

KOLUM KRITIKA

FUNGIBILITY, DEAD SOULS, AND FILIPINO OCWs

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Abstract

This self-reflective essay investigates the unimportance of the individual in a capitalist economy. Drawing from his working experience in investment banking, the author recognizes that individuals are not recognized as unique persons but are, instead, absorbed into a system that is more concerned with trade and profit. This reflection informs his reading of Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls*: the transaction of buying and selling souls and the realization of individuality. His reading then brings Ocampo Reyes to the final reflection that it is all too common to treat Filipino overseas contract workers (OCWs) as fungible objects lacking individuality.

About the Author

José Edmundo Ocampo Reyes holds degrees from Ateneo de Manila University and Columbia University. He was featured in the most recent New Writers issue of *The Hudson Review*, and his poems and translations appear or are forthcoming in *American Literary Review*, *Caracoa*, *Circumference*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Philippine Studies*, *Pleiades*, *Poetry International*, *Poetry Daily*, *Rattle*, and other Philippine and US journals and anthologies. A former fellow at the National Writers Workshop at Dumaguete City, he is the recipient of the Der-Hovanessian Translation Prize. "Fungibility, Dead Souls, and OCWs" won First Prize for Essay in the 2006 Don Carlos Memorial Awards for Literature.

When I first heard the word *fungible*, brought up during a conversation on bearer bonds about a decade ago, I immediately fell in love with its music, which added a few light notes to what had previously been a monotonous day. Fun' jə bəl: one stressed syllable followed by two unstressed ones, collectively forming a dactyl; three short yet gentle vowels; that distinctive *j* sound in the middle, technically called the voiced postalveolar affricate. Despite the fact that I'd never encountered the word before and was just starting to decipher its meaning through context, there was something familiar about it, perhaps its sonic proximity to the more commonplace *tangible*. Because of its sound, I began to associate it with the fuzz of a peach, the shushing waves of an ocean. My mind's tongue savored its delicious syllables. I soon discovered, however, that its distinctiveness belies its denotation, which privileges similarity over uniqueness.

John Austin, in his *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (published posthumously in 1879), contrasts things that aren't fungible with things that are:

When a thing which is the subject of an obligation...must be delivered in specie, the thing is not fungible, i.e. that very thing, and not another thing of the same or another class in lieu of it must be delivered. Where the subject of the obligation is a thing of a given class, the thing is said to be fungible, i.e. the delivery of any object which answers to the generic description will satisfy the terms of the obligation.

The key phrase is “which answers to the generic description.” If an obligation demands delivery of a unique object, for instance, an Amorsolo painting purchased by a museum, that object is not fungible; no other painting in the world, not even another Amorsolo, will satisfy the obligation. But in the case of fungible objects, or fungibles, the unique characteristics that distinguish a thing from other members of its given class are deemed irrelevant, as long as the terms of the underlying obligation are satisfied. If, for instance, a museum orders 1,000 reproductions of that Amorsolo painting from a printer, it doesn’t matter whether he produces them all himself or has to subcontract a fraction of the order, as long as he delivers 1,000 prints that meet the specifications (paper stock, print quality, glossiness, etc.) that had previously been agreed upon.

Though the word is, strictly speaking, a legal term, one we do not normally encounter in everyday situations,¹ we deal with fungibles every day. Purchasing virtually any commodity, such as orange juice, jeans, chicken, gasoline—all of which are fungible—we take out bills, likewise fungible, from our wallets. We do not care, for instance, whether the specific amount of gasoline we purchase for our fungible Toyota Corolla has been drilled from Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, Alaska, or Kuwait. Similarly, while each bill technically has a unique serial number, a gas station attendant will not care whether the violet hundred-peso bill we pay him with has serial number YJ179848 or AQ452974. During its journey from printer to consumer, did the bill pass through the hands of a gambler who lost everything one night playing mahjong, or the trembling hands of a college freshman who used it to purchase movie tickets during a first date? None of these particulars is of consequence to the buyer, to the seller. What matters is that the gasoline meets certain chemical specifications, the bill is genuine, and the transaction marginally increases the oil company’s bottom line.

My first encounter with the word *fungible* occurred when I worked as a trader in a bank’s treasury. Being a trader is all about routines, which tend to give each day, however different its particulars from those of other days, a certain regularity, the way templates give documents the same look regardless of content. Every morning I’d drive from my home in Quezon City to the office in Makati, which took an hour even though the distance

was only about twelve kilometers. Even though no two trips were alike—the cars traveling alongside me were always different, I might opt to drive on different lanes on different days, and potholes I may have hit one day were avoided the next day—pace Heraclitus, I felt like I was making the same trip every day. No matter which route I took, whether I drove along Ortigas then turned right on EDSA, or took the back roads of Little Baguio and entered the Makati Business District through Buendia Avenue, I would inevitably hit traffic. Sometimes I'd wind up alongside a bus whose passengers would either be asleep, heads leaning against the windows; or staring blankly into space. But before I could I ponder the sadness of it all, the car in front of me would inch forward, and I'd have to step on the gas or else risk falling behind someone intent on cutting in. As I crawled along with the traffic, the cars of different makes, models, and colors would morph into one blaring, suffocating mass.

Upon my arrival at the office I'd skim through the top stories in Bloomberg and Telerate, both trading systems, and the business dailies, to familiarize myself with what had happened in London and New York. I needed to know, among other things, every interest rate hike or cut by the Federal Reserve, where the long bond² was trading, and how Philippine assets fared overnight, in preparation for the morning briefing, during which we determined a trading strategy for the day. Trading would begin soon afterwards, at the same time each day. We would call up our counterparties, that is, competing banks, to check their prices for bonds, loans, deposits and currencies, and they would call us to do the same. Sometimes we would have an axe to grind; we'd aggressively bid for securities or offer them cheaply. Other times we would simply let other banks make the first move in order to get a better sense of their positions. Small talk during such phone conversations, particularly during hectic days, would be kept to a minimum; the only relevant details in our conversations were asset names and asset prices. We would write trade tickets and verify trade confirmations sent by other banks. We frequently updated our spreadsheets. All the while, we would keep our eyes on the headlines, index levels and stock prices that flashed on our television and computer screens, making sure that we were aware of any potential market-moving event—a rate hike by another country's Central Bank, a large company declaring bankruptcy, a head of state declaring currency controls—as soon as it became news, so that we could act accordingly.

Around noontime, things generally quieted down for a few hours, until the London market opened, when a slew of European counterparties would come online, and trading would resume. It was only after we were able to transfer our positions to our New York office at 8:00 or 9:00 P.M. that we were able to go home, unless we were scheduled to meet

a client or broker for drinks. By the end of the day, after the dust cleared, we would have hopefully accumulated a profit, bringing us closer to our annual budget. The next day, it was more of the same.

What struck me about the years I worked as a trader was the way fungibility pervaded my world. “What’s your offer for Philippine Par Bonds? 72-5/8? Okay, I lift you for two million.” It was the bank and its creditworthiness that mattered, not the person on the other end of the line. It didn’t matter whether he was having a bad day, or whether you were once classmates. There was also no guarantee that some other bank wouldn’t pirate him (or you for that matter) the next day, or that he’d be promoted to treasurer while another person took over the trading duties. That person may as well have been as fungible as the Par Bonds you were purchasing from him because you had someone on the other line willing to buy them at 73 cents on the dollar, thereby completing the arbitrage, or risk-free transaction. Unless the bank went into default, it would still be your counterparty the following day.

Meanwhile computers would keep track of the fungible credits and debits to our cash and asset accounts, while somewhere in a vault stacks of fungible bonds I had never seen lay gathering dust until someone demanded physical delivery of one, a rare occurrence. Even currencies and credit became fungible commodities bought and sold by banks and corporations, speculators and hedgers, part of the trillions of dollars’ worth of assets changing hands everywhere and nowhere each day, unbeknownst to the average person on the street.

At the end of the day, we were judged based on the amount of profits we generated for the firm. It didn’t matter whether we got there by stratagem, pure luck, or a combination of both. It didn’t matter what the underlying assets of our trades were, whether they were sovereign bonds, corporate bonds, or convertible bonds. It didn’t matter whether along the way another bank let go of dozens of employees because it found itself on the wrong end of this zero-sum game. We traded, took our profits, then moved on to the next trade. Once a trade was consummated, there was little or no time to ponder specifics. We had a target to meet, and every dollar in profit we accumulated along the way was virtually fungible. Come December, those fungible profits, along with those of other groups around the world, would somehow be absorbed into the consolidated figures of our firm’s annual report.

Fungibility, then, is the oil that keeps the innumerable cogs in the great machine of capitalism going. The same force that allowed us to shift millions of dollars instantaneously from one account to the next without having to count each and every bill also allows

manufacturers to mass-produce cars, MP3 players, dolls, and t-shirts without having to scrutinize each item. It allows us to buy our day-to-day groceries without having to go through an auction for each can, box, or fruit. Imagine a world where fungibility did not exist, one in which we would have to deliver a specific bond, pay for a particular stamp with a unique coin. It would be as if we'd never left the world of barter, the time when people would roll massive stone coins to market. All commerce would grind to a halt.

Yet fungibility has a price. In our rush to satisfy the daily obligations of our job, there is a great risk that we will fail to satisfy the more important obligation to take the time to acknowledge the uniqueness of the Other. As the poet Naomi Shihab Nye, quoting a Thai proverb, says, "Life is so short, we must move very slowly." Because of the difficulty of slowing down in the business world, there never was a day during the five years I worked in finance that I didn't dream of leaving it all behind. What I value most about my experience was not the thrill of making a profit, the routine, the fungibility that facilitated our transactions. It was the times when I was able to slow down enough to listen to those I worked and dealt with, and get to know them a little better; when I would have dinner at a former officemate's apartment, discussing anything but work, and watch his sons grow by leaps and bounds; when I discovered a colleague's fascination with the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg; when I watched *King Lear* with another bank's trader at the Fringe Club Theatre in Hong Kong; when late one night a co-worker told me that because of the severity of traffic, he would get home around midnight, then wake up at 5:30 a.m. just to get to the office. During these instances, they became neither colleagues nor competitors, but individuals with their own unique stories.

Unfortunately these were the exceptions, not the rule. Even when an extraordinary event occurred, such as when the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas was forced to devalue the peso in July of 1997, *Buy low, sell high* was still our mantra, our imperative. On that day, phones rang more persistently than usual, salesmen barked orders to traders, who shouted back while shuttling between several tense phone conversations with brokers and other traders. Figures changed furiously on the monitors, and there was even a point when there was no quote for the peso because the BSP stopped making a market on it, forcing banks to guess what its true level was. Fungibility, the same force that facilitated currency transactions for corporations looking to import goods, had also made it easy for speculators to sell pesos and buy dollars with impunity, and forced the BSP and other central banks across the region to jack up interest rates to defend their besieged currencies. I stood in the comfort of an air-conditioned trading room, several stories above the crowds and traffic of Hong Kong, while several hundred kilometers away the peso fell from 26.30 to 32.30,

the first phase of a prolonged devaluation, and most Filipinos went on with their lives, unaware that the next morning they would wake up to an even scarcer world.

II

While *fungible* is not generally used in analyses of literary works, it seems to me particularly appropriate for discussing Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls*, which negotiates (in the dual sense of "to work towards a compromise" and "to navigate") the tension between homogeneity and individuality more successfully than any other work I have encountered. The concept of fungibility, or rather, the desire to make things fungible, is a force that operates relentlessly throughout *Dead Souls*. This force manifests itself most overtly in a series of financial transactions similar to the ones I was involved in during the time I was still a trader; the only difference is that the underlying commodities in the book are souls—that is, Russian serfs—instead of currencies or bonds.

In the book's milieu, the government imposes a tax based on the number of serfs a landowner owns as of the last census. Unfortunately, because it takes years for a new census to be undertaken, landowners whose serfs die or escape soon after would still have to pay taxes on those same serfs until the next census. It is this particular discrepancy between actual and recorded numbers of souls that the main character, Chichikov, perceives as an arbitrage opportunity. Banking on the logical expectation that owners would desire to disencumber themselves from their dead and inutile souls, he tries to transfer as many of their souls to his name as he can in order to use them as collateral for a sizeable mortgage. For his purposes, the souls are fungible. What matters to him is that they are male, deceased (or have run away), and are still under the owner's name as of the most recent census. The serfs' individual histories are initially of little consequence to him, because only the three aforementioned parameters are relevant to the acquisition of the wealth he desires.

For Chichikov, time and secrecy are of the essence. His scheme will only work as long as a new census is not undertaken; at the same time, he cannot let others know of his scheme, since they could report him to the authorities or copy his idea. Like an opportunistic bond trader, he tries to consummate each transaction as efficiently as possible, gravitating toward individuals who would potentially have lost a significant number of serfs to the plague; at the same time, he tries to take advantage of any fortuitous situation he finds himself in. As such, any close examination of the traits of individual serfs runs contrary to his goals, since it will only delay his progress.

In addition to wanting the souls to remain anonymous (literally, “nameless”), he also wants to remain anonymous himself. When we first encounter him, he is described as “a man who, though not handsome, was not ill-favored, not over-fat, and not over-thin ... though not over-elderly, he was not over-young.”³ While such a description helps the reader imagine Chichikov’s physical appearance, it does little to show his uniqueness as a character; the passage could also describe countless other individuals. Even the narrator seems hesitant to discuss Chichikov’s past in any detail until the last chapter of Part I, the only one of the epic’s three parts that is extant.

Several events, however, undermine Chichikov’s desire for anonymity and expedience. He gets off to a successful start, obtaining souls from the landowner Manilov *gratis*, with virtually no trouble other than having underestimated the distance to his estate. Things, however, go downhill from there. After consummating the deal with Manilov, instead of immediately finding Sobakevitch’s estate, the next place on his list, he gets lost in the process and encounters two persons, Korobotchka and Nozdrev. Both meetings turn out to be exasperating for different reasons. Korobotchka turns out to be nosier and more suspicious than Chichikov bargains for. Though he is ultimately successful in obtaining her dead souls, her subsequent inquiries about the going price of such souls are partly responsible for Chichikov’s troubles in the town of N. Nozdrev, on the other hand, is incorrigibly deceitful. Chichikov gets nowhere with him, and in fact, has his scheme put in jeopardy when Nozdrev barges into the Governor’s ball and starts divulging details about their meeting.

More importantly, these encounters allow readers to learn more about Chichikov. For instance, the narrator’s description of Chichikov’s relationship with Korobotchka, in contrast to Madam Manilov, warns the reader to suspect Chichikov’s motives. He is no longer simply viewed as the charming person whom the townspeople of N. adore, but is now seen as a scheming individual who will put on whatever mask is necessary in order to achieve his goal of accumulating dead souls.

Chichikov’s next encounter is with Sobakevitch, who proposes an exorbitant asking price for his souls. Chichikov is astonished by the proposal, to which the landowner responds that his souls are high quality “genuine souls” as reputable as the carts sold by Michiev, an honest wheelwright. But Chichikov doesn’t want to hear about Michiev, Stepan, Milushkin, or any of the other souls Sobakevitch describes, since to him all these souls are fungible. He would want nothing more than to quickly agree on a reasonable price with the landowner and leave. The only problem is that Sobakevitch is intent on presenting them not as commodities, but as individuals, albeit to obtain a good price for

himself. They eventually come to an agreement, but Chichikov later cannot help but think about the individual souls, since that was the way they were presented in such intimate detail by Sobakevitch.

For the first time, Chichikov looks at souls, not as a class of objects, but as persons. Though he ultimately asserts their fungibility by pushing through with the transfer of souls to his name, he cannot help but be fascinated by what made each soul unique during his or her lifetime. He imagines the carpenter Probka Stepan. He visualizes his life and sees him walking the roads and making a living.

He then proceeds to imagine what the other muzhiks like Maksim Teliatnikov the shoemaker might have been like while they were still alive. Taking the time to ponder the individual qualities of these souls might detrimental to his purpose, but this could be seen as a victory of uniqueness and particularity over fungibility, if only a temporary one. While Chichikov meditates on the souls, they no longer remain anonymous, but begin to reclaim their names and voices. By the end of Part I, he has departed from N., where people have already started to ask questions, and moves on towards the redemption that Gogol had planned for him but left unfinished.

The financial transactions Chichikov enters into may be central to the text, but these to me are only half of the story. While the souls themselves become a site of relentless struggle between the assertion of individuality and the desire to make things fungible, a similar struggle takes place on the level of the text itself. On the one hand, the narrator himself has a tendency to stereotype, to see people within a certain group as interchangeable, insofar as the members share certain characteristics. He generalizes about a Frenchman or a German Later, in an incident involving Selifan, Chichikov's driver, he takes the opportunity to make a generalization that all Russians will avoid admitting a mistake—even if they know they are in the wrong.

On the other hand, the narrator has an even stronger impulse to assert the uniqueness of people and things, constantly digressing in order to illumine the subject before him. There are plenty of examples of this in the book. An old woman is quickly described during a simple transaction. The old woman bargains over the price of vodka, ensuring her profit while declaring her loss. In the context of *Dead Souls*, the brief glimpse into the character of the old woman at the inn could be viewed as nothing more than an insignificant digression. This passage in no way affects the subsequent plot, and could conceivably be omitted without materially affecting the rest of the book.

What strikes me about this digression, however, is that it foregrounds the individual characteristics of this old woman, giving more weight to these qualities than to whatever

qualities the *class* of old women might have. Rather than become anonymous, like one of the countless dead souls transferred to Chichikov's name, this old woman becomes *metonymous*. That is, her individuality allows her to carve her own niche from within the larger class of old women. Fungibility gives way to individuality.

Such digressions abound in *Dead Souls*. Just as Chichikov repeatedly makes detours in the course of his acquisitions, so too does the narrator relentlessly make detours in what would otherwise be a straightforward narrative. The difference is that in the former case, the detours are an unwelcome distraction for Chichikov. In contrast, the narrator, for the most part, seems genuinely interested in revealing the particular nature of everything he encounters. As a general rule, the narrator feels an urge to give characters voices and to allow the reader to glimpse each one's uniqueness.

The narrator's "passion for circumstantiality" finally motivates him to reveal Chichikov's history to the reader. The main character, who has been the focus thus far, is given even more of a voice than perhaps he himself would have wanted, and the motive for the accumulation of souls is finally known. What is at stake, however, is more than a mortgage: it is the representation (in the dual sense of "depiction" and "act of giving a voice to") of character in the face of unrelenting forces that seek to homogenize, to abstract, and to silence. By showing the many sides of Chichikov's personality and by allowing the reader to glimpse his personal history, the narrator allows him to become a unique character in his own right, not merely another anti-hero from a class of anti-heroes.

Part I of *Dead Souls* ends with an apostrophe to Russia written in a rather high, declamatory language. Russia is asked where it is going? It does not respond because it only exists in the abstract, as an "imagined community" to use the terminology of Benedict Anderson. It has no voice other than the individual voices of its citizens. No author could possibly represent all such voices in any text, but Gogol has done the next best thing. He has provided the reader with Chichikov, Petrushka, Nozdrev, the County Prosecutor, and a handful of memorable individuals who, because of the narrator's relentless "passion for circumstantiality" become metonyms for the Russia he imagines himself addressing. Through the multiplicity of characters in *Dead Souls*, Gogol has shown that in order to depict a people, an author must first depict the uniqueness of its countless citizens, and, in doing so, assert the primacy of individuality over fungibility.

III

I've never set foot in Russia, but the parallels between the nation Gogol depicts and

the Philippines seem to me inescapable. Today's Philippines, much like nineteenth-century Russia, still finds itself largely an agricultural nation with the majority of the land in the hands of a few wealthy landowners. And though technically the Philippines has no slaves, it is no stranger to indenture. Our people have suffered through hundreds of years of colonialism, resulting in, among other things, the country's persistent indebtedness to foreign countries and institutions, and its place as the largest exporter of labor in the world, exceeding even Mexico. Furthermore, one cannot talk about the export of labor without mentioning overseas contract workers, or OCWs, who, through their billions of dollars' worth of annual remittances, are one of the primary fungible means of sustaining its ailing, dependent economy. If one were to apostrophize and imagine today's Philippines, as Gogol did Russia, one would necessarily have to look beyond its borders and acknowledge these workers toiling in every corner of the globe.

In September of 1996, I was assigned to Hong Kong, where I lived and worked for three-and-a-half years. With its combination of cosmopolitanism, vibrant nightlife, and market-friendly policies, Hong Kong rivals Tokyo as the financial hub of Asia. I was no stranger to that place, having been there several times as a tourist. I had flown into Kai Tak Airport, whose runway was a patch of concrete surrounded by dozens of apartment buildings; any plane would have to bank at a precarious angle on its landing approach, or graze a building. I had walked along Nathan Road, the main thoroughfare on Tsim Shah Tsui, with a perpetual moving crowd of shoppers who bustled in and out of the various establishments. I had eaten at restaurants with roasted chickens, ducks, and slabs of pork hung on display for passersby to see. I had ridden the Star Ferry, which shuttled between Hong Kong Island and Kowloon at a turtle's pace, bobbing on the aquamarine waters of Kowloon Bay. I had watched dolphins and killer whales perform their crowd-pleasing leaps and tricks at Ocean Park. I had gazed upon the city's evening skyline, a rival to Manhattan's, its palette of neon and fluorescent lights spilling onto the shifting water like wanton streaks of paint, while the dark outline of the Peak loomed in the distance. But nothing prepared me for what was to come. This was the first time I would find myself alone, separated from my loved ones for an extended period of time; I could not seek any solace from the crowds of strangers. And while my experience in Manila had already given me a taste of what the international capital markets were like, I was nonetheless amazed to see up close the breathtaking pace and volume of transactions, which dwarfed what I had previously been exposed to.

I deliberately chose to live away from the office in Central, far from the spreadsheets, the never-ending stream of prices, the tense conversations. When I got home, I wanted to

put all thought of positions, profits, and transactions as far from my mind as possible. To get to work, I would commute from my apartment in Ap Lei Chau, an island barely off the southwestern coast of Hong Kong. The span of the bridge connecting both islands was so short that it took me more than a year to figure out I was crossing a channel, not a river. I would generally take the 590 bus, which headed north through the Aberdeen Tunnel into Happy Valley, right alongside the racecourse, then west through Wan Chai and Admiralty districts into Central, where it deposited me underneath Exchange Square. Though the trip typically took me forty minutes, about twice the time it took my officemates to take a cab from the Peak or walk down from Midlevels, riding the bus was infinitely more relaxing than my previous hour-long commute in Manila. Like the bus passengers I had caught glimpses of on EDSA, I would either close my eyes, lean my head against a window, and try to catch a few minutes' worth of sleep in my stiff, upholstered seat; or stare off into the mass of red taxis, buses, and cars in a rush to get to one of the countless towers downtown. Though my day would just be beginning, I would already be thinking of my return home to my apartment, when after a long and tiring day at work, I would look southwards into the moonlit waters, watching the cargo ships traverse the channel that separated Ap Lei Chau from Lamma Island.

Yet on weekends I often chose to head back to the heart of the city, the place I was so desperate to get away from at the end of each weekday. I would have lunch at a Japanese food court at the basement of Pacific Place, or have a Thai, Italian, Chinese, Japanese, or Cajun dinner with friends at a Soho restaurant. I would visit an Impressionist exhibit at the Museum, or attend a Grace Nono concert at the Cultural Center, then walk along the Kowloon waterfront before hailing a cab to go home. I would catch the latest Hollywood blockbuster at the multiplex, or an independent film like Von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* at the tiny Cine-Art House in Wan Chai. I would walk through the Hong Kong Botanical Gardens in Admiralty, or browse the books at Swindon in Tsim Sha Tsui, which had the best poetry section in all of Hong Kong.

Sometimes I would even find myself wandering the area near my office in Central on Sundays, noting the slower pace, the softer chatter, the thinner crowds on the walkways and sidewalks. To me there was something comforting about knowing no trades were closed, no phones rang off the hook, and no money changed hands inside the abandoned offices. I would notice the distinct features of each building, which melted into one big gray blur during my daily rush: Jardine House, jokingly dubbed "the House of a Thousand Assholes" by a broker because of its circular windows, the building's most notable feature; the triangular configuration of the Bank of China building, designed by I. M. Pei; the

modernist architecture of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation building, a modular structure of steel, aluminum, and glass designed by Sir Norman Foster; and right beside it, the beige Standard Chartered Bank Building, a narrow finger of concrete topped by a useless block, an attempt to assert superiority over its main rival by having the taller of the two skyscrapers. As I walked alongside these buildings, I would inevitably come across huge throngs of Filipinas, so numerous that entire streets had to be closed to traffic.

Because of its vibrant economy and proximity to the Philippines—a mere hour-and-a-half away by plane—Hong Kong is a natural destination for OCWs. During weekdays I caught sight of them in the midst of all the locals whenever I left the office to buy a packed lunch of soyed chicken, lamb curry, or roast duck. I could tell by their button noses, small build, dark hair, brown skin, and sad eyes that these women were Filipina. During weekdays, they were usually alone or in small groups, but on Sundays, these nannies took over Central, congregating in various locations from the base of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation Building to the Star Ferry Terminal to Des Voeux and Queens Roads near the Landmark and Mandarin Oriental, displacing the red taxis and busses that traversed there during the week. Dressed in casual attire, they would huddle in groups on the street, exchange stories, cut or braid each other's hair, and feast on adobo, pansit, Jollibee fried chicken, and steamed rice, while the locals, inured to their presence, walked calmly on towards wherever it was they had to get to.

My knowledge of their circumstances was, and still is, secondhand. They earned a fixed wage set by the Hong Kong government. They got about a week of Christmas vacation. Whatever their job had been in the Philippines—maid, cook, secretary, teacher—it paid a tiny fraction of what they were earning as nannies. Together with other OCWs all over the world, they remitted or made *padala* billions of fungible dollars back home to “satisfy the terms of the obligation” to support their family, their country. Like me, they had left family behind. Unlike me, they had done so more out of necessity than by choice.

Or so I believed. During the countless times I walked past them, I could have chosen to sit down and introduce myself as a fellow Filipino. I could have discovered for myself whether my preconceptions were true or not. I could have stopped looking at them as a collective, stopped hearing the aggregate of their conversations as a single, relentless buzz, and begun to listen to their individual stories. I could have found out what their interests were, what provinces they came from, how long they had been away from home. Instead, I viewed them as being as fungible as Chichikov's dead souls or the Hong Kong Dollar bills I withdrew and spent in my three-and-a-half years of living there. Though I spoke the same language as they did, I was too proud to attempt to bridge the gap between my

circumstances—my education, my economic status, my job—and theirs, and went my separate way.

Contrast these wasted opportunities with a particular encounter, also in the midst of a crowd. One Friday after work, I was to fly home for my birthday. As I had done many times before, I took the Airport Express to Chek Lap Kok Airport in Lantau Island, a trip that lasted around twenty-four minutes. The train arrived on schedule, and I walked across the enormous departure hall with towering glass walls and a high, multi-vaulted steel ceiling—a far cry from the cramped interior of Kai Tak Airport, which had been shut down a few years earlier—and towards immigration. Once the official stamped my passport, I walked over to W. H. Smith to skim through its meager stock of books, typical for an airport bookstore. After a few minutes, I took the escalator down to the shuttle that would take me to my terminal, several hundred meters away.

When I got to my boarding gate, several passengers had already been waiting in their seats, and a queue had already formed. Even though this particular combination of tourists, locals, businesspersons, and children of various nationalities was unique, the crowd might as well have been any other crowd on any other weekend I happened to be flying home. That is, it would have been, had I not noticed a familiar-looking gentleman of Indian descent waiting in line. His dark hair had receded noticeably, though a few stray hairs were visible on his forehead. Behind his glasses was a pair of gentle eyes that seemed trained to observe what others' eyes simply noticed or ignored. His appearance suggested he was comfortable with travel: he wore a dark blue overcoat, black denims, black leather shoes, and had a laptop slung over his shoulders and a leather bag at his feet. Summoning my courage, I went up to him.

"Excuse me, sir, but are you Pico Iyer?" I blurted out. I had been a fan of his ever since I encountered one of his essays in an old issue of *Time* magazine, and had seen his photograph on one of his book jackets.

"Yes, I am," he replied. Though he was visibly surprised, he still managed a hint of a smile.

We spoke all too briefly, because our plane was about to board. He asked if I was involved in writing. I replied that I was, sort of, but that by profession I was an investment banker. I asked a nearby gentleman if he could take our photograph together, and he obliged. Afterwards, Iyer took out his wallet and gave me his card. "This is the first time anyone has come up to me," he said, just as the passengers in front of him started to board.

Perhaps it was because of a pre-established connection to Iyer—my awareness of the unique combination of lyricism, precision, and thoughtfulness that distinguishes his voice

from that of every other writer in the world—that I was able to summon the courage to go up to him. Reading his essays, I was struck by how comfortable he seemed in an ever-shifting, postmodern world, and how he offered perspicacious observations and insights without ever rushing to judgment. He was always high on the list of writers I'd wanted to meet, and this time nothing was at stake other than the potential embarrassment of having mistaken someone else for him.

Yet I, too, had a connection to those nannies I had encountered during my Sunday walks. We were, we *are* Filipinos, looking for a better life than the one our country could provide. This should have been more than enough of a connection. Instead, I was like Chichikov, immersed in my discontent with my job, determined to head off to some other destination, alone.

Looking back on my indifference towards those OCWs, I cannot help but think about the beleaguered country we left behind, which has to cope with countless problems, including natural disasters, huge budget deficits, a stagnant economy, rising population, low productivity, and corruption. Among the loudest responses to these problems are calls for unity, calls to sacrifice our individual dreams for the sake of the common good, calls to halt the dreaded crab mentality. Crowds flock to the street by the thousands or even millions during periods of great dissatisfaction. We organize ourselves into various groups, political parties, and *barkadas*, and lump everyone else into categories (for instance, “Westerners,” “leftists,” and “politicians”) we can conveniently target or blame, even if we cannot possibly have gotten to know every single member of each group. People send emails, text each other and sign pro forma petitions. Those who don't join in are deemed *walang pakisama*, or worse, traitors.

While uniting towards a common goal is important, perhaps that is the easy part. What is difficult and time-consuming is what the documentarian Jonathan Raban calls the imperative to understand the Other: the act of trying to understand the unique subjectivity of each individual, however wide the gaps that separate us. Too often, it seems to me, we are like Chichikov, in a hurry to accumulate as many fungible souls for our various causes, ignoring or rejecting anyone who does not serve our purpose; when we could be like the epic's narrator, who welcomes detours and constantly digresses from the plot at hand in order to discern the peculiarities of the people he encounters.

It is no accident that I use the word *digress*, which comes from the Latin *digredi* (“to go aside, depart”). The word normally suggests a deviation from the topic at hand, but there was once a time when it meant “to transgress.” I spent those Sundays refusing to take a detour from my comfort zone and acting as though getting to know a stranger was a sin,

a transgression against my time. I consider this inability to take a risk one of my greatest failures as a writer, a Filipino, a human being.

Let me end with one final encounter, the closest I ever got to glimpsing one of these women's worlds. Riding the 590 bus home one evening, I overheard two OCWs seated nearby conversing in Tagalog as we were winding our way through the streets of Wan Chai. One was visibly burdened, while her companion smiled with a combination of sympathy and firmness. I picked up hints of the former's pregnancy. Then sometime during the conversation, under the glaring streetlights, the latter said, "*Kung gagawin mo ang iniisip ko na gagawin mo, pag-isipan mo nang mabuti at magdasal ka.*" ("If you're going to do what I think you're going to do, first think carefully and pray about it.")

I will never know what happened to the pregnant nanny, whether she decided to carry that child, who may have been a boy or a girl, to term. I will never know whether she is now happily married and at peace with herself. I will never know if she is now back in the Philippines, reunited with her family. I will never know whether she and her companion still talk to one another as they ride the 590 bus along the crowded streets of Hong Kong. I will never know whether I misunderstood the context of that remark to begin with. I will never know.

But at that moment I realized that before me was a unique individual, not some fungible person "answer[ing] to the generic description" of nanny, OCW, or Filipina, who was undergoing an ordeal so terrible it made all my burdens seem petty by comparison.

NOTES

- 1 According to the website *WordCount* (<http://www.wordcount.org>), “fungible” is the 66,619th most frequently used word in English out of a database of 86,800, ranking after such words as *fundoplication* (47,085th), *micraster* (56,675th), and *homeotherms* (66,604th), none of which appears in the current edition of *The Oxford English Dictionary*.
- 2 30-year US treasury bond, a benchmark for long-term asset prices
- 3 All quotations from *Dead Souls* are taken from the Project Gutenberg translation by D. J. Hogarth (<http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/1081>), which is in the public domain.

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