

# **“We are the Jews of today”: Filipino domestic workers in Israel and the language of diaspora**

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## **ABSTRACT**

While the Jewish diaspora is generally treated as the ideal type of an imagined global community, the notion of a Filipino labor migrant diaspora has arisen more recently. As I will show, the analysis of “diaspora” as an emic discourse offers much insight into the political and affective aspects of economic, social and cultural dislocation within a global capitalist order. Based on ethnographic research on Filipino domestic workers in Israel, this article focuses on migrants’ usage of the language of diaspora, rather than discussing whether their historical experiences justify their description as such. By declaring to Israeli policymakers and employers that “We are the Jews of today,” Filipino domestic workers in Israel are not only demonstrating their knowledge of and solidarity with Jewish history and suffering, but—against the background of a migration regime that rigidly excludes non-Jews—negotiate rights and belonging by appeals to pity and compassion, hereby claiming political inclusion.

## **Introduction**

As imagined communities that transcend the borders of the nation-state, diaspora formations have been celebrated as performing vital social roles, being “[d]eterritorialized, multilingual and capable of bridging the gap between global and local tendencies” (Cohen, 1997:176). In his comprehensive introduction to *Global Diasporas*, Robin Cohen even diagnoses a “diasporization” of the present age, created by unprecedented migration flows at a time of cheap air fares, abundant tools of mass communication and global service institutions (1997:175). In a similar tone, James Clifford has identified diasporic formations as a potential source for the subversion of nationality (1997:9) and analyzed the notion itself as a “master trope” for contemporary identity politics (1997:266). More recently, the usage of diaspora as an analytical concept has been criticized as perpetuating an “ethnic lens” in the social sciences by defining the unit of study “as people who share an ancestry and a

history of dispersal,” allegedly obscuring “the diversity of migrants’ relationships to their place of settlement and to other localities around the world” (Glick-Schiller, Çağlar and Gulbrandsen., 2006:613). Nonetheless, the fact that the notion of diaspora is increasingly invoked by national or ethnic groups in order to describe their own situation and feelings of exile, memory and desire calls for analysis. This article focuses on one such group, namely the up to eight million Filipino migrants who now form—together with Mexican citizens—the largest group of workers in the global economy to be living outside of their country of origin (Weekley, 2003:3).<sup>1</sup>

Drawing from ethnographic research in Israel, where Filipinos are engaged mainly in domestic work and caregiving, I move from the arid definitional question of whether Filipino overseas can indeed be said to form a (labor) diaspora, to describing their diasporic discourses as political claims and affective appeals for legal, social and cultural inclusion and belonging. As I will also show, Filipino migrant domestic workers in Israel (and beyond) are often integrated into larger transnational networks that transcend the borders of several nation-states, being based on affective ties, practical requirements and common experiences of economic dislocation, racial discrimination and legal, social and political exclusion from Western citizenship. Given this background, Filipino discourse on the Filipino diaspora both serves as a metaphor—drawing attention to the emotional pains and sufferings of globalization and migration experiences—and functions as a political strategy, mobilizing action to change the conditions from which these arise.

### **Filipino overseas workers in Israel and beyond**

Filipina domestic workers in Israel belong to a growing mass of international female migrants who move from the so-called Third World to the centers of global capitalism in order to take up low-wage jobs within a highly gendered economy. The Philippines today is one of the world’s largest exporters of temporary contract labor, and Filipinos are living and working abroad in more than 160 countries of the world.<sup>2</sup> With approximately ten percent of the population residing abroad and numerous households depending on the overseas material remittances of its members, the economic, social and cultural impacts of mass migration on Philippine social life can hardly be overestimated. As with other migrant-sending nation-state economies (e.g., Mexico, Sri Lanka, Morocco), overseas employment has become a major pillar of the Philippine economy.<sup>3</sup> In continuity with the colonial production of Filipino migrants as a cheap labor force for the U.S., the post-colonial Philippines has established an enormous number of state and non-state institutions that function to control, manage and generally promote out-migration (Choy, 2003; Tyner, 2004). Originally designed as a temporary measure, the Philippine labor export policy adopted by the Marcos regime in the early 1970s turned into a permanent national

development strategy in the global economic recession in the 1980s, a process that continues in slightly altered form up until today (Bello, 2004:11; Tyner, 2004). Recently, Levitt and Glick-Schiller have described the Philippines as a “strategically selective state” (2004:1023), which encourages emigrants to remain tied to their home country while it seeks to maintain control over these ties. Nevertheless, throughout recent years, the legal and political position of Filipino nationals and citizens abroad has been strengthened by the state, mainly due to political pressure and activism by its transborder citizens. Thus, since 2003, the Philippine state has permitted dual citizenship and the right to vote in Philippine elections from abroad. According to the Senate President, the signature of the Citizenship Retention Bill in 2003 (which granted these rights) served as an “affirmation to the age-old adage that ‘once a Filipino, always a Filipino’” (cited in Levitt and Glick-Schiller, 2004:1024).

Contributing to the global feminization of migration, Philippine migration flows became increasingly feminized during the 1970s (Gonzales, 1998:42ff).<sup>4</sup> A growing number of women have left the country to seek jobs, first in Philippine urban centers (Eviota, 1992), then as “factory girls” in Taiwan and nurses in Saudi Arabia, Western Europe and the U.S., and later as domestic helpers or caregivers in practically every nation-state in the world. The expansion of global capitalism has generated an international division of labor (Parreñas, 2005), within which the Philippines have become an *Empire of Care* (Choy, 2003), producing cheap, English-speaking and apparently loving workers for a growing market of care services. Portrayed in the literature as easily exploitable and vulnerable female domestic workers and foreigners, suffering from the separation from their families in the Philippines while taking care of others, Filipina migrants have long since become national icons of victimhood, especially so after the highly publicized case of the unjustified execution of a Filipina domestic worker, Flor Contemplación, in Singapore in 1995 (Hilsdon, 2000). Filipina domestic workers’ heroism and martyrdom have become the embodiments of a vulnerable postcolonial nation (Rafael, 2000; Tadiar, 2004; Tyner, 2004).<sup>5</sup>

Filipinos entered Israel through the tourist “loophole,” both individually and as part of organized groups, as early as the 1970s. Alongside West African and Latin American migrants, they sought jobs predominantly as domestic workers in the comparatively affluent urban centers of Israel’s Mediterranean coastal region. Since 1995, Filipinos have been actively recruited within a state-sponsored system that restricts their employment to caregiving in both private homes and public institutions. The basis of this system was laid down on November 1, 1995, by a decision of the Israeli Ministry of Health to bring in thousands of Filipino workers in order to save up to fifty percent of the costs of medical and geriatric care, by shifting the care system from hospitals to private homes (*HaTokhmit HaFilipinit*, “the Filipino Plan”; see Bender, 1995). As recruited contract workers, Filipinos in Israel became part of the growing population of “foreign workers” (*ovdim zarim*), whom Israel recruited in large numbers from Southeast Asia, eastern Europe and elsewhere in order to meet demands created not least by the removal of Palestinians from the

low-wage sector of Israel's ethnically segmented labor market (Bartram, 1998; Rosenhek, 1999). In many respects similar to European guest-worker regimes of the 1960s and 1970s, the Israeli foreign workers regime is based on the temporalization of the presence of migrants, who are essentialized in their status as foreigners and their function as workers (Kemp, 2004; Rosenhek, 2000).

In spite of this, the "autonomy of migration" (Mezzadra, 2007) succeeded in outsmarting state migration policies. Thus, some Filipinos continued to avoid the state-sanctioned recruitment system—which typically implies "placement fees" of up to U.S.\$5,000, illegally demanded from Filipino migrants by Israeli recruitment agencies (Kav LaOved, 2006)—and arrived as tourists, who then simply overstayed their visas. Moreover, recruited Filipino caregivers left typically more oppressive and economically less rewarding live-in arrangements in favor of part-time jobs as live-out cleaners and babysitters, even though these imply illegal status in Israel. And finally, labor migrants succeeded in organizing collectively within church communities, regional associations and workers' unions. As a result, processes of (illegalized)<sup>6</sup> migrants' settling in Israel became increasingly noticeable, especially in the southern neighborhoods of the country's urban center, Tel Aviv. Here, Filipino domestic workers, alongside labor migrants from elsewhere, rented shared (weekend) apartments, created families, opened shops that served migrants' needs and collectively struggled for political, social and legal inclusion into Israeli state and society.

In mid-2002, a change in the political climate in Israel and a campaign with strongly racist undertones against the alleged threat of an invasion by (Christian) foreigners of Tel Aviv and the loss of the Jewish character of the state led to the adoption of a policy of mass deportations of illegalized migrants (Willen, 2007).<sup>7</sup> Subsequently, as thousands of migrants were literally hunted down in their workplaces, residential areas and public spaces, arrested and deported within a short period of time, Israel and the "appropriated" urban social spaces of southern Tel Aviv became increasingly hostile sites. While before 2002, illegal status in Israel was relatively insignificant in migrants' daily lives, it was now transformed into an acute threat of "deportability."<sup>8</sup>

This specific situation forms the background to the following ethnographic analysis of Filipino domestic workers' diasporic discourses as a claim for social, legal and cultural inclusion in Israel, alongside their transnational practices and their on-migration towards other countries, the apparently "greener pastures" of elsewhere.

### **"We are the Jews of today": Filipino domestic workers' claims for compassion and the land**

According to the Israeli migration regime outlined above, most Filipina migrants in Israel are recruited as live-in caregivers. As such, they live in the private homes of

their employers and are supposed to be available for work six days a week, 24 hours a day. Domestic labor realities therefore lie at the heart of an understanding of Filipino migrants' social, economic and emotional situations in Israel. Domestic work, most especially care work in which the majority of Filipinas in Israel are engaged in, is affective labor, deeply relational in many regards. As I will argue below, Filipino domestic workers' usage of diasporic discourses in Israel are infused with (Filipino) Christian concepts and have to be seen against the background of their domestic work experiences. As caregivers for mainly elderly Jewish persons, Filipino domestic workers in Israel are often exposed to the experiences and traumas of survivors of the Holocaust (*Shoah*) and of Jewish immigrants to Israel. The following examples will help to illustrate this.

#### *Thelma and Tikva*

Thelma<sup>9</sup> was born in 1968 in the Philippines as the youngest of eight children to parents who separated shortly after her birth. She grew up in poverty in a rural area. Going abroad was her "stepping stone" out of poverty, as she called it in an interview. Thus, Thelma first left home in 1989 at the age of 21 in order to work as a maid in Hong Kong. In 1998, she arrived in Israel, after having also worked in Taiwan for some years, and was employed as a legal live-in caregiver to Tikva. Tikva immigrated to Israel from Yemen in the mid-1950s together with her husband and four small children. At our first meeting, Tikva recalled her first years in Israel as a time of economic hardship and racial discrimination by lighter-skinned Ashkenazi Jews. After years of living in a reception camp and later a poverty-ridden neighborhood of so-called Oriental immigrants on the outskirts of southern Tel Aviv, she now continues to live in the city in a two-room apartment with Thelma.

Throughout most of her adult years in Israel, Tikva, just like Thelma, worked as a domestic worker in homes in the Tel Aviv area. As a religious woman, Tikva told me during a visit to her home, she considered it her moral duty (*mitzvah*) to take care of Thelma and her Filipino friends since they were foreigners in the country, just as she had felt herself to be for so long. Thus, Thelma regularly invited her Filipino friends who were employed in other homes in the neighborhood during evenings or on Saturdays, the Jewish *Shabbat*. On one of these Saturdays, Thelma, Tikva, two other Filipina caregivers and I were playing a Filipino card game, eating *jahnun* (the traditional Yemenite Shabbat dish Tikva had taught Thelma to prepare) and chatting. Our conversations that day, which went on late into the evening, were conducted in a mixture of English, Tagalog (the dominant language in the Philippines) and Hebrew, intermixed with Arabic words that Thelma had picked up from Tikva. They circled around family members elsewhere, Israeli society, the difficulties of living away from home and the differences between Filipino, German, Yemenite and Israeli cuisine.

In 2007, against the background of a deterioration in Tikva's mental and physical condition, Thelma was planning to leave Israel and continue working in Western Europe or Canada. She told me: "We Filipinos are the Jews of today." Explaining this further, she said that the ongoing economic hardships of her family in the Philippines—that is, her parents, several sisters and brothers and her daughter, for whom she was forced to provide by herself because the father denied any responsibility—forced her to continue working abroad. If not in Israel, where she would be prevented from staying on legally if Tikva passed away,<sup>10</sup> then in another country, possibly somewhere where the wages and the prospects of becoming a citizen were better.

*Anne and Rachel, Rose and Deborah*

By the time I met Anne, another Filipina interlocutor, in 2004, she was employed in an expensive private old people's home beside the beach south of Tel Aviv. About thirty Filipina caregivers were employed in the home, which accommodated approximately 360 Israeli residents, many of whom were affluent immigrants of West European origin. Anne's employer, Rachel, had immigrated to Israel in the early 1990s from Rio de Janeiro. She had grown up in a well-to-do Jewish family in Berlin and fled to France in the second half of the 1930s. During WWII, she and her husband experienced an odyssey through Western Europe and North Africa, hoping to make it to the U.S., but ending up in Brazil, as she put it. In 1990, after her husband passed away, Rachel followed several of her Jewish-German-Brazilian friends, who had decided to spend their old age in Israel. When Anne first introduced me to her, Rachel was bedridden and in poor physical condition. Throughout the months that followed, Rachel was repeatedly hospitalized until she finally died in September 2005.

By that time, Anne was clearly one of the Filipino community's "veterans" in Israel, having first entered the country in 1989. She regularly contributed poems to a Filipino magazine published in Israel, *Manila Tel Aviv*, and for many years had organized group tours and community events during her weekends off. Anne came from a middle-class family of plantation owners in Quezon Province and held a bachelor's degree in political science. She decided to work abroad because her job as a travel company manager in the Philippines did not generate enough income to provide for a decent education for her son, whom she was forced to raise as a single mother, like Thelma and many other Filipina migrants. Also like Thelma, Anne talked about Rachel in deeply emotional terms and considered her a "good" employer. As I saw during numerous visits to the old people's home, Anne and Rachel often engaged in conversations about their families and life experiences, and Anne said she learnt a great deal from Rachel about the *Shoah*, World War II from a European perspective and Jewish history. Reflecting on her talks with Rachel, Anne, like Thelma, compared her own situation as an OFW (Overseas Filipino Worker;

such is the official term used by the Philippine government) to that of the Jewish people: forced to live away from her home and loved ones, discriminated against for being “foreign,” but forming intensive emotional bonds with members of one’s own group living in exile.

Throughout Rachel’s last months of life, Anne lived in constant fear that Rachel might die. Whenever she was hospitalized, Anne stayed with her, sleeping on a mat beside her bed and refusing to leave even for her weekly day off. When I met her shortly after Rachel’s death, she said she felt emotionally devastated. Since Rachel had not left any children behind, it was largely left to Anne to pack up and distribute large parts of Rachel’s personal belongings. She felt emotionally unable to throw away any of Rachel’s belongings and decided to keep some of her photographs to herself. She told me that she felt as if she was the last person who would one day remember Rachel’s life story, and she felt the urge to write about her. While packing up Rachel’s belongings, Anne thought about packing up her own belongings as well and returning to the Philippines: “She was a good woman. I miss her. I don’t want to work for another family, because she was like my family. So I think I will just return to the Philippines.”

After I left Anne that day, I went to meet another Filipina interview partner, Rose, and told her about the previous meeting with Anne. “Oh yes, I know how she must feel,” Rose said. At the time she was working for Deborah, a *Shoah* survivor. Rose went on to tell me how Deborah often woke up at night from nightmares and sometimes talked to her for hours about the torture and sufferings she had endured in a German concentration camp. Throughout these talks, Deborah had told her things (about being raped, for example) that Rose was sure she had not even told her own children. “I might be the last to know her stories,” Rose told me, and added: “And I know better German than her children do.”

Against the background of physical confinement, daily interaction and intimacy, the Filipina and Israeli migrant women portrayed above formed strong affective ties. The labor arrangements described above are certainly exceptional in their overall harmoniousness between the giver and the recipient of care, though they remain structurally exploitative. Nevertheless, they illustrate the typically intimate encounters between Filipino domestic workers and Israeli employers. As “members of the family” in a much deeper sense than the literature on domestic work suggests (e.g., Anderson, 2000:122ff.; Constable, 1997:104), Filipina domestic workers may derive a sense of belonging and even right to being recognized as part of Israeli society from their daily roles as the managers of households and as not simply the caregivers, but the symbolic—and in some cases even material—heiresses of Israel’s sick and elderly. As such, so the following will show, they claimed inclusion and the right to stay when the Israeli migration regime turned increasingly exclusionary towards them.

A profound change in Israeli state policies towards migration occurred, as mentioned, in late 2002, when a massive deportation campaign was launched, enforced by a newly established Migration Police, a police unit assigned the task of

deporting illegalized migrants from Israel. Filipino domestic workers in Israel came to be most seriously affected by deportations when, in August 2003, the Immigration Authority announced Operation Housecleaning, aimed—as the rather cynical name implies—at arresting so-called illegal domestic workers (Leibovich-Dar, 2003). In the weeks and months that followed (and to a lesser degree until today), even Filipino domestic workers with a valid work permit found themselves being stopped and arrested by policemen in public, or experienced the police raiding their shared weekend apartments in southern Tel Aviv. Thousands of overstayers were deported. Against this background, Filipinos' diasporic discourses likening their experiences to those of the Jewish diaspora were increasingly voiced in and towards the Israeli public. The claims that “We are the Jews of today” came to be heard during gatherings to protest against the state's deportation policy and was used by community leaders during interviews with Israeli journalists and policymakers, as well as Filipino writers in migrants' magazines such as *Manila Tel Aviv*.<sup>11</sup> Thus, in an article about his own arrest and deportation to the Philippines, Elbert Cainday, the first Filipino editor of *Manila Tel Aviv*, wondered whether the younger officers of the Israeli Migration Police were so “heartless and rude, because they have not suffered in a foreign land, the realities of the Diaspora is [sic!] so remote and irrelevant to them,” unlike elderly officers who were apparently more compassionate with Filipino migrants, due to their own experiences of exile and immigration (Cainday, 2003).

In June 2005, a comparison between Jewish historical experiences and contemporary Filipino ones was undertaken by the Philippine ambassador to Israel, Antonio Modena, though with a slightly different connotation. Modena was said to have compared the Israeli Migration Police with the Gestapo, the secret police of Nazi Germany. In an interview to an Israeli newspaper, he was quoted as saying that, “[j]ust like the Nazis treated the Jews, you know, that's how the immigration police treat us. [...] They don't think twice about raiding a Filipino home in the wee hours of the morning” (cited in Stevens, 2005).<sup>12</sup>

It is clear that, in these contexts, the reference to being a modern-day diaspora suffering from exile, racial discrimination and legal, political and social exclusion from mainstream society serves most of all as a claim towards inclusion, namely that one be allowed to stay on (in the case of illegalized domestic workers), be granted social, economic and political rights, and be treated humanely in Israel. Moreover, it shows Filipinos' knowledge of and even identification with Jewish history and suffering, often acquired through their intimate encounters as domestic workers in Israeli homes. Nevertheless, using the language of diaspora is far more than a political strategy. At least in the case of domestic workers, it is an *affective* plea for compassion and subsequent betterment of their treatment. As such, it has to be seen within a culturally infused emphasis on suffering and compassion that is closely linked to Filipino notions of Christianity and religious practices in Israel.

In her study of *Power and Intimacy in the Christian Philippines*, Fenella Cannell (1999) analyzes pity and compassion (Tagalog *damay*, “to feel with

someone”) as central cultural concepts. Rather than the images of either Christ crucified or Christ risen, it is those of Christ arousing pity that are of central importance in the Philippine lowland’s Christian life, just as it is the story of Christ’s suffering, the *pasyon*, which is publicly enacted, pitied and experienced with compassion during an important annual celebration (Cannell, 1999:165ff.). According to local Christian belief, to pity the suffering and to care for someone is to become Christ’s intimate, to share his ordeal.

As domestic workers in Israel, taking care of elderly and needy persons—and given the double meaning of “care” as comprising both the practical tasks of caring or nursing and the affective dimension implied in the term—(Christian) Filipinos, as they are fond of pointing out, are the ones who *really* care for the Jewish people and the “Holy Land.” As such, they emphasize, Filipinos have a special responsibility for Israel, a mission. This can be illustrated by the following quotation from a preaching of an evangelical activist, Pastor Ed, from the Philippines, addressing the predominantly Filipino congregation of a southern Tel Aviv born-again church (Living Stone Ministry):

See that God has a purpose for you! [...]Whether we like it or not, all the prophecies is [sic!] being fulfilled before our very own eyes. You see, Filipinos—why there are eleven [million] legal Filipinos all over the world and there are about five million illegal Filipinos all over the world in 148 countries? There are around 15 to 16 million Filipinos all over the world. You see? Like the Jews before, during the time of Joseph—they were slaves! Filipinos today are slaves all over the world. The very meaning of that word “Filipina”—you know that?—is a domestic helper. But, Church, start to rise up! [*Shouts from the audience: Amen!*] You, Filipinas, you are not just an ordinary *metapelet* [Hebrew, “caregiver”] and you will not stay as a *metapelet* forever! [*Shouts from the audience: Amen!*] Hello! [*Shouting in Tagalog:*] You are not a *metapelet* for life!<sup>13</sup>

By being modern-day “slaves,” dispersed around the world “like the Jews before,” Christian Filipinos, so the preacher claims, are much more than “ordinary caregivers” (*metaplot*). As he continued to make clear in his preaching that night, they turn into missionaries by “sharing the Word” of the Christian Bible with their Jewish employers, that is converting them to Christianity. Hereby, Filipino caregivers in Israel occupy a crucial role within the Christian doctrine of redemption, the coming of the end of times. Rather than being directed towards an Israeli audience, the diaspora discourse here functions within the migrant community, as a strategy to re-narrate Filipinos’ current situation of vulnerability and powerlessness as “slaves” into a position of power as Christian “redeemers,” by evoking the historical example of the Jewish diaspora from the Bible.

A related migrant discourse that has evolved significantly in this context is described by Adriana Kemp and Rebecca Raijman in their research on evangelical

Latin American labor migrants in Israel, as “Christian Zionism” (Kemp and Raijman, 2003; Raijman and Kemp, 2004). By claiming a “greater Israel” in the biblical boundaries of the land, employing a language of love and emotional belonging to Jews and Israel, and engaging in a religiously motivated nationalism comparable to that of their Jewish counterparts, Christian labor migrants, the authors claim, become “Ambassadors of Zion” (Kemp and Raijman, 2003). The religious narratives and practices of Latin American Christian Zionists they describe are in many regards identical with those used by Filipino (evangelical) Christians in Israel.<sup>14</sup> Thus, Filipino Christians often integrate Jewish concepts, objects and practices into their own religion to a point where the boundaries and differences between Christianity and Judaism become blurred. For example, they observe Jewish holidays like *Pesah* or *Yom Kippur*, put up Stars of David and *menorot* (seven-branched candelabras) in their shared weekend apartments and churches and typically share right-wing Jewish ideologies of the rebuilding of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem or “greater Israel.” During church services and especially weekend group pilgrimages, Filipino Christians claim the land by practicing their religion. They emotionally relate to the sites they visit, considering them holy, and become publicly visible as typically large and organized groups. Nevertheless, they claim the land without challenging the hegemonic definitions of Israeli state and society, namely Judaism and Zionism.

Against the background of their far-reaching exclusion from the legal, political and cultural aspects of Israeli citizenship, Filipino domestic workers’ culturally and religiously infused claims to and identification with Jewish history and suffering therefore have to be viewed as both a re-narration of power and, directed towards the wider public, a political demand for inclusion, based on the affective appeal for compassion. Yet, as I will show in the following, Filipino diasporic discourses cannot be reduced to either the position of domestic workers within the Israeli migration regime nor to Filipino or Christian cultural concepts. Rather, they must also be related to Filipino migrants’ global dreams and pathways and their embeddedness in a global capitalist migration regime, as well as typically larger transnational social fields.

### **On Filipino transnational social fields and imagined global communities**

Filipino labor migrants employed as domestic workers abroad have been described as prototypical “transmigrants,” who develop and maintain multiple social, economic, political and religious relations that span the borders of nation-states (Glick-Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton, 1992). As became clear during my field work, Filipinos do not migrate out of mere poverty, but have a complex array of reasons for their decision to leave home, including dreams of a better life, a search for political refuge and—especially in respect to female migration—their physical

removal from repressive gender roles and family structures. Even though Filipino domestic workers in Israel and elsewhere typically migrate alone—leaving behind their parents, spouses and in many cases children—their migration moves are organized, financed and undertaken collectively. Thus, elder brothers or sisters may feel a responsibility to work abroad in order to be able to finance their younger siblings' education; households may have to pool their money to pay the large placement fees required by recruitment agencies; and migrants typically follow former classmates, neighbors or relatives abroad. Thus, in conformity with the *kuha* system, in which migrating family members are expected to help their kin to follow after they have established themselves abroad, migrants are expected to sponsor the migration of typically younger female family members such as nieces, daughters-in-laws or daughters financially, if not to one's own destination country, then to another. As a result, Filipino labor migrants are typically integrated into large social and familial networks that stretch across the national borders of several states.

Not surprisingly, Filipino migrants are expected to share the material benefits of their stays abroad and to support those who have remained in the Philippines financially. Each of the migrant women interviewed or encountered during research in Israel sent cash remittances to family members, in the majority of cases once a month to their husband, mother or—if these were not identical—the carer of their children. In order to maintain transnational social ties and to relieve the “pain of separation,” I was told, Filipinos depend heavily on what Deirdre McKay (2006), writing on Filipino migrant workers in Hong Kong, has termed “translocal everyday technologies.” These include telephoning with pre-paid calling cards, sending text messages through mobile phones (“texting”), using the Internet or sending *balikbayan* boxes.<sup>15</sup> Even the most superficial observation of Filipino migrants in Israel will show the extreme importance of various means of mass communication in the everyday lives of migrant women. In Neve Sha'an'an, the southern Tel Aviv area where a large number of Filipino migrants meet and live during their weekends off from work, numerous Internet cafes, as well as shops with international calling cards, mobile phones and mobile phone accessories are strikingly evident. On Sundays, the usual weekly day off for Filipino live-in domestic workers, long lines of people waiting to talk to family members and friends in the Philippines form in front of public phone booths. At the same time, Neve Sha'an'an's Internet cafes are crowded with Filipinos and other foreign workers writing e-mails and chatting or communicating through web-cams or Internet telephone programs. The notion of “cellphone families” has become a widespread expression in the Philippines for families with core members abroad.

Not least due to their extensive transnational social ties and use of communication techniques, Filipino migrants are generally well informed about the working conditions, legal regulations and Filipinos' living arrangements in other places abroad. Thus, in *Building Diaspora*, Emily Noelle Ignacio (2005) analyzes the vast role of Internet chat rooms and newsgroups on the formation of an (imagined) global Filipino community. Moreover, Filipino domestic workers are

typically organized in church groups and regional or tribal associations, as well as in political networks such as fraternities, parties or labor unions. Members' migration to practically every nation-state in the world has generated global networks and a global diaspora, which—at least in the case of religious groups—are strongly supported by their global outreach activities and mission. As an example, the full-gospel “Jesus Is Lord” ministry, founded in 1978 in the Philippines, possesses churches and conversion centers in practically every state where Filipinos are employed in large numbers.<sup>16</sup>

In Israel, the group has established nine churches and other places of worship (in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Beer Sheva, Afula, Haifa, Nazareth, Netanya, Rehovot and Eilat) and plans to “conquer” other locations, including Gaza City. Within the church administrative structure, “Jesus Is Lord Israel” is part of “Jesus Is Lord Europe,” whose center is situated in Milan, Italy, which has one of the largest concentration of Filipino domestic workers among Europe's urban centers (Parreñas, 2001). Through the on-migration of church members, these different locations are frequently connected by strong personal as well as institutional social ties. Hence, many Filipino domestic workers who were church members in Hong Kong continued to work in Israel and, especially after the introduction of Israel's deportation campaign, left Israel for “greener pastures” in Western Europe, where they typically enjoy a high status within the church, due to their being former residents of the “Holy Land,” speakers of Hebrew and “experts” in Jewish practices and religion.

This leads us to a point which, even in comparative research on Filipina domestic workers abroad (e.g., Parreñas, 2001; Stasiulis and Bakan, 2005), has received hardly any attention, namely that Filipina migrants are *serially* transnational. Engaged in border-crossing journeys through a number of nation-states, many Filipina migrants move *on and on* rather than *back and forth* between the Philippines and a country of destination. As research has shown, they move on and on within a global hierarchy of desirable destination countries, ranked according to differences in salaries and legal entitlements, the costs and risks of entry and subjective attractiveness. Within this global hierarchy, Israel holds a middle position, above most Asian and Middle Eastern destination countries, where many women were employed before coming to Israel, but clearly below Western Europe and North America, which ultimately may grant citizenship (and family reunion), so they hope, and which many dream of reaching as their final destination.

Within this process, the global moves of typically unmarried, separated or unhappily married women, for whom “home” becomes an increasingly abstract category as they spend large parts of their lives elsewhere, often takes on the form of self-sustaining global journeys. Like the Dominicans described by Ninna Nyberg Sorensen (1998), Filipino domestic workers therefore appear to be “natives” of the transnational space, integrated into a large imagined and practiced global community.

## Conclusion

In *From Exile to Diaspora*, the American sociologist of Filipino origin, Epifanio San Juan, suggests that the transported, displaced and “longing-for-home bodies” of Filipinos “now ‘belong’ to the whole world” (1998:6), as a diaspora analogous to the African and Chinese global dispersal. In what at times sounds like a political manifesto for the Filipino diaspora, San Juan goes on to write:

... I envision the Filipino community shaping its own identity through solidarity with all the oppressed and exploited as a responsible autonomous force committed to distributive justice, to genuine self-determination, to socialist democracy. Opposing a common enemy, this struggle necessarily traverses space and crosses state boundaries, joining the diaspora with brothers and sisters in the islands in Southeast Asia and reconstructing the homeland as habitat for a segment of the human species (1998:16).

As in the case of San Juan, the notion of a Filipino diaspora as a designation of Filipinos residing outside the Philippines is popular in the literature on Filipino migration, especially in the publications of writers who see themselves as part of just such a global community (Beltran and Rodriguez, 1996; Ignacio, 2005). Indeed, the common features generally associated with diasporas—such as geographical dispersal or expansion, the collective memory of a homeland, return movements to this homeland, ethnic group consciousness and solidarity with co-ethnic members, and a troubled relationship with “host” societies (Cohen, 1997:21ff.)—seem to apply well to a great number of Filipinos abroad. Numerous publications on the subject suggest that the millions of so-called OFWs do imagine the experiences of their co-Filipinos (*kababayan*) elsewhere abroad as similar, notwithstanding differences of class and gender, in that they share a group consciousness as a community of fate. This is based on the knowledge that Filipino migrants are widely excluded and discriminated against in a world system in which being “Filipino” is associated with being a cheap oilfield worker or seaman and being “Filipina” with being a caring maid vulnerable to exploitation and abuse (Gonzales, 1998; Ignacio, 2005; Parreñas, 2001; San Juan, 1998; Tadiar, 2004).

This article has shown how diasporic discourses are employed by Filipino migrants in Israel in strong relation with their experiences as domestic workers in Israeli homes, their religious and culturally infused narratives and practices, and their rigid exclusion from legal, political and social participation by Israeli state migration policies. As became clear, Filipino domestic workers’ public invocations of being the “Jews of today” came at a specific historical moment, when Israel decided to use force to enact its state-sanctioned legal caregiver system against the autonomy of migration through the establishment of a police deportation unit. This unit forced not only illegalized but also legal domestic workers (and, to a lesser

extent, Philippine embassy officials) to suffer humiliating, time-consuming and at times violent controls and arrests, and resulted in a temporal restriction of their stays in Israel. In this situation, Filipinos' diasporic discourses have served as a political strategy based on affective appeals to the compassion of the Israeli public and policymakers.

In this sense, the Filipino domestic workers' use of the language of diaspora contradicts that of the literature on the Filipino diaspora cited above: while diaspora is invoked by (American) Filipino writers and researchers because they may feel a connection with the Philippines as their original home, Filipino domestic workers in Israel used diasporic discourses precisely to prove their understanding of and belonging to Israel as a "new home." Therefore, as James Clifford points out, "the term *diaspora* is a signifier, not simply of transnationality and movement, but of political struggles to define the local, as distinctive community, in historical contexts of displacement" (1994:308). A diasporic consciousness, Clifford goes on to write, "makes the best of a bad situation" (1994:311). This suggests an understanding of diasporic discourses as means of communication and political tools. Given the history (and success) of the Zionist movements' use of the language of diaspora, the political content of diasporic discourses is hardly new or surprising. As a discourse that often evokes ethnic solidarity and speaks in a highly emotion-laden language, it should be carefully analyzed in its specific historical, social and economic situatedness, rather than being celebrated.

If we view the stress on diasporas and the diasporization of the world as a social product, we can start analyzing the social realities, emotional needs and political dreams that create it, rather than using "diaspora" as an analytic concept or metaphor. As a social fact, the description of experiences of globalization and migration in the language of diaspora, like the self-identification of social groups such as Filipino labor migrants as a global imagined community, draws our attention to the political as well as affective sides of these experiences. Perhaps above all, use of claims such as "We are the Jews of today" by Filipino domestic workers in Israel shows that, far from being mere victims of global capitalism, Filipina domestic workers have appropriated a discourse of victimhood used by Jews in the dispersion, the archetypal diaspora, but within a post-modern world in which they have become global players, actively negotiating citizenship. They conceive of themselves as cosmopolitans who reach out beyond their cultural, religious and ethno-national origins, to feel at home in the world, despite their working-class occupations and non-elite status. They are, in Werbner's words (1999), "working class cosmopolitans."

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For the latest figures on official numbers of world migrants, see <http://esa.un.org/migration/p2k0data.asp>; last accessed November 7, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Exact figures on Filipino citizens abroad are lacking. The Philippine government estimates the number of Filipinos working abroad at 6.5–7.5 million (<http://www.poea.gov.ph/html/statistics.html>; last accessed November 7, 2007), whereas NGOs generally speak of eight million (see, for example, the website of Migrante International at <http://migrante.tripod.com/>; last accessed November 7, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Thus, on May 15, 2007, the Philippine Central Bank announced that the remittances of overseas Filipinos had remained above the U.S.\$1 billion mark for the eleventh straight month; accordingly, the remittances amounted to U.S.\$3.5 billion in the first quarter of 2007 (see Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas Media Release on May 15, 2007, at <http://www.bsp.gov.ph/publications/media.asp?id=1574>; last accessed August 5, 2007). The central importance of remittances for domestic consumption and the Philippine currency is generally recognized (Mellyn, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> For more recent data on Filipino out-migrants, see the statistics of the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration at <http://www.poea.gov.ph/html/statistics.html> (last accessed November 7, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> The discourse on Filipina migrant workers as national heroines was coined by President Corazón Aquino, who in 1988 addressed a crowd of Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong as the “new heroines of the nation” (Tadiar, 2004:147).

<sup>6</sup> By using the term ‘illegalized’ instead of ‘illegal’ migrant, I intend to emphasize the production of migrant illegality through state law and practices.

<sup>7</sup> Thus, in September 2002, the Israeli government established a so-called Immigration Authority, whose responsibility was to implement a cabinet decision of August 18, 2002, to “deport 50,000 illegals annually” (acting Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, protocol of government decision no. 2469, August 18, 2002). Less than two years after its establishment, in June 2004, the Immigration Authority publicly announced having deported 100,000 “illegal aliens”; this makes the Israeli expulsion operation of migrant workers one of the largest in the Western world after 1945 (Sinai, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> In distinguishing between migrant illegality and deportability, I follow DeGenova (2002).

<sup>9</sup> The names of Filipino interviewees have been replaced by pseudonyms throughout the article.

<sup>10</sup> According to the so-called binding arrangement, Filipino caregivers’ permits to stay in Israel are legally tied to their employment with an Israeli citizen specified in their passports (Kemp, 2004). In spite of a High Justice Court ruling in March 2006, which called the binding arrangement a “modern form of slavery” and demanded its abolition (High Justice Court 4542/02), it remains largely in practice within the caregiving sector (Kav LaOved and Hotline for Migrant Workers, 2007:40ff.). Moreover, domestic employment permits must be extended

annually and can generally be prolonged for a period of up to 51 months only (though in some cases migrant carers may prolong their employment permit beyond 51 months if they stay with the same employer; Gilbert and Krieger, 2004). Given these regulations, Thelma's permit to stay and work in Israel expires the moment Tikva dies.

<sup>11</sup> This is based on an unsystematic media observation during the time. Among the events I attended, where this claim was voiced, was a demonstration against the deportations of migrant workers' illegalized children organized by several NGOs in southern Tel Aviv on September 3, 2003, and a protest during the U.N.'s International Migrant's Day on December 18, 2004, outside the Tel Aviv Cinematheque.

<sup>12</sup> Ambassador Modena's remark triggered political outrage among Israeli state officials, and former Israeli Justice Minister and *Shoah* survivor Joseph Lapid demanded that he either apologize or leave Israel (Stevens, 2005). Modena apologized for his remarks after being summoned by the Israeli Foreign Ministry (Bahur-Nir, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> Transcript of preaching by Pastor Ed in Living Stone Ministry, recorded January 12, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> While the majority of Filipinos in Israel (like Filipino Christians in general) are Roman Catholics, more than a dozen large evangelical groups of Filipinos run churches in the country. Moreover, even though evangelical groups established by labor migrants in Israel tend to be divided into different national or ethnic groups, the global outreach and transnational orientation of "born-again evangelicals" needs to be emphasized. As Karagiannis and Glick-Schiller have recently pointed out, the persistent use of ethnic groups as the unit of analysis within research on religious migrant groups systematically neglects their transnational claims and ideological consistency (2006:141).

<sup>15</sup> The term *balikbayan* (lit. "homecomers") was created in the early 1970s by President Marcos with the aim of strengthening the ties between the Philippines and its overseas nationals in order to generate economic investments. The large cardboard *balikbayan* boxes allow overseas Filipinos to send objects free of duty up to a value of U.S.\$1,000 to the Philippines (Rafael, 2000:207).

<sup>16</sup> See the official website of Jesus Is Lord at [www.jilworldwide.org](http://www.jilworldwide.org), last accessed November 7, 2007.

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