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Research in Personal Experience

The Construction of a New Filipino National Identity:

How State-Sponsored Labor Brokerage Changed the Philippines and

Filipinos Around the Globe

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Date: July 1, 2021

Objective:

The Smart Development Institute (SDI), a certified IRS 501(c)(3) non-profit firm, transforms communities into Smart Communities to improve the quality of life of the citizens of communities. The following research to personal experiences helps SDI better understand the challenges faced by citizens of communities, in order to help us bridge the gaps that hinder growth, equality, wealth and well-being to reduce or eliminate these barriers, so that citizens of communities can move forward to a path of self-sufficiency and youth empowerment.

Introduction:

The following research into the development of the Filipino National Identity, recounts the personal experience of one individual and the larger impacts of colonization, government policies and new terminology on Filipino Identity worldwide. The research begins with a brief background description of the individual, in his own words, and is followed by his recounting of his understanding of Filipino history and world events that have helped to shape Filipino National Identity. Lastly, it explores the applications that these historical events have on the overall formation of Filipino National Identity in America and abroad.

Personal Experience:

On the first day of school, as a five-year-old Filipino boy attending a local Catholic school in Caracas, Venezuela, I wondered why no one looked like me. Three years later, I attended a similar type of school in Santiago, Chile, again wondering the same thing. My father's job as a diplomat for the Philippine government had taken me from Southeast Asia to South America, and finally to the United States where I now live. A part of his job was to help Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) and the Filipino diaspora as a whole by processing their visas and representing the Philippine government. More specifically, he helped incarcerated Filipinos abroad, helped renew or validate visas, and was a liaison to foreign governments. At the time, I did not truly understand the nature of his work, however, I thought to myself, "What are we [Filipinos] doing here?" This basic question would not truly be answered until I began doing my own research in college. Over time, I began to understand that the Filipino diaspora can be found all around the globe, with many Filipinos working to provide for their families back home.

Fast forward to the year 2017, I am at my internship where my boss told me a story about meeting one of former president Ferdinand Marcos' cabinet members who had fled the country to live in Northern Virginia. This man boasted about the system the leaders of the country created, one that encouraged the outward migration of labor from the Philippines to foreign countries due to the lack of employment opportunities at home. Hearing this story, myself prompted questions such as, "Why are Filipinos so willing to leave the country and everything that they know?" And, "What role did the government play in this?" Little did I know that this conversation with my boss, coupled with my life experiences of living abroad, would become the inspiration for the topic that I wished to study and explore during my senior year of college.

In the book *Marketing Dreams, Manufacturing Heroes - The Transnational Labor Brokerage of Filipino Workers* by Anna Romina Guevarra, Guevarra describes the discourse surrounding the subject of exporting labor, labor brokerage, and OFWs as a discourse that portrays the Philippines "as a place of untapped labor resources because it cannot generate viable local employment as a result of an economy that is recovering from legacies of debt and trade deficits that are remnants of its colonial past and exacerbated by the administration of former president Ferdinand Marcos and his cronies" (Guevarra 4). Guevarra introduces the lack of employment opportunities, legacies and influences of a colonial past, and the role president Marcos played in creating the new phenomenon of the OFW. Furthermore, the role of president Marcos suggests the fact that the practice of labor brokerage is state-sponsored.

This whole practice of state-sponsored labor brokerage has created a new national identity, one rooted in transnationality and the romanticization of working abroad. As Aziz Choudry says from *Labour/Le Travail*, "The Philippine state has reconfigured and redefined citizenship, rearticulating ideas of nationalism and national belonging for the purposes of brokerage labour to the world" (234). Through this paper, I hope to explore the construction of the OFW as a means of the Philippine state to stimulate the economy through the use of language, terminology, and discourse created by the state to perpetuate this system and the role of government in labor brokerage. Because OFWs are described as "The backbone of the Philippine economy," and account for around 10% of the Philippine's GDP, they are an invaluable asset to the state. The Philippine state, therefore, has reinvented what it means to be a Filipino citizen by means of labor brokerage under the false pretense of "empowerment."

Background:

To provide a background to the beginning of the practice of state-sponsored labor brokerage in the Philippines, we need to understand three key periods of time in the nation's history. In chronological order—Spanish colonization, American colonization, and the presidency of dictator Ferdinand Marcos who ruled from 1965 to 1986.

The Philippines has had a long history with its colonial powers. Spanish colonization of the country lasted for almost 350 years all in which they strongly imposed the Catholic religion to people in these islands. The Philippines was no more than a collection of islands at the time with tribes inhabiting different sets of islands. The Spanish saw an opportunity in this—they wished to make these tribes into "educated citizens," meaning, teaching them about Christianity and its principles. Christian principles were taught through the usage of the bible using passages and teachings of suffering, sacrifice, martyrdom, and resilience. These three teachings would later resound throughout the rest of Filipino history and would be used as an important tenant in discourse about the OFW.

As soon as Spanish colonization ended, American colonialism took over the Philippines. During this time, their policy of benevolent assimilation¹, which resembled the ‘educated citizens’ policy of Spain, sought to take control of the islands and its economy and its inhabitants. As Guevarra states, “Thus the legacy of an agricultural export economy inherited from the Spanish and preserved by American colonial occupation through American trade relations may have sown seeds of an environment that would later support the impetus of labor migration as a project of economic development” (27). As we will see later, the United States created deep ties within certain industries that would lead the Philippines and the US to be reliant on one another.

A few decades after the Philippines became an independent country after World War II, President Marcos took office in a time of economic growth from the Philippines, however, by the end of his time, rampant corruption, loss of lives, and extreme debt plagued the nation. In 1972, Marcos placed the Philippines under martial law—a time period when he rewrote the constitution, took away freedoms of the press and used his power to silence political opposition to his regime. Subsequently, two years after enacting martial law, Marcos passed an executive order to establish the Labor Code of 1974, “an effort to reorganize the Philippines’ labor policies with the intent of mitigating the country’s escalating unemployment at the time” (Guevarra 31). Guevarra notes that an important takeaway from the establishment of this code was that it formally institutionalized the country’s labor export policy. It established two key government agencies while simultaneously minimizing the role of private employment agencies in labor recruitment and barring foreign employers from directly hiring Filipinos. These two agencies created were the Overseas Employment Development Board (OEDB), now known as the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA), and the National Seamen Board (NSB). The agencies handled all land-based or sea-based employment of OFWs.

The Practice of Labor Brokerage:

The practice of labor brokerage in the Philippines can be defined as, “a form of labor control and neoliberal capitalist discipline that sustains the country’s labor migration and brands Filipinos in ways that aim to transform them into a highly coveted workforce” (Guevarra 204). In addition to this definition by Guevarra, I would like to add that labor brokerage, as a neoliberal capitalist discipline, places the value of capital and profits over the worker. This added definition will be evident when we talk about the government’s use of the term “empowerment.” The distinction must be made, however, that labor brokers are different from recruitment agencies in that labor brokers control almost all aspects of the worker’s employment which includes interviews, travel, transportation, pay, etc.

The practice of labor brokerage begins before employees even leave the country during Pre-Departure Orientation Seminars, or PDOS, which serve as basic seminars that allow for a brief introduction to the country which the OFW will be travelling to. In these seminars, the agency in charge attempts to give the OFW a basic cultural understanding of the country in which they will be working, giving them a dos and do not checklist, cultural norms, potential dangers, basic language skills, and essential rules about travel regarding their stay. The Women in Development Foundation (WIDF) is an NGO authorized by the state to give these seminars. During one such event, Guevarra notes that the co-founder of WIDF exclaimed to the crowd, “You are not yet heroes. You are just soldiers right now!” (Guevarra 51). The PDOS is an example of one of the “empowerment” tools that the state uses to explain their role in the

¹ The US policy towards the Philippines proclaiming that the country is essentially under the control of the United States

system. The narrative WIDF uses creates a type of nationalistic imaginary that makes these new OFWs feel like they have a part to play for the state. Additionally, using the term heroes is confusing because many of these migrant workers only leave the country in order to improve their socioeconomic status.

A popular occupation that often gets outsourced from the Philippines is nursing. This began with the Exchange Visitors Program in 1948. The program was instrumental in constructing the Philippines as a global source of nursing labor with nurses in almost every continent. This program brought in Filipinos to the US to receive advanced training in US hospitals where around 8,000 Filipinos participated. This program set the precedent for the beginning of labor brokerage specifically in the nursing field, having been cultivated by the US as a colonial power. From 1948 until the 2020s, the United States continues to recruit Filipino nurses when US hospitals experience nursing shortages.

The State:

“While the Philippines is just one of the many nations supplying labor to the globe, it has the most institutionalized labor-export process, enabling it to supply a range of workers” says Guevarra (3). The whole system the state created has had time to grow since its inception, fine-tuning its messaging and its goals towards becoming more profitable at the expense of OFWs. The state creates its messaging by first creating a discourse of what the OFW is supposed to be. According to the state, OFWs are supposed to be resilient², smart, adaptable, creative, caring, and quick-to-learn among the many labels always placed on them. Its goals, however, are simple. They easily align with capitalist and neoliberal discipline: to prioritize the economy by bringing in money from overseas.

We cannot talk about capitalism without mentioning who it benefits. In this specific case, it is the legislators, government officials, and the state as a whole who are the primary benefactors of the system. The Marcos era saw an intense rise in corruption and gross misconduct. Marcos himself spent more patronage resources than any other Philippine president before him to get reelected to his second term as president, “Marcos wrecked the economy” as Mark Thompson says in his book *The Anti-Marcos Struggle* (33). Additionally, it is estimated that Marcos stole the equivalent of about five to ten billion USD of taxpayer’s money. This figure does not take into account how much the rest of Marcos’ government officials stole for themselves, falsifying documents in order to keep the money. One can say this fueled the push for intensifying the promotion of overseas work as high inflation devalued the Philippine peso, making foreign money that was being funneled into the Philippines more valuable. This economic crisis made a lasting impact on the Philippine economy for decades to come. Unemployment hovered around 8% towards the end of Marcos’ first term. As of 2007 the country had a total population of 88.57 million citizens, over one million OFWs were deployed while an additional three million of citizens carried overseas employment contracts which amounts to 4.6% of the country’s total workforce (Guevarra 22). As of 2018, the Philippine Statistics Authority estimates that over two million Filipinos are deployed overseas.

Another repercussion of the labor brokerage system is the transnationality due to the concept of added export value to the Filipino worker. Essentially, the Filipino who is characterized as adaptable, resilient,

² This term has taken on a negative connotation because politicians continuously use it in order to avoid speaking about the shortcomings of the national government regarding protecting OFWs.

hard-working, becomes commodified³ when the state begins measuring their worth in terms of the amount of remittances they send back to the country. Additionally, the characterizations of Filipinos the state has constructed for them attempts to place a comparative advantage against other countries that export labor. The state is attempting to manipulate and uphold a certain image the OFW has created to capitalize on their remittances. Much like a commodity, maintaining a high-quality product leads to more revenue, or in this case a better economy. In addition to all of the expectations the government places on OFWs, they encouraged the idea that upon making money from their job, the OFW should turn into an OFI, or Overseas Filipino Investor, investing more money to the economy in any way they can. The idea of an OFI places an added heavy burden on OFWs who already suffer from homesickness, being in an unfamiliar country amongst an unfamiliar culture.

One tool this capitalist system employs is creating an appropriate label with regard to their role in maintaining the state-sponsored labor brokerage system. The state does so carefully as to avoid placing blame on itself. This careful labelling, therefore, leads the state to claim that it does not promote overseas employment, and instead “manages” it. They “manage” overseas employment by supporting Filipinos’ choice to work, their desires, and freedom to choose for themselves (Guevarra 23). This specific wording is used to deflect blame from the state and onto the workers. If the state is in charge of supporting and directly promoting the practice, they could be held accountable for any abuses OFWs might encounter abroad.

A document that validated the “manage not promote” rhetoric was the Republic Act 8042: The Migrant Workers Act and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995. Described as the “Magna Carta” of OFWs by Guevarra, it states that the government is simply there to facilitate the choice and opportunities presented to Filipinos. This piece of legislation signaled the shift in mindset of how the government viewed the practice. What the RA 8042 continued to do, however, was to ardently defend the practice saying that it is still one of the best solutions when it comes to filling (or exporting) the gaps of occupations where we have a surplus of labor.

All the pieces of legislation as well as the continuous use of specific language to describe the OFW are powerful in becoming a true part of common knowledge. If the universal idea behind governments is that they are a representation of the people that should be trusted, there will be many Filipinos who will outright believe anything the state puts out. All legislation and discourse can, therefore, be highly effective in making people believe the system of labor brokerage is an inherent part of the nation.

The Shroud of “Empowerment”:

In this section we will explore the usage of the term empowerment and the way in which it is used to deflect blame from the state and onto workers. In an interview conducted by Guevarra with a POEA official, the official said, “When you empower the worker, you believe that when they get out into the field, they have the adequate bullets and when they [finish the battle], the first thing that [they] do is *behave*. And when you *behave*, you can’t go wrong. So I am looking at the empowerment of the worker as a true and responsible worker” (57). First, this mindset characterizes the OFW as going into a battlefield or a warzone armed with bullets, those bullets being discipline. Why would they compare working overseas with such a dangerous thing such as warfare? Perhaps the state is fully aware that the

³ The process of treating something or someone as a commodity

work performed abroad has similar dangers that might be faced. Additionally, it implies that the OFW's best protection against abuse is empowerment through being well informed, and if you are informed they say, you will not encounter any problems. What Guevarra does not take into account, however, is the accreditation the government gives to the hiring agencies that scam the OFW, some of whom do not fully understand their rights. This can be done through the hiring agencies charging workers higher rates than the norm, taking a sizable portion of their paycheck, or not giving them the adequate pay in their contracts.

"Empowerment" has many other uses. It can refer to the agency of a Filipino migrant worker and is a tool used by the state to aid in nation-building. Empowerment opens us to questions about what agency OFWs truly have under the economic system in place. The state acts under the guise of giving their citizens the agency to make their own decisions, to have the freedom to choose. Through this (in)voluntary choice, therefore, the OFW has the power to transform their family's status both socially and economically. However, under the current economic landscape of the Philippines, do lower class Filipinos truly have a choice in where they wish to work?

The Incorporation of Language used to Construct Filipino National Identity:

The beginning of a system like state-sponsored labor brokerage will warrant the creation of new rhetoric and discourse. A few of the terms we will be exploring include "bagong bayani" (new heroes), "ambassadors of goodwill", and "new aristocrats" all of which help in the construction of a new identity for Filipinos. When state leaders and government institutions, such as former President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and the POEA frequently use this language, it creates a validation of these terms as legitimate.

The first term, "bagong bayani" or new heroes is an attempt by the government to deflect attention from their lack of action and support to "summon a kind of nationalist spirit rooted in the belief of one's role in nation building" (Guevarra 33). They call OFWs new heroes because they continue to provide for both their families and for the Philippine economy—heroes to their families and the Philippine state. This narrative of all OFWs being heroes for simply trying to make money abroad for the survival of their families acts as a distraction tactic in order not to highlight the absence of protective measures that should be in place for them. To further add to this, since 1989 the POEA has bestowed the Bagong Bayani Award (BBA)⁴ to the OFW that has displayed the most, "effort in fostering goodwill among peoples of the world, enhancing and promoting the image of the Filipino as competent, responsible and dignified worker, and greatly contributing to the socioeconomic development of their communities and out country as a whole" (Guevarra 52). This official statement from the POEA website is straightforward in describing the intent behind the creation of the bagong bayani and the BBA by the state. Similarly, the same type of narrative is rising rapidly in the United States due to the current COVID-19 pandemic. Although started for different reasons, the term hero is being placed on "essential workers" in the US such as grocery store workers, maintenance workers, and medical workers. The similarity between this and the bagong bayani is that they both work to deflect blame from the state and their inability to provide protection to their citizens. In the case for the US, the government and White House response to the pandemic has been slow in providing for both workers needs and protective gear for

⁴ The BBA comes with monetary awards sponsored by the state

frontline workers. In a similar way, the Philippine state does not ensure or take action over the abuse of their citizens abroad, instead opting to focus on their value measured by remittances.

Another term coined by the state referring to the OFW is “ambassadors of goodwill.” The government views OFWs beyond their ability to remit money, they also view them as partners of the state in representing the country. This is important because, with the high number of Filipinos abroad in countries all over the world, in the view of a neoliberal government you would want your citizens to “behave honorably with proper decorum” to further capitalize on the positive press it might bring to the country. This title, however, comes with many caveats. As an “ambassador” there are many responsibilities such as forging good relations with the host country and promoting cultural exchange and understanding. If the worker were to “misbehave” it would paint a bad light on the rest of Filipinos leading the employer to “generalize” that all Filipinos are bad workers. The title does more than this, it reminds the OFW that they need to be aware of their actions at all times, because if they do not, they are disappointing their nation and the ability of other OFWs to work in said country in the future.

Lastly, we can analyze how former President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo speaks about OFWs in her Saturday morning show called “May Gloria Ang Bukas Mo” which translates to “There is Glory in your Future.” In this morning show, she talks about various topics including the Philippine’s position in the global economy, employment prospects, labor shortages and how to fill them, and foreign investments in the Philippines. It serves as a way to communicate to the people what can be done in light of situations like labor shortages, and how Filipinos themselves can tackle these issues. In one of these she talked about Filipino nurses in England. Arroyo explained how well off they are having reached a newfound status of “New Aristocrats.” Additionally, she adds that these nurses were able to reach this status solely because they are working abroad, implying they would not be able to reach this status had they stayed in the Philippines. This messaging presents a problem to Filipinos: On one hand, they can earn almost ten times the amount of money abroad at the cost of leaving all that is familiar, and on the other, it shows the lack of upward socioeconomic ability available to Filipino citizens in-country. Should the focus be on creating more economic prospects in the Philippines itself so that this practice would not have to be there in the first place? Or is the practice so ingrained in the state and in the minds of Filipinos that it has become a national norm?

Overall, by ‘managing’ the labor migration, the state attempts to portray itself as one that responds to the needs and necessities of its citizens abroad. The discourse that bagong bayani, ambassadors of goodwill, and new aristocrats create, attempts to elevate the status of the OFW and deflect from the governing body’s inability to protect its citizens. The state claims that the best tools to protect oneself from encountering problems abroad (i.e. abuse, sexual harassment, etc.), is empowerment. Empowerment, in the eyes of the state is through actively preparing oneself with the knowledge necessary before starting their journey as an OFW. In an interview with former POEA director Ricardo Casco, he says, “In reality, what should be done is to explain to the OFWs that instead of wasting [their] money with [buying] fake goods in Hong Kong or doing duty-free shopping, [they] should buy this educational plan,” (Guevarra 55). There is an emphasis and belief that knowledge, education, and the right decision-making abilities enables the OFW to be protected from any adversity thrown their way. Furthermore, Casco says, “[You] have to behave in proper decorum, [in] a way that [you] dress, carry [yourselves]... [As] Filipino citizens, [you] should help in government programs—promoting tourism and investments,” (Guevarra 56). One can clearly see the mentality of the POEA, the primary agency in charge of OFWs, through the words of former director Ricardo Casco. Not only are OFWs supposed to

provide for their families, but they also owe a debt to their state to elevate the country in any way possible.

Driving Forces for Outward Migration of Labor:

Both labor brokers and government officials claim that a major reason for OFWs leaving the country is the Filipino's tendency to be 'naturally adventurous' and because of that, Filipino society has evolved into a culture of migration. Guevarra notes that this culture of migration was, "facilitated by the educational and social infrastructure that resulted from the country's colonial relations with the US" (23). As previously mentioned, one such example of this is the nursing occupation. The Exchange Visitors Program paved the road for the Philippine state to become the source of nursing labor to the United States whenever there would be a shortage which continues as of the year 2020.

This labor migration is not just economic driven, there is a certain prestige that comes along with the ability to live abroad, whether it be for work or for education. Clearly, the main reason for labor migration is the impoverished country that is unable to provide its citizens with attainable basic necessities for livelihood, however, another discourse arises from those living inside the country. In the eyes of Filipinos, the OFW does not just have a great opportunity at hand, their position also produces a certain jealousy. The mere fact that someone is abroad affords them experiences that their families or friends will never know within the Philippines. Family members or friends romanticize the experience of living abroad believing that material possessions and experiences are much easier to come by because of the increased salary or wage. In the documentary by filmmaker Ramona Riaz called, *The Learning*⁵, Filipino schoolteachers are recruited to travel to East Baltimore, Maryland where they have a shortage of elementary and high school teachers. In this film, these teachers, upon returning to their homes having made ten times their salary from their job in America, are almost venerated by their friends and family. In one scene of the documentary, one of these teachers takes her family shopping at a whole-sale club where her family members continually place food and other items in the cart without her permission. She continually tells them to stop because they have already filled two whole shopping carts. The viewer can see the frustration building up inside her, later telling her family that they cannot do that again because she still has bills to pay in the US. The family, however, dismisses this and continually speaks about how she is their hero for sacrificing so much to work abroad. We see a heavy burden placed on OFWs by their families. They want to provide every need for their family but at the same time their family is often incapable of understanding their financial situation.

This sacrifice, therefore, warrants calling these OFWs heroes by both their family and the state because of the money they bring in. The remittances OFWs send, and the economic relief it can provide for their families is at the center of the driving force for labor migration. OFWs have the potential to make ten times more money abroad than they would at home, clearly paving the way for great economic advancement, but at what cost? And why can't this be as easily done in the Philippines? As Aziz Choudry says in their review of Robyn Magalit's book *Migrants for Export*, "The Philippine state has arguably developed the most advanced, sophisticated model for transnationalizing labor brokerage as an institutional form" (235).

⁵ PBS Documentary about four Filipino women whose idealized imaginary of America collide with the reality of teaching at Baltimore schools

Filipino National Identity – Constructed:

Multiple factors play into constructing identity. Since we already spoke about discourse and rhetoric playing their role, we will now explore other factors. To explore the romanticization of travelling or working overseas we need to be cognizant of the country's neo-colonial relations to the United States. These relations, as Guevarra notes, "facilitated the country's dependence on overseas employment as a form of economic development and enabled labor migration to become embedded in the national consciousness of Filipinos" (32). These colonial legacies have the possibility of creating stagnation in the economy because of the deep ties countries have as each other's labor source. The transnationality of OFWs is clearly seen through the formal relationships the Philippines has with multi-country alliances such as ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and APEC (Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation). These organizations claim to promote the liberalization of mobility, goods, and capital (and now people), further validating the status of the Philippines as a neoliberal state. Neoliberalism, therefore, acts as the main driver of globalism, helping the Philippines become a player in the labor migration market. Due to this, the Philippines is seen by other countries as a model for "migration management to other labor exporting countries such as Pakistan and Vietnam" (Choudry 235).

Two additional factors worth noting that aid in the construction of Filipino national identity are the romanticization of travelling and working overseas (especially in the United States) and the culture of sacrifice. In chapter six of Guevarra's book she interviews a Filipino nurse working in the US named Justin. Justin tells her, "We [Filipinos] are born to have the American dream. Since I was a young child, I thought that America is a good place to live, everything is free, there is democracy, and you have freedom" (Guevarra 166). Justin was in fact able to acquire a car and a variety of material possessions he otherwise would not have been able to get in the Philippines. Stories like these continually circulate around migrant networks in the Philippines, learning of individual people's success and leading people to think this could happen to anyone if they work hard enough. Filipino nurses that get recruited to the US, however, have to have many prior years of work experience and are vetted in a long process. There is a lengthy process involved in being able to work in the US, however, as Guevarra says, "Thanks to transnational corporations, a globalized media, and migrant transnational social networks, the images that travel and get imported globally portray the US as a place of wealth, cosmopolitanism and limitless opportunities" (167). This globalized view constructed by the state and the media create a troublesome narrative leading to a false social imaginary of the US. Additionally, some of these nurses note that Filipinos seek to have a voice, something they feel is more attainable in the US rather than in their own country. They feel as if rich are the only ones that truly are able to speak their minds freely.

The large wealth gap in the Philippines is what drives these sentiments of disillusionment with the state. The government fails to act upon the wishes and desires of their citizens to have better economic opportunities within the country. Instead, corrupt politicians fail both citizens and OFWs by stealing their hard-earned money. Another theme that the phrase "We were born to have the American dream" brings up is American colonialism. Filipinos can still feel the vestiges of American colonialism affect them to this day, whether they know it or not. The reverence that is still in place for the United States as a land of opportunity has permeated the minds of everyday Filipinos. Additionally, the US is also viewed as the top destination to both live and work by many OFWs who do not realize that a romanticized social imaginary of America may very well lead to disappointment and estrangement.

The discourse surrounding phrases such as “Migration is in the culture and being of the Filipino” help to perpetuate the idea that labor migration is something that will be a permanent part of the country and that there is a solution to moving away from such an emotionally taxing system. This phrase is often used by state officials to justify the labor brokerage system, saying it is in the innate nature, culture, and being of the Filipino to long for travel. I propose that it is because of the very institution of labor brokerage that this type of sentiment is felt throughout the Philippines. One is not born with the innate desire to travel, but instead is informed by the expectations and societal norms surrounding them.

One of the biggest discourses associated with the journey of the OFW is their sacrifice and resilience. As mentioned earlier, Spanish colonization had a part to play in laying the foundation for certain aspects of the Filipino national identity. After firmly establishing the Roman Catholic religion in the country, it has become one of the cornerstones in constructing the way in which society operates. Just as Catholicism remains strong in the Philippines, so do the teachings of priests about Jesus’ sacrifice for humanity and biblical stories of resilience. Likewise, the Filipino is meant to ‘sacrifice’ their lives in order to better the economic conditions and overall life of their families. Choosing to be this sacrifice is the ultimate form of love one can show to the rest of their family. People link the difficulties of working away from their home to Jesus’ sacrifice for sinners because just as Jesus sacrificed his life, so do OFWs by giving up their lives for the sake of their families. This is an especially powerful message given the deep religious roots that are so ingrained in Filipino’s minds. Similarly, the narrative of OFWs as ‘resilient’ goes hand in hand with sacrifice. The homesickness, alienation, and liminality that OFW feels have to be endured for the sake of their families. Their love is shown by their ability to endure and be resilient through immense hardship that can take a toll on their mental health and wellbeing. Resilience has acquired a negative connotation over the past few years, however. The widespread use of the word by politicians has soured the mouths of Filipinos. To a degree, Filipinos are realizing the played-out narrative the state has been constantly advertising. Politicians promise to create more jobs, as well as better pay, but the reality is that it has rarely been the case. Unemployment persists in the country and even those who have jobs do not get paid a fair wage.

Conclusion:

Many variables and factors all combine to form identity. Filipinos, however, have experienced a shift in their definition of national identity mainly because of policies implemented by the state during President Ferdinand Marcos’ regime that have created a ripple effect for decades to come. The major factors that have aided this construction are the history of colonization, government policies, and biggest of all, the creation of new terminology that has shifted the way Filipinos think about their role as citizens of the state. The narrative that the state has created encompassed in the phrase, “Migration is in the culture and being of the Filipino,” as well as the use of the term empowerment, are tools used to deflect blame from the state because of the lack of support they provide to OFWs. The very institution of state-sponsored labor brokerage has created a new sense of national belonging by the transnational narratives state officials have been drilling to the public since the mid 1970’s.

The long history of Spanish colonialism coupled with American colonialism sowed the seeds for the large number of migrant labor that the country exports daily. Spanish colonialism introduced Christianity to the inhabitants of what was then just a group of islands with native tribes. Even in the late stages of colonization the inhabitants of those islands did not think of themselves as ‘Filipino’ but identified more with the tribes they belonged to. Subsequently, after the Spanish-American War the Philippines and

other colonial holdings of Spain were ceded to America, marking the beginning of American colonialism. During this time, the United States worked to establish a colonial mentality within Filipinos—making sure that the United States could turn to its ‘little brown brother’⁶ whenever it needed its resources or labor for decades to come. This is also the time when the Exchange Visitors Program informally marked the beginning of the Philippines providing nursing labor to the US whenever the country would have a shortage.

The Philippine state essentially birthed and codified the practice through the creation of the POEA and the NSB to facilitate labor brokerage. Due to the high unemployment rate during the beginning of Marcos’ second term the state began promoting the export of labor. What state officials thought might be a temporary fix during the time of high unemployment became a part of the identity of the Filipino. Years later, the practice of labor brokerage persists and the Philippine economy benefits from it. Choudry notes that “10% of Philippine’s total population is employed in over 200 countries across the world” accounting for 10% of the country’s GDP (234). This number alone displays the immense value the OFW’s remittances hold for the government, state officials, and legislators—not because they would like to advance the country’s agenda, but because corruption plagues the leadership of the country. Countless politicians have consistently stolen taxpayers’ money and the more money that circulates the economy, the more they can profit.

Politicians and state officials also make use of new language, terminology, and discourse to indirectly capitalize on remittances, and to directly construct a new national identity. Terms like *bagong bayani*, ambassadors of goodwill, and new aristocrats all circulate Philippine institutions and media in order to lead the Filipino to perpetuate labor brokerage. These are especially powerful in shaping the minds of the people—by appearing to praise their efforts and lead them to believe they are part of a larger entity beyond their own agenda, the state creates a feeling of debt that the OFW has to pay.

Overall this new national identity has grown from the roots of colonial and neocolonial relations, etched in the minds through new discourse created, and codified through government. In one example, we can see remnants of colonial mentality through the phrase “We are born to have the American Dream” from one of Guevarra’s interviews. There is a veneration and romanticization of travelling and working abroad in order to advance one’s own socioeconomic status. Success begins to be measured in how much one’s new wage or salary can attain new material possessions. The widespread realization needs to be made that in order to create a more stable Filipino society, both economically and socially, the Philippines will need to move away from the labor brokerage system it created and instead focus on building more and better-paying jobs within the country. The long history of labor brokerage in the Philippines has constructed a new meaning for what it means to be Filipino with labor migration, sacrifice, and resilience at its core.

In conclusion, Smart Development Institute's research on the Filipino American community's needs highlights the importance of historical research and understanding national identity. Through this research, SDI can provide essential services that cater to the community's unique needs, ultimately building smarter and more connected communities. By recognizing and celebrating the Filipino national identity and historical experiences, SDI's work can positively impact the community's sense of belonging and strengthen their voice in American society. As SDI continues to expand its services, the integration

⁶ A term Americans used to call Filipinos during American colonization

of historical research and cultural sensitivity will remain critical to building smarter and more inclusive communities that empower and uplift all individuals.

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