

Dreaming Domesticity: The Migrant Workforce in Philippine Science Fiction



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One of the most enduring dreams that Filipinos have is that of migration. The history of Philippine labor migration stretches back to the Spanish colonial period (1565-1898), when the Manila-Acapulco galleon trade employed Filipinos as part of their crew. However, it was during the American colonial period (1898-1946) that the first *sacadas* (or farm workers) were enticed to leave the Philippines to work at the sugar and pineapple plantations in Hawaii. Between 1906 to 1934, between 120,000 to 150,000 Filipinos migrated to the United States (Asis, 2006) to work.

However, labor migration as something aspirational was only pushed as policy by the Marcos dictatorship through the 1974 Labor Code, which actively encouraged Filipinos to find work outside the country's borders, meant as "a temporary intervention to deal with rising unemployment and eroding foreign reserves" (OECD/Scalabrini Migration Center 42). This continued even after the fall of the dictator, after which the Filipino migrant worker was colloquially called OFW or "Overseas Filipino Worker," and upon whose backs the Philippine government was and is carried.

In the 2019 Survey on Overseas Filipinos conducted by the Philippine Statistics Authority, roughly 2.2 million Filipinos were working abroad, bringing in over PhP 211.9 billion in remittances between April and September 2019, and accounting for at least 9.3% of the country's GDP (Mapa, n.p.). Many of these Filipinos work in service and manufacturing industries, with fewer than 5% of the workforce in white-collar positions. According to the International Labor Organization, there are at least ten million Filipinos living and working abroad at any given time, with over a million Filipinos leaving the country annually. In a country with a projected 108.7 million inhabitants, at least one in every fifty Filipinos are working abroad (Int'l Labor Organization). It is this reality that I am interested in exploring through the lens of science fiction. In particular, I am interested in the way that this particular public policy has influenced the narrative through which labor migration has been unnecessarily valorized, and how this is carried over in Philippine science fiction (sf).

Encinas-Franco observes that "[f]rom movies, banks, and telecommunications companies, the 'heroic' aspect of work and life abroad never fails to capture a nation said to have imbibed a 'culture of migration.' (Asis n.p.) Such is the dominant narrative anchored on the suffering and sacrifice of Filipinos, whose labor abroad has kept the economy afloat even in times of economic crises". (57) This has continued until the present. By embedding the narrative of heroism in labor migration, post-Marcos governments have shown that "this rhetoric meant that migration for work is a "natural" inclination of people in search of a better life and that the state would have nothing to do about it because to do so would be a violation of one's human right... to travel

and seek greener pastures”. (Encinas-Franco 64) Such normalization of labor migration has engendered Philippine sf texts that confront or allude to the reality of migrant Filipinos working in oftentimes horrific circumstances and lacking even basic support services or assistance from institutions such as embassies or NGOs. Many Filipino migrants, most of them women working as domestic helpers, have been physically and sexually abused, beaten, jailed, or died (Zozobrado; Hosoda) while employed by foreign nationals.

In its portrayal of labor migration, Philippine sf borrows from science fiction’s long history of social protest and critique. In fact, sf writers in the Philippines even enact a kind of literary migration—unable to find fertile soil in the social realist literary tradition that dominates Philippine literature, (Garcia 106) they move on to more established (i.e. Anglophone) sf literary traditions elsewhere, learning from them and incorporating them in their own writing.

In these stories, the OFW experience is metaphorized through three significant sf tropes: space flight, the alien, and future tech; with temporality replacing spatiality, which, as Homi Bhabha notes, “resists the transparent linear equivalence of event and idea that historicism proposes; it provides a perspective on the disjunctive forms of representation that signify a people, a nation, or a national culture”. (292) Though Philippine sf borrows certain iconography and images from Anglophone sf mega-texts, they seem to have been re-deployed in different ways across these texts, rendering them as carriers of alternate meanings. Using these tropes as anchor points to describe the OFW experience and posit its future deployments, this article examines the portrayal of the migrant Filipino worker in specific works of Philippine speculative fiction: the short story “Feasting” by Joshua Lim So, the short comics “Humanity” by Paolo Chikiamko, and the one-act play “Marte” by Eliza Victoria.

Aside from a broad scope in terms of literary forms, these texts offer a way of resisting the OFW as “Bagong Bayani” (trans. “New Heroes”) narrative crafted by Philippine government institutions and private corporations. By analyzing the re-imagining of the Philippine migratory experience in sf, I posit that these texts allow us to step away from the valorization of the OFW phenomena and provide a space where one can think about significantly re-positioning the narrative of the Filipino migrant worker: as a global citizen, as a commodity, and as acknowledgement and reckoning of the tangled, half-forgotten legacies of the country’s violent colonial histories. Ultimately, this article would like to imagine how the future worlds in Philippine sf can become a vehicle to interrogate, empower, or re-imagine the future of the Philippine migrant worker.

In his reflection on global sf, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. observes that the very concept of global culture—and therefore global speculation, such as the kind that might influence sf writers beyond the West—rests upon the constant movement of human bodies across geographic space, particularly when it comes to “subcultures [existing] in specific gathering places... [where] there was usually a sense of homeland or hearth, at the very least a reserve, where distinctive folkways evolved in dialectical relation with distinctive spaces in which they were putatively grounded.”

(479) This notion intersects with Bhabha's notion of hybridity, particularly that "willingness to descend into that alien territory" where one can see "the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity". (38)

Using these frameworks of hybridity, I speculate that Philippine sf does not necessarily adhere to Gernsback's initial definition of science fiction from 1926, "a charming romance interwoven with scientific fact and prophetic vision" (Clute et al.). Instead, I borrow from Elizabeth Ginway's examples of reading non-Anglophone science fiction as "a commentary on modernization", (467) because "[s]cience fiction written in the Third World requires critical tools different from those typically applied to European and Anglo-American sf, because the shift in geographical and cultural contexts can force a reinterpretation of the genre's basic premises." (467) Similar to her analysis of imagery and themes in contemporary Brazilian sf, my examination of these sf tropes in the three texts are reliant on my understanding of how they comment on the Philippine labor migrant experience. The three texts do not rely on the scientific thought behind the tropes, but rather utilize these images beyond their genre-specific usage.

The first text, "Feasting" by Joshua Lim So, was published in 2006, as part of the anthology *Philippine Speculative Fiction Vol. 2*, which was published by Kestrel Books, an independent imprint headed by sf writer Dean Francis Alfar. The story, fabulist in nature, is the story of a young fisherman named Makaon, who was recruited by a tall, pale-skinned being for an unspecified job across the ocean, where nobody in his fishing village of Balay had ever been. In return for his labor, he would be paid in meat—a luxurious and desirable item that attained mythic status among his people. To please his wife Sisita, Makaon takes the job and then disappears from the village. For seventeen years, a wooden box filled with red, raw meat arrives at the shore in front of Sisita's house. The villagers rejoice and hold a celebration, while Sisita gorges on the foul-smelling raw meat. Every quarter of a year, when the meat arrives, she uses part of the bounty to secure herself a large house and servants, and her son Natividad becomes indolent and fat on a steady diet of meat. But in the 18th year, the box of meat never arrives. Instead, the whole village bears witness to a box of white bones stacked neatly, and atop the stack "were two hands, palms up, as if begging, fully intact with flesh" (98). A short note accompanies the box, stating, "Greetings in Peace, Services no longer required. Please enjoy." (99) As a storm rolls over the horizon, Sisita watches the clouds gather as "she felt seventeen years of feasting rushing back up from her stomach". (99)

Though the story is linear, it nevertheless opens itself up to interpretation once read alongside the dominant narratives of the OFW experience, where young men in impoverished villages are invited to work "across the sea." It also emphasizes the idea of exchange; specifically, an unfair exchange in which one party is ignorant of how much it costs to perform certain duties, such as send back remittances for their families, who use the earnings of those abroad to "feast" in their own villages.

Similarly, the one-act play "Marte" (the Filipino word for the planet Mars) written by sf author Eliza Victoria, was first staged in 2016 as one of the handful of plays premiering at Virgin Labfest,

an annual playwriting showcase sponsored by the Cultural Center of the Philippines. Directed by George de Jesus III, the play follows two Martian factory workers, Tina and Lorie, who both work in the assembly line for the industrial company known as Promethei. The work is dangerous and laborious, and both women share the sorry fate of what happened to another woman on the floor, Mylene, who suffered an accident on the job just as she was promoted. Lorie and Tina fight about whether or not they are treated humanely or not, when they learn that Mylene succumbed to her injuries and has died. However, instead of writing it off as an accident, Promethei has declared that it will investigate the death. Lorie confesses to Tina that she was the one who accidentally killed Mylene. Tina realizes that both of them are in danger, and urges Lorie to run away with her and return to Earth. Lorie realizes she needs to make a choice as they hear police sirens in the distance.

The narrative is set up like a mystery box, where questions are provided by the text, unearthing new lines of connections between all the characters in the play. Lorie, in particular, wishes that she was a robot—echoing Soviet-era sf, where the working class was compared to, and traded for, the efficiency of soulless machinery—in order to provide for a family “back home” who seemed to have no idea how difficult their working conditions were on Marte. Though the play takes place off-world, the characters' problems are anchored to this world.

The final text is “Humanity,” a short comics chapter in the collection *Mythspace* by Paolo Chikiamko and illustrated by Cristina Chua. Published in 2014 by Studio Salimbal and Visprint, the comics anthology tells short comics stories in the shared world of Mythspace, where beings from Philippine lower mythology are transmuted into sf characters. Aliens resemble mythological creatures such as the tikbalang and the kapre, all of whom form a loose galactic alliance. However, in “Humanity,” the focus is on the human miners abandoned by aliens to their death on a barren planetoid. Hungry and thirsty, the humans try to keep their hopes up by trading stories of the Dalakitnon, humans who were raised in technological prowess and protected by the god-like aliens called Lewen’ri. Marta and Danny, whose friendship anchors the story, argue about whether or not the Dalakitnon is real. In a show of bravura, Danny paints the symbol of the Dalakitnon and summons their war ship, Nalandangan.

The two are unconsciously beamed aboard the Nalandangan and learn that because they were genetically perfect specimens of humanity, they were rescued. However, their other companions were left on the asteroid because they were old and infirm. Danny finds this exchange equitable, but Marta refuses. He decides to stay on the ship, while she requests to be returned to the asteroid and fight for survival along her company. As they try to survive, Marta exhorts the rest of their company to follow the plan they concocted for survival, “because as long as we have life... we make our own hope”. (113)

Once again, we see the hardships faced by forced labor, and the negligence of those in power. However, the relationship between the powerful aliens and the powerless humans is also turned on its head because Marta does not push back against their alien overseers—she doesn't even seem to have much feeling for them. Instead, she lashes out against her fellow humans, the Dalakitnon,

and their eugenics. She understands that her freedom was not made possible because of anything she did, but rather relied on her own genetic predisposition. Understanding the unfairness of that moment, she acts beyond herself, returning to the asteroid where she will likely perish, but hoping for, and working towards, the safety of *all* her comrades.

In all three texts, we can see the influence of the Anglo sf mega-texts: the presence of aliens, the reality of space flight, technological advancements. None of these are questioned within the worlds of the texts that created them. However, these tropes are used in conjunction with the text's commentaries about the position of the migrant laborers, whose realities are being used as part of the novum. In all three stories, the trope of space flight is used to indicate the hopelessness of travel, a leave-taking in which there is slim to no chance of returning home. Makaon leaves Balay, never to return alive from beyond the sea. Lorie and Tina talk of the difficulties and expense of returning home and of surviving one more year on their contract, so that they could scrimp enough credit to book legal passage on a spaceship, else they plan to stow away on a ship heading back to Earth. Marta and Danny's movements in space are dependent on the aliens and the requirement of their labor, and their abandonment on the asteroid indicates that they are no longer useful as laborers, and even less as living beings.

Similarly, the non-human entities in these stories—aliens, robots, futuristic corporations—are understandably alien and strange, but what is also observable about them is that they are the ones in power, who control the lives of the migrant laborers in the texts. All the migrants are human, and implicitly identify as Filipino. All of the non-human characters exert power and control over the lives of migrant humans by offering or taking away means of livelihood and survival: Makaon was taken away by the men in the sky, tempted by the thought of providing precious meat for his wife and child; Lorie and Tina were contract-bound to the robot factories of Prometheii, their salaries never enough to purchase a legitimate way back to Earth; Marta and the rest of the humans in the mining were dependent on the aliens for their sustenance, and were abandoned by the same aliens on an asteroid where they had no way of getting off.

Even the future tech that is present in all three stories seem to show the disenfranchisement of those who do not seem to understand how they work. Advanced technology serves as a barrier to equality, not enlightenment. On Balay, nobody understood how Makaon left—he was described by the town drunk as though “[h]is wings raised him high... he was like a warring angel... [t]hen he was slowly engulfed by the morning light” (So, 95)—or how the packages of meat appeared like clockwork at his old home. On Marte, Lorie and Tina do not understand the purpose of the technology that they themselves seem to be building; Tina describes it as “[l]inis-linis ng screen ng robot, sort-sort ng mga aserong kamay at paa, kabit-kabit ng turnilyo. Pamatay-kaluluwang trabaho ba” [“cleaning the screen of the robot, sorting out hands and feet, tightening screws. A soul-killing job”]. (Victoria, n.p.) On the generation ship Nalandagan, Marta does not understand how the technology of the Dalakitnon works; she only intuits that it is this technology that separates them from other humans when she learns that they scanned her and “determined that

[she] will be an excellent addition to our genetic pool... to ensure the advancement of the human race". (Chikiamko and Chua, n.p.)

However, these sf tropes seem to be successfully re-worked towards a pushback against the "Bagong Bayani" narrative espoused in dominant OFW discourse. Most of these characters cannot be considered traditionally heroic, and even the seemingly heroic narratives are presented in a way that is self-conscious and critical.

Furthermore, threaded through these texts is a sense of homelessness, a foundational concept in diaspora studies. Robin Cohen notes that one of the most distinct features of diasporic individuals is an orientation towards the concept of home. "Home" became more and more generously interpreted to mean the place of origin, or the place of settlement, or a local, national or transnational place, or an imagined virtual community... or a matrix of known experiences and intimate social relations" (10), which is even further removed in sf stories, where the very notion of home is complicated by space travel. As such, the orientation towards home—the motherland, the family home, the planet—is juxtaposed with the seeming impossibility of returning in these texts.

In diasporic Philippine sf stories, there is either a sense of inevitability towards the status of migrants, or a sense of hopelessness, that the status quo will never change. It seems that even when Filipinos imagine ourselves in the world of tomorrow, we are still the poor amidst the stars. In his introduction to *Mythspace*, Budjette Tan writes, "I realized the difficulty of writing a 'realistic' Pinoy sci-fi story. I mean, would it be realistic to read a story where the captain of the starship was a Pinoy? I told my friend, maybe one of the guys in engineering would be Pinoy." (4) This difficulty in imagining a different role for a Filipino migrant character in an sf story seems to be the burden carried by all three texts – the Filipino migrant is always in a position of powerlessness, of hopelessness, or of entrapment by forces beyond their understanding. This seems to reflect the present-day status of Filipino migrants in our world, and even eschews the "Bagong Bayani" narrative by stripping away the artifice of heroism and exposing the misery that lies beneath.

But isn't it time to begin imagining a world where the Filipino migrant could be something more? If speculative fiction calls for us to transcend our limitations in this reality, why can't we transcend a world in which we still see ourselves as "a proletarian diaspora... characterized by low communication skills and comprises "a nearly undifferentiated mass of unskilled labor", with little prospect of social mobility"? (Armstrong, qtd. in Cohen 62) As an sf writer, I am cognizant of the challenges to dreaming beyond the boundaries of my lived experience. Our lived realities are what provides us with an opportunity to challenge the dominant narratives about OFWs, and start re-imagining the future of the Filipino diaspora.

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