Countertopographies of Migrant Women: Transnational Families, Citizenship and Labor as Solidarity

Neoliberal globalization has unleashed forces that have pushed women to migrate and pursue livelihoods far from their homes in places where they confront racism, xenophobia, gender-based discrimination as well as low-wages and difficult working conditions in cities like Hong Kong, London, Taipei and New York. As scholars have established, Third World women are indispensible, yet very disposable, bodies of labor for global capital, transnational elites and increasingly to emergent middle-class families (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007; Wright 2006; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2004; Sassen 1999).

In the U.S. for instance, migrant domestic workers, are crucial to maintaining the lifestyles of numerous New Yorkers. These women daily service the families of the elites of this “global city” who live in the expensive neighborhoods of Manhattan and then are sent back to the outer boroughs of the city at the end of the day. Meanwhile, from their modest accommodations in places like Jackson Heights in Queens, these women try to maintain their own families, albeit transnationally, with the wages they earn. For some, the burdens of being what Rhacel Parrenas has called “servants of globalization” (Parrenas 2001b) are too great and drive them to take their own lives as in the case of Felisa “Fely” Garcia who died alone in her apartment and whose family in the Philippines did not see her body until months later. Tragically, her corpse was left to languish in a local morgue. With no support from her employer or the Philippine consular office in New York, Garcia was abandoned in a land not her own.

In Hong Kong, foreign domestic workers have become such a normalized part of many middle-class families' lives that the cramped high-rises in which most Hong Kong families reside are built with separate, tiny closet-sized spaces meant to accommodate a domestic who is expected to perform housekeeping duties while also care for children and/or the elderly (Yeoh, Huang, and Lam 2005; Constable 1997). Domestic workers in Hong Kong are required, by law, to live-in with their employers and are only entitled to one day off a week, usually Sundays. With no where else to go on their days off, domestic workers from the Philippines, Indonesia and other countries occupy every bit of free public space they can muster. Anyone who has visited Hong Kong can attest to this fact as parks and sidewalks overflow with domestic workers on any given Sunday seated on old newspapers, mats and cardboard boxes.

Migrant domestic workers have migrated to work for privileged families around the world however their immobility is evidenced in the way they are easily discarded to the streets every Sunday, as in Hong Kong, or in worse cases, left dead and forgotten in New York. Indeed, migrants are both incredibly mobile—living and working in all corners of the globe--yet they are immobile as they are confined to specific categories of work and are segregated to specific areas of residence in their countries of destination. Paradoxically migrant women's mobility to work abroad, yet immobility in their destination global cities can also form the new grounds of diasporic and transnational activism.

We present two examples of migrant transnationalism within the Filipino labor diaspora; specifically we look at the activism of domestic workers in New York City and Hong Kong. Kabalikat Domestic Workers Support Network in New York City is an

organization of 50 or more migrant workers working as nannies, housekeepers, and caregivers to the elderly. Most of the organization is made up of women, although some men are members, and they are almost all undocumented. Their organizing includes local struggles like migrant rights in New York and making claims to the Philippine state regarding migrant welfare. The United Filipinos of Hong Kong (UNIFIL) is an alliance of domestic workers' groups from the Philippines who are employed there on short-term contracts. The groups that comprise UNIFIL are quite diverse ranging from organizations of indigenous Filipinos to regional associations. UNIFIL can mobilize hundreds, even thousands, of Filipinas to public mobilizations it organizes.

Through our analysis of the work of Kabalikat and UNIFIL we explore how Filipina migrants' make transnational connections, how these connections operate and *when* these connections act as a basis for transnational mobilization. We find that though Filipina migrant workers experience very different working and living conditions, they similarly engage in transnational solidarity organizing and the subjectivities through which they engage in cross-border activism can take parallel forms. We find that migrant women's experiences of gendered social reproductive labor, both paid and unpaid, are salient in shaping their political subjectivities and they connect these experiences to a critique of their "home" state. We situate our work in the literature on transnational feminism and introduce some conceptual tools from feminist geography, specifically "countertopography" to consider the distinct yet linked global cities of New York and Hong and the particular grounds for political subjectivity that mold the possibilities for Filipina migrants' transnational solidarity.

Biography:

Valerie Francisco is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Portland in Oregon. Francisco received her PhD from the Department of Sociology at City University of New York, The Graduate Center. Francisco's dissertation, "Together But Apart: Dynamics of Filipino Transnational Families," examines the strategies of maintaining a transnational family from the perspectives of Filipino migrant women working as domestic workers in New York City while their families live in the Philippines. Francisco's research fundamentally interrogates the implications of neoliberal globalization on intimate and microrelations such as those of the family. In her analysis of the hardships in transnational families, Francisco also pays attention to the ways in which migrants engage their experiences of dislocation and diaspora to craft resistance. In journals like *The Philippine Sociological Review, Action Research* and *Critical Sociology*, Francisco writes about how families are changing under neoliberal immigration policies and what types of political subjectivities emerge from those conditions.

Francisco's research is informed by the transnational activism of GABRIELA, an alliance of progressive Filipino women's organizations in the Philippines and in other countries internationally; and MIGRANTE International, an international alliance of Filipino migrant workers. These networks of diasporic and transnational solidarity between Filipino migrant communities in the U.S. and the national democratic movement in the Philippines have shaped her critical perspective on neoliberalism. To this end, Francisco has engaged in participatory action research and feminist methods in all of her research projects where Filipino and Filipina migrants' experiences are centered as expert. Currently she is collaborating with Robyn Rodriguez on a PAR project with Filipino caregivers and domestic workers to research an understudied industry of caregiving to the elderly. More importantly, this research project allows for the development of leadership and organizing capacity in the Filipino community in the Bay Area through a newly formed organization, Migrante Northern California.