and were not planning to divorce their wives nor did I want to break up any marriages. It is taken for granted these were only flings on our day off.”<sup>99</sup>

Singapore’s tough immigration laws prohibit marriage between overseas workers and Singaporean nationals. Since the demographic shows a clear majority of up to a hundred Filipinas to one Filipino male, potential boyfriends come from the pool of foreign men from different nationalities, many of whom are also working in Singapore on temporary contracts and who do not have permanent residency. Since a number of these men are already married (with their spouses located overseas), they are unavailable as potential life partners. Filipina domestic workers know that the solace they find in another man’s arms is only ephemeral.

The advice column or Agony Aunt column (“Dear Tita Lily”) of a magazine directed at Filipina domestic workers in Singapore around the 1990s featured several letters from women who were having illicit

---

96. Banados, *The Path to Remittance*.

97. Banados, *The Path to Remittance*.

98. “Overseas for Survival or Adventure,” in Banados, *The Path to Remittance*, 9.

99. “A Childless ‘Single Wife’ Overseas,” in Banados, *The Path to Remittance*, 61.

relationships with “boyfriends” who were not their husbands, appealing for wise counsel for anxieties about sexual health and sexually transmitted diseases, dilemmas involving several suitors or affairs with their employers.<sup>100</sup> According to Michael who owned a jewelry shop at Lucky Plaza, at the Filipino mall in Orchard Road: “On Sundays it’s very common to see Filipinas cuddling up to guys who obviously are married and are not their husbands. They are happy.”<sup>101</sup> Filipinas were spotted holding hands with their boyfriends in the MRT (underground metro train), Lucky Plaza, or Botanical gardens.<sup>102</sup> The ubiquity of illicit romances between “single wives” and South Asian construction workers in Singapore inspired a special feature article in this same magazine (Manila Press) attempting to explain “the mystery of the romance between Filipinas and Singaporeans.”<sup>103</sup> Explanations put forward by the women interviewed included loneliness, sexual excitement, revenge against cheating husbands in the Philippines, and financial gain, since boyfriends lavished them with gifts of mobile phones, jewelry, clothes, and cash which they can remit to their families.<sup>104</sup>

These women break taboos in two radical ways. First of all, while men’s infidelity is tolerated in Filipino society; women’s adultery is not. Thus, in publicly confessing their sexual affairs (albeit using pseudonyms), they assert women’s sexuality and sexual agency outside of marriage. The married woman with a lover is considered extremely rare in official representations of women. Thus, Filipina overseas workers’ stories debunk the myth of the chaste wife. Secondly, women know that their liaisons are not going to lead to forming new families. They do not intend to divorce their husbands (not legal in the Philippines) or form new families with the new partners. The stories of these women migrants who openly discussed their relationships with many men, illustrate the ways women migrants celebrate their sexuality and reveal that women’s sexual relations or emotional attachments are no longer connected with ideals of creating “families.” In the anthology *The Path to Remittance*, only one woman is able to remarry—a white foreigner (American).<sup>105</sup> Since the normative behavior in the Philippines is that Filipino women are expected to form romantic relationships with the intention of marrying and starting families, this behavior of domestic workers in Singapore challenges traditional constructions of the feminine and the primordial instinct to form “happy families.”

All the migrant women who reject the ideals of the chaste wife become pioneers in dismantling traditional constructions of the femi-

---

100. “Private Life,” *Manila Press* 2, no. 8, April 1995, 16; “Dear Tita Lily Problem Page,” *Manila Press* 2, no. 8, April 1995, 18-19; “Dear Tita Lily Problem Page,” *Manila Press* 2, no. 19, 1994, 23; “Dear Tita Lily Problem Page,” *Manila Press* 2, no. 11, 1995, 25; “True Confession,” *Manila Press* 2, no. 9, 1995, 39-40.

101. Denny Rue, “Misteryo ng Pag-iibigang Pinay at Singaporean,” *Manila Press* 3, no. 1, October 1995, 38.

102. Rue, “Misteryo ng Pag-iibigang Pinay,” 38-39.

103. Rue, “Misteryo ng Pag-iibigang Pinay,” 38.

104. Rue, “Misteryo ng Pag-iibigang Pinay,” 38-39.

105. Banados, *The Path to Remittance*.

nine. By having sexual liaisons, and because these relationships are not imagined to be permanent, these women are proclaiming that women have the right to sexual desire and reject the Catholic church's teachings that sex be confined solely to the marriage bed. Writing on the "mystery" of Filipina romances with Singaporeans, Deney Rue warns the reader [assumed to be Filipinos all over the world] not to be shocked ("huwag kang mabibigla") to see a Filipina cuddling up to a Tamil man as if she was his wife.<sup>106</sup> The observation that it is commonplace to see Filipinas on Sundays holding hands with Tamils, riding motorbikes with Malays, going to discos with Chinese and going on holidays with expatriates (presumably whites), reveals that Filipinas in Singapore are breaking taboos not just about sexuality (since readers were warned not to be shocked), but also about interracial romance.<sup>107</sup>

### **Conclusion: Migrant Consumer Power and Its Limits**

On the sidewalks outside the back of Lucky Plaza mall outside Richmond Park condo, an illegal market operated from time to time. This informal market extended from the back of Lucky Plaza to just outside Richmond Park condominium and behind the Tong Building. Every now and again the police raided it hoping to end the practice. Almost two months after my field work, my informants sent me a message that the police closed it down one weekend in September 2017. The Straits Times reported that the raid happened in response to complaints made by Lucky Plaza retailers who blamed a 20–50% drop in sales revenues on the itinerant vendors who were selling shoes and t-shirts and offering manicure and haircutting services as well.<sup>108</sup> Those caught were fined between \$300–\$500.<sup>109</sup> The war of attrition continued. The fact that Filipinos in that illegal market were able to break the strict Singaporean laws—a radical move in that city-state was remarkable in itself<sup>34</sup> revealed that Filipinos can actually take over the sidewalks around Orchard Road for more than 24 hours. But the successful police raid that put a stop to it was a sign that Singaporeans were able to once again enforce the status quo.

Lucky Plaza on Sundays is one example of the ritual of misrule where for one day a week, the social hierarchy and its rules are not enforced. During the working week, Filipino domestic workers are required to dress modestly and plain. They are to remain unobtrusive, silent, and invisible while pandering to every whim dictated by their employers. At Lucky Plaza on Sundays, the opposite happens. Singapor-

106. Rue, "Ang Misteryo ng Pag-iibigang Pinay," 38.

107. Rue, "Ang Misteryo ng Pag-iibigang Pinay," 38.

108. "Illegal Hawkers Taking Away Business, Say Lucky Plaza Shops," *The Straits Times*, September 25, 2017, <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/illegal-hawkers-taking-away-business-say-lucky-plaza-shops>, accessed November 27, 2017.

109. "Illegal Hawkers Taking Away Business, Say Lucky Plaza Shops," *The Straits Times*, September 25, 2017, <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/illegal-hawkers-taking-away-business-say-lucky-plaza-shops>, accessed November 27, 2017.

ean and Filipino owners cater to their tastes in food, clothing, goods, and services. Their voices are loud and their presence is clearly visible. At peak hours (from 11:00 a.m.–3:00 p.m.) the noise from the cacophony of human voices all shouting at the same time is deafening. They transform themselves into beauty queens and fashionistas and are free to appear as beautiful or seductive as they want—with newly coiffed hairdos, make-up, false eyelashes, jewelry, manicured nails, in dresses that expose their arms, legs and décolletage and high heels. At Lucky Plaza on Sundays, Filipinos are not a marginal group and local Singaporeans who dare visit the mall that day are Other. They can break rules (on loitering for example) and get away with it. For local Singaporeans, Lucky Plaza on Sundays must seem to them to be “a world upside down.”

These topsy turvy days are very similar to the rituals of protest and forms of symbolic theater described by Laturie and Davis when discussing Carnivals and misrule in Early Modern France. Like Laturie’s carnivals, Sundays at Lucky Plaza have not succeeded in overturning the status quo; on Mondays, the social hierarchy of Singapore is once again reinforced as normative. Like Cinderella, the sartorial transformations on Sundays disappear on weekdays as Filipina domestic workers remove their make-up and jewelry and don the uniform of servitude. In their maid’s uniform or ubiquitous jeans and t-shirts, they return to their lives of keeping daily life functioning for their households without calling attention to their physical presence. While the impact of their consumer power on weekends is obvious on Sundays, with businesses catering to them reaping huge profits, their lack of presence on weekdays no longer calls attention to this important clientele so obviously.

But, much like Natalie Zemon Davis has argued for Early Modern France, the consumption practices performed at Sunday gatherings at Lucky Plaza have also been able to “suggest alternatives to the world order”—at least in the Filipino cultural constructions of the feminine. These women have become breadwinners for their family. Their sartorial transformations have raised their status as middle-class successful women. As fashionable, cosmopolitan women they are able to also challenge dominant constructions of the feminine of sexuality not just by presenting themselves as “sexy ladies,” but by indulging in extra-marital affairs. Yes, the beauty regimens reveal that they still conform to the traditional feminine beauty ideals, but their behavior in their fashionable attire challenges gender sexual ideals of the chaste and faithful woman.

The sartorial transformations on Sundays not only perform women’s new identities as fashionable successful breadwinners and sexual beings; they also mark the women’s educational attainments as they embark on the first stage of forging a career path beyond domestic work. As mentioned previously, some of the women I talked to in the beauty salons on the last Sunday I did field work at Lucky Plaza were having their hair and make-up professionally done, because they were going to attend their graduation from the many courses run by the NGOs that help migrants in Singapore, especially H.O.M.E. I had the

enormous privilege of being invited to attend one of these graduations from courses in dressmaking, cooking (for chef qualifications), and caregiving in August 2017. I was invited to give a few words of inspiration for the graduating class, the majority of whom were Filipina domestic workers. These women took these courses because they hoped to one day move away from domestic work. They have initiated the first step in changing their lives.

I have also called attention to the way their consumption power has had an impact on the businesses whom they chose to patronize. The outlets that cater to Filipino tastes are rewarded with enormous profits. On Sundays, smaller food outlets make around SGD\$3500 on Sundays, compared to SGD\$2000 on weekdays.<sup>110</sup> Door-to-door carriers send around nineteen shipping containers per year to the Philippines. When Jollibee first opened an outlet customers were prepared to stay in a queue for five-hours.<sup>111</sup> My informants also tell me that Filipino restaurants that are not located in Lucky Plaza do not succeed and have to close down in contrast to those at Lucky Plaza that survive for years.<sup>112</sup> At Lucky Plaza their tastes, desires, needs, and wants are catered to. If one applied Bourdieu's paradigm here, the tastes of the class with the lower economic and social capital is the one that influences business capital. It is the working schedules of this group that dictates the opening hours of shops and services. Local Singaporean shop-owners go out of their way to attract this clientele. They learn Tagalog; they hire Filipino salespersons; they learn what food Filipinos like to eat, and cook it for them, and sell the goods that fill up the balikbayan boxes. Eddie Gonzales, the owner of Barrio Fiesta, makes sure that the special dishes his clients ask for are served to them the following week.<sup>113</sup> There are at least two outlets, owned by Chinese Singaporeans who sell Tagalog romance pocketbooks in the hundreds. In fact, the "addiction" of domestic workers to these novels have catapulted this genre into bestseller status, forever changing the history of the book in the Philippines.<sup>114</sup> Jewelry shop Luvenus, which has several branches in Lucky Plaza, had a huge sign advertising the opportunity to win a free ticket to the Philippines to lure Filipino clientele. One might wonder how Filipino domestic workers could afford to splurge on an expensive luxury item, but informants tell me that their boyfriends (some of them

---

110. Interview with Eddie Gonzales, owner of Barrio Fiesta, Lucky Plaza, Singapore, July 17, 2017, and interview with Noeline Rivera who used to work for Lutong Pinoy, Lucky Plaza, Singapore, July 23, 2017.

111. Interview with Noeline Rivera, Singapore, June 23, 2017.

112. Interview with Luz Campos Mesenas, Publisher of *OFW Pinoy Star Magazine*, Singapore, July 26, 2017.

113. Interview with Eddie Gonzalez, Owner of Barrio Fiesta, Lucky Plaza, Singapore, July 17, 2017.

114. Georgina R. Encanto, "Savoring Romance Pinoy Stay in Foreign Climes: Why Women Migrants Love Reading Tagalog Romance Novels," *Review of Women's Studies* XVIII, no. 1, January-June 2008, 27-52; Patricia May Jurilla, *Tagalog Bestsellers of the Twentieth Century*, (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2008), chapter 6, 161-85.

South Asian men also on contractual work visas) buy them jewelry. At least two stores that sell mobile phones and iPads offer a pay by installment option precisely to attract this clientele.<sup>115</sup> Even major Singaporean companies, such as telecommunications network Singtel, target the Filipino domestic worker clientele with advertisements in OFW Pinoy Star<sup>116</sup> and Manila Press and signs in Tagalog at Lucky Plaza promising good rates for phone cards.<sup>117</sup>

However, such consumer power can also be interpreted as problematic and limited. Since some of these companies are owned by Singaporeans, one could argue that the money Filipinos earned is simply recirculated back to the host country that employs their labor. Nevertheless, these Singaporean owners who profit from the migrant workers are required to learn Filipino domestic workers' tastes and desires. They have to learn their language, and they have to be nice to them on Sundays, because the disposable income of this group is the source of their profits. Yes, they make a profit, but this comes at the price of taking note of the products and services that appeal to this group of people who are meant to be invisible to the wider social hierarchy. It means catering to the wants of the group they refer to disparagingly as "their maids." Thus, there is something more going on here, than just recirculating capital. There are shops owned by Filipino permanent residents of Singapore (such as Kuya Eddie's food outlet, and the Afreight shipping company), and Filipinos married to Singaporeans (such as the Maganda-Sexy Beauty salon). There are also Filipino franchises such as Tapa King and Jollibee, for example, although the latter is managed by a Singaporean. Rick Bonus argues that Filipino Oriental stores in San Diego and Los Angeles at least allow capital to be circulated within the Filipino community and benefit the Filipino community abroad as they are able to reinvest their profits to fund charity work, community work, and other market opportunities.<sup>118</sup> This interpretation can also be applied to this case study of Sundays at Lucky Plaza.

However, the items sold at Lucky Plaza are also cheap—in contrast to the prices of luxury goods in the other malls in Orchard Road—highlighting the disparity in wages between the domestic workers and the Singaporean locals. If malls around Lucky Plaza actively work to exclude Filipinos from their spaces because they see them as down market (going back to the disparaging comment made to me by my Singaporean colleague which opened this article), this could be interpreted to be another act of exclusion that reinforces the status quo. It is possible that Lucky Plaza is allowed to continue to cater to this clientele because Singaporeans are happy to concede this section of Orchard Road to them as long as Filipinos do not move to other malls. Yet, the way local Singaporeans themselves feel "Othered" at Lucky

---

115. Interview with Alpha Grace Vicente, Singapore, July 23, 2017.

116. Full page advertisement Singtel, *OFW Pinoy Star Magazine*, May/June 2013, 3.

117. Juan, "Ethnic Boundaries Redefined," 89.

118. Bonus, *Locating Filipino Americans*.

Plaza on Sundays is a sign that an inversion of the social hierarchy occurs there, albeit only temporarily.

Applying Davis' model about the transformative potential of misrule, is it possible for Filipino domestic workers on Sundays to alter Singapore society? It is difficult for Filipino domestic workers in the closed society of Singapore to introduce change. The NGO H.O.M.E. with its office at Lucky Plaza has been at the forefront of agitating for the rights of domestic workers in Singapore. Two of my interviewees were invited to give testimonies for a closed-door session for the convention of decent work for domestic workers for the ILO Convention 189 in Geneva. Two of my interviewees also served as president of H.O.M.E. Roses, the branch that looks after migrant health issues.<sup>119</sup> Another interviewee, a volunteer for the H.O.M.E. Academy (the school that runs the courses on dressmaking, etc. for migrant workers), organized and addressed the graduation ceremony I attended in 2017. One interviewee and four other friends (also Filipino domestic workers) published a cookbook entitled *Family Favorites* in 2019. The authors planned to use the proceeds of the book as an investment fund so they could set up a restaurant and cooking school in the Philippines after their retirement from overseas work.<sup>120</sup> The last chapter of their cookbook included recipes from the chefs of top restaurants in Singapore—BAM!, Gattopardo, Chef's Table, and PS. Café.<sup>121</sup> In these examples, Filipina domestic workers on their Sundays off have been working together with Singaporeans as colleagues and not as invisible servants.

As a gender historian I am very much attracted to the unique phenomenon of Lucky Plaza on Sundays. As a Filipina migrant herself, writing about my own ethnic group, and as someone who experienced acts of social exclusion in my own migration life-story, I perceive this weekend event as a remarkable way a minority group has been able to take over an entire mall in a closed, authoritarian, and conservative society such as Singapore. When I attended the graduating ceremonies of H.O.M.E., joined the financial literary seminars with the ATIKHA NGO and their birthday parties, had lunch, afternoon tea, and after dinner snacks with them, helped them with their children's homework, became Facebook friends with them—keeping in touch with their personal lives even after field work ended—my view of them was of not of women content to remain invisible, but of women proactive in their project of

---

119. Interview with Lisa (pseudonym), Singapore, July 24, 2017, and interview with Julie (pseudonym), Singapore, July 16, 2017.

120. Helen Flores, "5 Pinay HSWs in Singapore Write Own Cookbook," *The Philippine Star*, Home, July 28, 2019, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2019/07/28/1938503/5-pinay-hswws-singapore-write-own-cookbook>, accessed August 30, 2020.

121. Helen Flores, "5 Pinay HSWs in Singapore Write Own Cookbook," *The Philippine Star*, Home, July 28, 2019, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2019/07/28/1938503/5-pinay-hswws-singapore-write-own-cookbook>, accessed August 30, 2020. Amrith, *Caring for Strangers*. For an analysis on the connection between beauty and female power see Mina Roces, *Women, Power and Kinship Politics*, chapter 5.

self-transformation. Their stories reveal that migration is not just an economic project and that they do not see themselves as the invisible maids that their Singapore employers expect them to be.<sup>122</sup> Of course, as a scholar of my own ethnic community (and a migrant myself), I also feel protective of them. My role is multi-faceted because, while I have an ethical responsibility for my subjects, I am also required by my own discipline to represent them as truthfully and faithfully as I can. While I need to present their perspective to audiences, I also have need to ensure that my analysis will not undermine their own attempts to empower themselves or to paint them in ways that may cause them harm. Based on interviews with them and field work at the site, I see them as influential consumers and actors. Of course, in writing this article, I have also struggled with the way this view of consumer power that I present here might be read as attributing more power to a marginal migrant group than is possible in the context of the migrant domestic worker rights/situation in Singaporean society. But from the vantage point of a politics of visibility and a politics of appearances, it is still possible to read Sundays at Lucky Plaza as an example of the way that individual everyday practices (the market bound perspective) have allowed Filipino domestic workers to defy Singaporean society's social rules that they remain completely and permanently invisible and unfashionable. On Sundays, their collective numbers at Lucky Plaza proclaim their politics of presence. The fact that local Singaporeans (and Filipino professionals) who do not want to mingle with the domestic workers do not visit Lucky Plaza on a Sunday is a sign that they object to this occupation of what they believe is their space.<sup>123</sup> Even though it is only in one mall on the entire Orchard Road, being near Lucky Plaza on that day, one can no longer pretend that these migrant workers are not visible.

While I discuss here the sensitive issue of extra-marital affairs and sexual liaisons which these migrants have described in their own memoirs as "one-day stands" (as opposed to "one-night stands," since they only have the day-off and not the full 24-hour day off), I do not interpret these in a negative light.<sup>124</sup> As a feminist historian who has written about the women's movements in the Philippines and activists' struggles to alter how the Filipina is defined by religion, the state, and cultural traditions, I see their actions as empowering particularly given the limits placed on Filipino gender constructions of sexuality.<sup>125</sup> After all, Filipino men's infidelity is tolerated in the homeland. While conservative Filipinos and Singaporeans might dismiss these actions as evidence of immorality, I take the perspective from the sources I use and the interviews I've had where these actions are not judged but

---

122. For an analysis of Filipino migrants that goes beyond disenfranchised labor see Roces, *Rethinking Filipino Migrants*.

123. Amrith, *Caring for Strangers*.

124. Banados, *The Path to Remittance*, 62.

125. See Mina Roces, *Women's Movements and the Filipina, 1986-2008* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2012).



instead presented as a new norm. In the accounts of Filipino workers in Singapore where authors speak candidly about their sexual affairs, this behavior is not condemned. I have also encountered these stories from the migrant archives (source produced by the migrants themselves) talking about women's infidelity in places such as the Middle East where the authors analyze these as a new "modern trend" (although some of the writers also express their concerns that the women might be hurting partners and breaking up families).<sup>126</sup> In the feature film *Remittance*, the heroine, who is a Filipina domestic worker in Singapore, has a South Asian boyfriend. But since the story is told from her perspective, the audience is sympathetic to her plight as the film discloses that her Filipino husband has taken a mistress in the Philippines, and at the end of the film he not only steals her hard-earned money; he almost physically assaults her. Meanwhile, the South Asian boyfriend is represented as kind and caring. A Filipino former overseas contract worker who was stationed in Iraq for five years in the 1980s, confided to me that, based on his observations of his batch of workers, infidelity happens when migrants feel unappreciated for the remittances they send back home. I am of course writing about migration from the migrant's point of view (and not that of the nation left behind) and this allows me to be empathetic to their particular situation.

On Sundays, domestic workers also undergo a sartorial transformation. The Sunday make-over from ordinary dowdy and unfeminine domestic worker to fashionista and beauty queen (after all, several domestic workers regularly participate in the many beauty contests sponsored for them) reveals that the politics of appearances is also incredibly important as a coping strategy for them. The Cinderella day is documented through professional photographs taken by Ces photography (the Filipino-owned professional studio at Lucky Plaza mentioned above) or by Facebook posts. The self-representation recorded for posterity here is not their working selves, but their leisure time as successful migrants capable of looking just as attractive and as cosmopolitan as the middle class in the Philippines. While these beauty make-overs endorse Filipino cultural beauty ideals, the conflation between beauty and female power in Filipino culture also sends the message that they are channeling some of that beauty/power nexus.<sup>127</sup> And, for some of them the transformation is not merely physical, as they gain new professional qualifications as graduates from H.O.M.E. courses, or NGO

---

126. See Nenita's story in Fanny A. Garcia, *Pamilya, Migrasyon, Disintegrasyon* (Manila: de la Salle University Press, 2013), 73. Here she says that "Many Filipinos in Saudi Arabia, large numbers of them, many have spouse here [in the Philippines] as well as spouses there [in Saudi Arabia]. See also Jessica Flores Napat, "Tukso, Taksil, Takbo," in Jovelyn B. Revilla, *Masaya Din, Malungkot Din* (Karanasan ng OFW), (USA: Tatay Jobo Elizes, 2012), 99-102. In Jessica Flores Napat's migration story, she says that in Dubai infidelity was commonly practiced by Filipinos where love affairs were considered "pandandalian or sideling nga lamang (just a quick or sideline activity only)."

127. For an analysis on the connection between beauty and female power see Mina Roces, *Women, Power and Kinship Politics*, Chapter 5.

ATIKHA's financial literacy seminars (and indeed some of them become teachers and ATIKHA trainers themselves), and in taking on leadership roles in H.O.M.E. (which includes addressing the ILO Convention in Singapore), these women have already begun the project of initiating an alternative world for themselves.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.** Research for this project was funded by an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant entitled "A History of Women as Consumers" (DP170102661). I would like to thank Gilda Malaluan, Lita Patricio, and Alpha Grace Vicente for help in organizing interviews and accompanying me around Lucky Plaza and for their wonderful hospitality. Barbara Quek, senior librarian at the National Library in Singapore, gave me valuable assistance in accessing primary sources. Cristina Santos, Secretary, Board of Directors H.O.M.E. welcomed me to the H.O.M.E. family and Lisa Monteroso Mayor included me in the ATIKHA Financial Literacy Seminar ran in Singapore. I thank Luz Campos Mesenas (publisher of Pinoy Star Magazine with husband Clement) for organizing interviews with Filipino businesses at Lucky Plaza and for giving me copies of Pinoy Star magazine. Raina Ann Bernardez and Esther Ann Soriano transcribed some of the interviews for me. I am grateful to Rick Bonus for his very helpful feedback on an earlier draft, and for encouraging me to think about the limitations of migrant consumer power and reflecting on my ethnographic work. And finally, I am greatly indebted to Martyn Lyons for suggesting that I read the work of Early Modern European historians on the carnival and misrule.

*This page intentionally left blank*