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Queering the Global Filipina Body: Contested Nationalisms in the Filipina/o Diaspora.

Description

Contemporary popular culture stereotypes Filipina women as sex workers, domestic laborers, mail order brides, and caregivers. These figures embody the gendered and sexual politics of representing the Philippine nation in the Filipina/o diaspora. Gina K. Velasco explores the tensions within Filipina/o American cultural production between feminist and queer critiques of the nation and popular nationalism as a form of resistance to neoimperialism and globalization.

Using a queer diasporic analysis, Velasco examines the politics of nationalism within Filipina/o American cultural production to consider an essential question: can a queer and feminist imagining of the diaspora reconcile with gendered tropes of the Philippine nation? Integrating a transnational feminist analysis of globalized gendered labor with a consideration of queer cultural politics, Velasco envisions forms of feminist and queer diasporic belonging, while simultaneously foregrounding nationalist movements as vital instruments of struggle.

Keywords

Filipina/o diaspora, queer diaspora, Filipina/o American cultural production, transnational feminisms

Disciplines

Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies | Women's Studies

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Introduction

The Global Filipina Body

The second season of the TLC cable television show *90 Day Fiancé* introduced viewers to Daya, a pediatric nurse and a prospective bride from the Philippines who travels to the United States for the first time on a K-1 visa (a “fiancé visa”) to visit Brett, a white American man who lives in Washington state. A US-based reality television show, *90 Day Fiancé* offers a glimpse into the lives of couples who meet by correspondence. Replacing the older paper catalogs of international matchmaking services of the 1980s and 1990s, the Internet now serves as the medium through which long-distance couples meet. Each season of *90 Day Fiancé* focuses on a group of these couples, in which one member of the couple arranges to bring his or her fiancé to the United States on a ninety-day visa. The couple has three months to meet in person for the first time, fall in love, and marry. The audience shares in the tears and frustration experienced by Daya as she faces rejection from Brett’s overprotective mother, who fears that Daya is only interested in Brett for his US citizenship. Against all obstacles, Daya and Brett proceed to fall in love and get married during the course of her three-month stay in Washington. This drama plays out the familiar tropes of the global Filipina body with which US consumers of popular culture are already familiar. The figure of Daya, who is both a nurse and a prospective “mail-order bride,” embodies two tropes of Filipina/o transnationalism for the ninety-five million viewers of the TLC channel: the hardworking Filipina nurse who migrates to work abroad and the mail-order bride who seeks an American man to marry

for purposes of immigration.¹ The nurse and the mail-order bride are examples of the “global Filipina body,” a term I use to describe the gendered figures of Filipina/o transnationalism that embody the forms of domestic, sexual, and affective labor that Filipina/o workers provide for a global economy. Responding to global capital’s need for devalued, flexible labor, the Philippine state has played a significant role in brokering a contemporary global labor diaspora of more than eight million Filipina/o migrant workers.² Although they are not all women, Filipina/o workers perform gendered labor, working as nurses, maids, nannies, eldercare providers, housewives, and sex workers. Despite the diversity of the kinds of gendered transnational labor that Filipinas provide—from the domestic labor of maids to the sexual labor of sex workers—these distinct forms of labor are often collapsed in the generalized figure of the global Filipina body within both global popular culture and Filipina/o American cultural production.

The familiarity of US audiences with the figure of the Filipina mail-order bride on the television show *90 Day Fiancé* reflects the circulation of this figure within Global North popular culture from the 1990s onward. For example, on an episode of the popular 1990s US television sitcom *Frasier*, Frasier’s father tells him that for “that amount of money, you could buy a Filipino wife.”³ Over two decades later, if one were to Google the term “Filipina,” dozens of mail-order bride websites and news articles about migrant Filipina domestic workers in places such as Singapore and Saudi Arabia would appear onscreen. From the widespread representation of Filipinas on internet dating websites and films such as *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* and *Closer to Home*, to actor Alec Baldwin’s controversial quip in 2009 (on the television show *Late Night with David Letterman*) that he would enlarge his family by “looking for a Filipino mail-order bride,” it is clear that global Filipina bodies are omnipresent figures within contemporary popular culture in the Global North.⁴ These multiple iterations of the global Filipina body circulate within US popular culture, from the figure of the hyperexploited Filipina overseas domestic laborer (maid, nanny, or eldercare provider) to the figure of the Filipina sex worker / trafficked woman—a participant or victim (within the “traffic-in-women” discourse) in the international sex trade. From 1990s films to more recent cable reality shows, these examples demonstrate a dominant capitalist logic in which Filipina bodies are represented as sources of easily available sexual, domestic, and affective labor.

As a Filipina mail-order bride character, Daya is familiar to viewers of *90 Day Fiancé* because of the broader material context of Filipina laboring bodies under neoliberalism. Daya, who is both a nurse and a mail-order bride, is a popular cultural example of the global Filipina body, a figure that embodies the gendered affective and sexual labor that migrant Filipina/o workers provide for

a global economy. A figure for the feminized position of the Philippines within a gendered international division of labor, the global Filipina body serves as a “geobody” for the Philippine nation’s status under contemporary neoliberal globalization. Philippine film studies scholar Roland Tolentino introduced the term “geobody” to describe how transnational figures such as the Filipina mail-order bride stand in for the Philippine nation itself.⁵ Daya is a geobody for the Philippine nation. She corporealizes devalued and feminized Filipina/o transnational labor. Within both global popular culture and Filipina/o diasporic culture, the ubiquitous figure of the global Filipina body signifies the subjection of Filipina/o bodies to the gendered and racialized effects of neoliberal globalization. As such, the global Filipina body indexes broader debates about gendered migrant labor and embodiment in the context of globalization. Whether represented as a mail-order bride, trafficked woman, or overseas contract worker, the figure of the global Filipina body makes evident the ways in which global capitalism naturalizes exploited racialized and gendered labor.⁶

The Global Filipina Body examines several instantiations of the global Filipina body that circulate within Filipina/o American cultural production, including the mail-order bride, the Filipina sex worker / trafficked woman, the *balikbayan*, and the cyborg.⁷ Each of these figures embodies the gendered and sexual politics of representing the Philippine nation within the Filipina/o diasporic imagination. My analysis of these gendered figures of Filipina/o transnationalism reveals the essential contradictions that are at the heart of this project; on the one hand, *The Global Filipina Body* critiques the heteronormativity and masculinism of diasporic nationalisms as they are reproduced within Filipina/o American performance, film, video, and heritage language programs. On the other hand, in the context of the Filipina/o diaspora, the Philippine nation continues to function as a sign of sovereignty and liberation from neoimperialism and neoliberal globalization.

The Failure of the Heteropatriarchal Nation

A naked Filipina woman faces backward, gaze downward, with the words “For Export” stamped in red ink on her bare back. The naked figure is facing a bare concrete wall, her face mostly obscured, in what could be assumed to be a cell or space of involuntary confinement. This image accompanied an article in the online news source, GMA News Source, a website that provides Philippine news for Filipinos across the diaspora.⁸ The familiarity of this image reflects the ubiquity of images of trafficked women within both US popular culture and Filipina/o diasporic culture. From the *Taken* films, starring Liam Neeson, to the antitrafficking campaigns of the women’s philanthropic organization Soroptomists

International, the figure of the trafficked woman is pervasive.⁹ The article, written by Lila Ramos Shahani, an assistant secretary during the Aquino Philippine presidential administration and head of communications of the Human Development and Poverty Reduction Cabinet Cluster, was originally delivered as the keynote lecture at a conference held at the University of Washington, Seattle, titled "Human Trafficking in an Era of Globalization: Forced Labor, Involuntary Servitude, and Corporate and Civic Responsibility" in January 2013.¹⁰ The image accompanied a poignant story of a young Filipina girl who was offered a high-paying waitress job abroad and who arrived in Malaysia to find out that she had been deceived. Instead, she was held against her will and forced into sexual slavery. Intended to invoke transnational affects of pity and indignation, the figure of the Filipina trafficked woman is pervasive within Filipina/o diasporic political culture. However, the figure of the Filipina trafficked woman is often collapsed with the migrant sex worker. The traffic-in-women discourse, as it circulates within contemporary Filipina/o American cultural production, makes very little distinction between migrant workers who do domestic work, migrant sex workers who choose to do sex work, and migrant Filipinas who are forced or coerced into sexual labor. The traffic-in-women discourse often conflates distinct forms of gendered labor, such as the domestic labor performed by maids and nannies and the sexual labor of Filipina bar hostesses in Japan.

The fraught politics of the heteropatriarchal nation, transnational labor, and global capitalism coalesce within the constellation of figures of racialized, gendered Filipina/o labor—the trafficked woman, the mail-order bride, the domestic helper—that constitute the global Filipina body. The figure of the global Filipina body circulates within the political-economic context of outward transnational labor migration from the Philippines.¹¹ While there have been several studies of Filipina/o migration and the gendered transnational labor market, there has been less scholarship on how the global Filipina body circulates as a figure within both global popular culture and Filipina/o diasporic culture, particularly from a cultural studies viewpoint. Sociologists Anna Guevarra and Robyn Rodriguez have described how the Philippine state brokers a contemporary global labor diaspora of more than eight million gendered Filipina/o workers, including nurses, maids, nannies, eldercare providers, housewives, and sex workers.¹² Philippine literary and film studies scholars Neferti Tadiar, Caroline Hau, and Roland Tolentino have argued that Filipina domestic workers, sex workers, and mail-order brides serve as a sign of the Philippine nation, as well as the commodification of gendered Philippine labor within the global economy.¹³ Unlike these texts, however, this project combines textual and visual analysis with ethnographic methods to examine both the representation of

the global Filipina body within Filipina/o American cultural production and the social worlds in which these discourses circulate. *The Global Filipina Body* introduces an interdisciplinary and transnational feminist cultural studies analysis of the broader discursive terrain of the global Filipina body as a sign of the broader gendered and sexual politics of the Philippine nation within the Filipina/o diaspora.

The identification of the Philippine nation with sex work, both by the international sex industry and by nationalist movements in the Philippines, incites broader nationalist anxieties about transnational capital's threat to the sovereignty of the heteropatriarchal nation.¹⁴ In the diasporic context, the exploitation of the global Filipina body—who provides gendered and sexual labor outside the domestic space of the Philippines—signifies both the failure of the heteropatriarchal nation under global capital and the racialization of an international division of labor. Within the Philippines and its diaspora, the trafficked woman / sex worker embodies the crisis of the Philippine nation under global capitalism. As Tadiar has argued, the figure of the Filipina sex worker signals the shift in the Philippine economy to export-oriented industrialization and tourism, showing how "prostituted women thus became the symptoms of the crisis of the nation."¹⁵ The figure of the Filipina sex worker / trafficked woman exemplifies the subordination of the Philippine nation within an international division of labor, highlighting the Philippine economy's reliance on remittances from Filipina/o workers abroad. Within Filipina/o diasporic culture, the Filipina sex worker / trafficked woman epitomizes the threat of transnational capital to the heteropatriarchy of the nation.¹⁶

The trope of the sex worker as the sign of the heteronormative nation's failure in the face of capitalist exploitation is not new. Queer theorist Roderick Ferguson discusses a similar trope in the work of Karl Marx in which the sex worker (or prostitute, in Marx's terms) represents the threat of capitalist exploitation. The figure of the sex worker signifies the broader commodified condition of labor, symbolizing human degradation under capitalism. Ferguson specifically addresses the "drag queen" sex worker of color as "the other of heteropatriarchal ideals, an other that is simultaneously the effect of racial, gender, sexual, and class discourses, an other that names the social upheavals of capital as racialized disruptions."¹⁷ Tadiar describes the position of the Philippine nation within a global capitalist economy: "In this misogynist, homophobic, racist worldview, pussy is not only what the Philippines *has*, it is what the Philippines *is*."¹⁸ In this sense, the global Filipina body signifies the failure of the heteropatriarchal family to retain a traditional gendered division of labor (a rupture of traditional forms of gendered domesticity, with women providing domestic and sexual