

## **[OVERVIEW SLIDE]**

I want to first thank the organizers of International Solidarity Reloaded and all of the wonderful presenters at this conference. I have benefited greatly from the talks thus far and want to give credit to many of you for making this presentation so much sharper than it was when I arrived in Frankfurt. During my presentation, I want to take up the question of solidarity between Filipino migrant workers by using a spatial heuristic, countertopography, to explore how migrant transnational activism are using the diaspora—a geography created by the Philippines as a neoliberal state—to activate transnational networks. Diaspora is not only a description of the character of Filipinos globally. I argue that diasporic geography plays a key role in drawing out local struggles while scaling it up to transnational strategies. I will provide two examples of Filipino migrant workers organizing, mostly women working as domestic workers, using emotional basis to produce local solidarity via issues of family and precarious work.

Simultaneously, I highlight their membership in Migrante International, an international alliance of Filipino migrant organizations, to explore their transnational solidarity with one another through making claims on their citizenship on a global scale, directing political actions and demands towards a critique of the Philippine labor export policy. Lastly, I hope to make sense of these examples to point out that transnational migrant activism is a different vantage point to think of transnational solidarity and how migrant spatiality is key in challenging capitalist spaces.

**Critical geographers have used the idea of topography to describe the changing landscapes of social relations under neoliberal globalization, for example the uneven development of urban geographies in the concentration of capital in global cities like NYC and HK, while pockets of those very cities are abandoned. Today, I am interested in the topography**

constituted by labor migration under conditions of neoliberalism—namely how global cities are changing with the immigration of women from the 3<sup>rd</sup> world working in low-wage domestic industries. Yet, as Herod has reminded us, capitalist space is always negotiated and challenged by workers, therefore I put migrant workers at the center of this interrogation by using a concept called countertopography. [COUNTERTOPOGRAPHY] Cindi Katz talks about a “Politics that maintains the distinctness of a place while recognizing that it is connected analytically to other places through a particular relations to a globalizing process.” I extend the notion of a feminist countertopography by being attentive to the uneven terrain within which migrant women are inserted into the global order; I recognize that different sites offer both limits and possibilities for building transnational solidarity even amongst migrant women who share deep structural similarities. The research Robyn Rodriguez and I have done reveals that Filipinas in New York and in Hong Kong are using the distinctness geographies of global cities to breakthrough in new types of local while connecting transnationally to the globalizing processes of forced migration from the Philippines. The historicity and particularity in each city gives way to very different types of organizing capacities wherein Hong Kong migrant women engage in multi-ethnic, multi-racial coalition building in the streets of Hong Kong, New York migrants work use guerilla theater and the family to galvanize migrant workers in their cities. As I will show, both examples demonstrate a different local strategy with the global city as an actor in political organizing of migrant workers but an engagement with their transnational solidarity politics ebbs and flows as well.

[PHILIPPINES] Before I move any further, I want to highlight the basis for migrant worker organizing in the Filipino diaspora. The numbers to your right describe the sophisticated and

aggressive system of labor export in the Philippines where up to 5,000 Filipinos leave Manila's airports daily for contractual labor in over 190 countries. The migrant Filipino population numbers at \$10 million, 10% of the overall population in the Philippines that then remits over \$19 B annually. Robyn Rodriguez and Anna Guevarra call this globalizing process "labor brokering," wherein the Philippine state invests in the systematic management and export of the people globally. In spatial terms, the Philippine government is also investing in diasporic geography wherein its citizens stretch the boundaries of the nation in their destination countries all over the world. This idea can also be supported by all of the consular offices and attachés under the Philippine state present in various global regions all over the world. The labor brokerage state as the Philippines' entry onto neoliberal global stage has unleashed forces that have forced 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, Qatar and New York. As Melissa Wright argues, Third World women are indispensable, yet very disposable, bodies of labor for global capital and transnational elites and increasingly to emergent middle-class families. The "spatial fix" according to Harvey, of Filipino women is in the global demand for their work and yet the constrained way they are then attached or fixed to their destination countries as they arrive.

**[HONG KONG]** In Hong Kong, foreign domestic workers are 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. 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 become indispensable to privileged families of around the world while their disposability is evidenced in the way they are easily discarded to the streets every Sunday, as in Hong Kong. Paradoxically migrant women's indispensability yet disposability to the imperatives of neoliberal globalization in these cities can also form the grounds for new sites and circuits of activism through which migrant women mobilize transnationally. Though domestic workers' isolation in their Hong Kong employers' homes is their source of vulnerability in the worksite, their vast numbers on the streets offers geographic potential for collective power as organizations like United Filipinos of Hong Kong (UNIFIL) have taken on Sundays and the concentration of Filipinas on the streets as an opportunity to do sweeping organizing. Often as the crowds of Filipinas are organized by ethnolinguistic group and even by public space, UNIFIL organizers provide political education in dialects and languages pertaining to groups and through simple outreach strategies like karaoke, gaining the confidence of migrant workers in the event that they should have grievances against employers or are in need of health or legal services. The spatial concentration of Filipinos alongside other migrant women from the Asia Pacific has also given way to the Asian Migrant Coordinating Body, an interethnic alliance of foreign domestic workers from Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Nepal and the Philippines have taken advantage of this situation to organize direct actions on the Hong Kong government over wage and other issues drawing tens of thousands of women for nearly a decade. UNIFIL and their membership to Migrante

International joined with the collective power of AMCB in Hong Kong would later be instrumental in organizing and convening the International Migrants Alliance (IMA).

**[KABALIKAT] Migrant domestic workers, for instance, 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 impossibly 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” 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 was only discovered after several weeks. Tragically, her corpse was left to languish in a local morgue. Since all of her family and friends lived in the Philippines, there was no one who could make arrangements for her burial. Garcia’s employers were clearly uninterested in her once she had disappeared from their lives and likely had Garcia quickly replaced.**

**When domestic workers who frequented a local Filipino community center heard about Garcia's case, no one knew her personally and some had never even met her, but quickly, they sympathized with her, the situation of her alleged suicide and the family that depended on her financially she hadn't seen in years. In the many meetings and street actions that followed, some of the migrant women that eventually formed KABALIKAT in 2007 came to speak out for the very first times in their lives. Their fiery and often tearful speeches at the community center and public meetings pinpointed the failure in the life and death of Fely Garcia, the systematic export of Filipinos to countries wherein the Philippine**

state could abandon their responsibilities to their migrant citizens. They demanded that the Philippine government perform an investigation of Garcia's death as well as bear the cost of the repatriation of her remains, relying on an emotional basis to draw solidarity from one another in NYC to demand justice from the institution they saw should be responsible, the Philippine consulate. During street actions in Queens, a borough housing the largest concentration & foot traffic of Filipino immigrants in NYC, KABALIKAT delivered acted and sang songs for a woman they never met and didn't know. They used the highly pedestrian urban landscape of NYC with what Kasper Brasken called "emotional bridges" to relate to Filipino immigrants coming off subway trains, walking to and from work as a local organizing strategy. With narratives about what it was like to be far from their children, racially marginalized/deportable migrants and disposable workers they used NYC's urban economy and geography to gain support for Fely's campaign. This local strategy also used Migrante's transnational network to activate Filipino immigrants in support of Garcia. Rallies and press conferences with Garcia's family in Manila and statements from migrant organizations across the world increased the pressure on the Philippine government and media to pay attention and respond to Garcia.

[THEATER] A community-based memorial service for Garcia drew hundreds of Filipino immigrants and Filipino American community members from the New York/New Jersey area while hundreds of Filipino migrants employed in other parts of the world including Filipina domestics in Hong Kong signed petitions in support of the campaign. Through this transnational solidarity network, Kabalik at UNIFIL's transnational actions through Migrante leveraged the NYC Philippine consulate to release funds for Garcia's repatriation.

[IMA] Domestic worker activists of Hong Kong were able to make linkages across the Pacific Ocean to the NYC May 1st Coalition, a coalition of migrant worker organizations in New York City who successfully organized one of the biggest demonstration in U.S. history on May 1st 2006 as well as other groups around the world. It was perhaps the May 1st 2006 mobilizations in NYC that prompted activists involved in the AMCB that I described above to reach out across the Pacific to their counterparts in the United States. Moreover, AMCB activists had been following the developments of the Global Forum on Migration Development (GFMD) also taking place that year. Convened in September 2006 after a United Nations High-Level dialogue on the issue of migration and development, notably only a few months after the May 1st mobilizations, the GFMD is a venue through which the idea of “temporary labor migration programs” is actively being promoted by both labor-sending and labor-receiving countries. Together the two coalitions—the AMCB in HK and the May 1st Coalition in NYC—would form the International Migrants Alliance just a few years later in 2008 at a conference organized by the AMCB in Hong Kong. That conference brought together migrant activists from other countries in Asia, Europe, Africa and North America. A few months after its founding, IMA would host its first major event in Manila to contest the second annual meeting of the GFMD. As one of the world’s premier labor exporting countries in the world, with what some international organizations consider a model temporary labor migration program, Manila was perhaps the most appropriate site for the GFMD to convene. IMA, however, organized an a series of events which included its member organizations as well as new contacts countering that the GFMD is ultimately a Global Forum on Modern Day Slavery. The organizational capacities migrants develop through local activism in sites like Hong Kong and New York allow migrants to formalize transnational linkages through the establishment of IMA to then contest international

initiatives the governance of migration governance. This represents a kind of scaling up of migrants political transnationalism that is quite new.

At the same time, migrant women activists in IMA transnationally mobilize against specific kinds of transnational feminist politics. As Eni Lestari, an Indonesian migrant domestic worker activist in AMCB who was elected secretary-general of IMA put it, “For many years, many have spoken on our behalf... This time, we will speak for ourselves.” IMA was founded with the purpose as stated in its constitution to, “Empower migrant workers, immigrants and refugees through their self organization.” Unlike their middle-class, professional NGO counterparts who, for instance, are officially accredited by the United Nations therefore have access to privileged networks that span the global, the transnational circuits that the women of IMA traverse often takes them outside and around institutions of power.

Nevertheless, it is in these spaces, like the geography of the street, or spatial organization of transnational employment, where they can come together to articulate radically different analyses of contemporary global order. Finally, the events organized by IMA become a means through which they can share experiences and make sense of the circuits through which they are forcibly and often brutally rendered in, through and across different sites around the world. Indeed, these events become sites for the construction of countertopography.

**[GLOBAL PORK] Another example in which these two local organizing sites have used scales to build a countertopography is in the recent pork barrel scandals in the Philippines. In the summer of 2013, exposés of Philippine elected officials using public funds to increase their personal, political and economic gain swept the country resulting in large mass demonstrations in the millions against corruption. In New York City, KABALIKAT teamed up with trafficked teachers and health care workers who are legally “stuck” in the**

**U.S. because of contract-substitution and the illegalizing policies of US immigration system, to highlight the need for Philippine officials to redirect resources to assist trafficked workers and migrants like Fely Garcia who needed repatriation upon her death. In Hong Kong, UNIFIL alongside their allies in AMCB led protest actions in the thousands criticizing the Philippine state for funneling resources into political family dynasties instead of developing jobs and national industries in the Philippines to keep Filipinos home instead of subsequent contractual work as domestics in cities like Hong Kong. Each site took up their own local particularity and yet, as illustrated by this flyer for the global day of action against Aquino's pork, the organizations are using the diasporic geography to highlight the contradictions between the corruption in the Philippine government and the very labor diaspora that is supposed to be keeping the country's pocketbook afloat. This flyer represents the geography of Filipino labor migration and yet localized approaches taken up by Migrante chapters globally reflects how this capitalist spatiality is being negotiated and challenged by the very migrant workers dispersed in all over the globe.**

[CONCLUSION SLIDE] A countertopography has allowed us to analyze emergent forms of transnational solidarity amongst Filipina domestic workers that are as yet understudied. Distinct from the transnational practices with a shared interest or target, I argue that these migrants' engagements with homeland politics are not around issues taking place in the homeland, but around migrants' struggles outside of the country. Indeed, migrants' activism is fueled by a global political imaginary as migrants' see themselves intimately connected not only to those in their immediate environs, but to their compatriots who are positioned in structurally similar ways around the world. This countertopography is useful to contain the simultaneous scaling up in different places across the Filipino diaspora. I chose this image because it speaks to how I am

trying to understand the areal and networked ways that the lights of migrant activists light up in support of one another and then also aimed at the Philippine state. Their embeddedness in this transnational geography forces them out of their country but it also gives them the global arena to critique the very state and system that has dispersed them.

*I want to spend the rest of my minutes linking up these examples with this rich discussions at this conference by posing some questions to help us sharpen our working definitions of solidarity: What spatial, emotional, analytical bridges can we build between the precarity of migrants worker and formal workers? What does flexibility/precariety and diaspora offer us in terms of possibility for rupture in a global capitalist economy? What does a practice of solidarity look like with highly feminized and racialized migrant workers, for those who do not share those individual and group identities? In some ways, I want to circle back to Cristina's questions about difference, how can understand migrant workers' gender, racialization, undocumentedation be points of unity and conscientization without erasing our very clear differences? Lastly, Migrante's program includes an intentional focus on international solidarity building across borders within their migrant community and outside. What basis can migrant workers build solidarity with one another across cultural, geographical lines. Thank you for your attention and time and brilliance.*