OUT AND ABOUT: MIGRANT BAKLA, PERVERSE INTIMACIES, AND THE MUSICAL OF MIGRATION IN LIZA MAGTOTO’S CARE DIVAS

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Abstract
The essay analyzes the Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA)’s stage musical, Care Divas, for its figuration of the Filipino migrant worker as bakla and for its consequent queering of labor out-migration from the Philippines. It problematizes the notion of “perverse intimacy,” particularly through the play’s employment of gay language and performance as agentive practices of survival in the diaspora. Finally, it interrogates the play’s aestheticization of kabaklaan and migrant work through a musical drama-comedy format, which deploys song and dance, as well as laughter and sentimentality, in order to make a spectacle out of the foibles of migrant bakla, to render visible the agency of these gendered Filipino laborers abroad, and finally, to underscore the Filipino migrant workers’ charged cosmopolitan ethic of oneness with or belongingness to the world.

Keywords
Filipino labor diaspora, PETA, Philippine theater, plays

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The Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA) marked a milestone in 2010 when it staged the much talked about and highly successful *Care Divas*, an original Filipino musical that focuses on five Filipino *bakla*, or homosexual males, who are employed in Intifada-ridden Israel as caregivers by day and cross-dressing performers by night in a small bar in Tel Aviv. Scripted by Liza Magtoto, directed by Maribel Legarda, and musically scored by Vincent de Jesus, the play reveals the lives of migrant laborers who form the sing-and-dance group D’Nightingales and whose ultimate goal is to achieve their big musical break in their current land of settlement. Its members include Shai, the leader of the pack, who is always haunted onstage by the figure of his mother back in the Philippines, who also happens to depend financially on him; Kayla, who eventually becomes an illegal worker, after serving several abusive employers; Chelsea, the play’s focal character, who works for the ailing Jew, Daddy Isaac, and who eventually becomes the lover of the undocumented Palestinian Daniel or Faraj; and two other *bakla*, namely Jonee and Thalia, who provide crucial support to the whole cast. More importantly, these migrant-workers-cum-drag queens do not only attend to their wards, but in the face of risks and threats brought about by a protracted war and enduring sociopolitical conservatism in Israel, they also take on the task of having to learn the Hebrew culture and language, deal with traditional views on homosexuals while negotiating their identities, and secure themselves from immigration authorities. Always living on the edge, these migrant *bakla* are susceptible to the termination of their employment contracts, deportation, and death. Kayla, for instance, gets arrested and expelled from Israel after being disowned by Adara, his temporary employer. His capture leads to the performing group’s potential collapse. Their downfall seems imminent during a particularly important D’Nightingales show, when Nonah, the only female friend of the migrant *bakla*, is appointed to substitute for their deported member. The rift among the *bakla* also worsens as they are downgraded from front-act performers at Club Mosaic (the new bar that was supposed to give them a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity) to welcoming receptionists. Furthermore, the narrative becomes tragic when toward its end, as the Intifada worsens the already chaotic setting, Chelsea is killed by a suicide bomb explosion when he attempts to rescue his beloved Faraj from Israeli authorities. The play, however, does not culminate in this bleak moment; rather, it ends with a festive show where the cast members, including the dead Isaac and Chelsea, together with the expelled Kayla, appear again onstage, extolling a utopic wish for a borderless world where peace, acceptance, and beauty prevail.

Known for its diegetic twists and turns, the musical drama-comedy attracted people “from all walks of life and people of different sexual and political orientations for its power to speak to any heart that knows tribulations and triumphs, heartaches and ecstasies” (Abunda, “Care Divas”). Amidst the dance...
numbers, slapstick comedy, bawdy undertones, and intertwining issues of gender, citizenship, and labor, the play has proffered what has been felt by critics and audience members as a “deep moral meaning to the values that most Filipinos are known for,” particularly “the feelings of homelessness, resiliency in the time of crisis and generosity of spirit found in most cases of Filipino overseas workers” (Del Rosario, “Care Divas”). Situated within the context of Israel’s intolerance toward Palestinians and tolerance of homosexuals, the play limns the contours of Filipino labor migration and its attendant sociocultural impact on both the migrant and his or her respective kinships back home. Deemed substantially hefty in contrast to other gay-themed plays in the Philippines, Care Divas successfully gathered a constellation of support and sponsorships from theatergoers, media outfits, TV celebrities, cultural and theater critics, and most especially the LGBTQ community. Due to persistent public demand, the musical was re-staged for two different runs, in different locations, under two different but related circumstances in November 2011 and April 2012. Staged at the Onstage Theatre in Greenbelt 1 in Makati, the play’s run in April 2012 also broke ground in Philippine history as it made possible the first ever partnership between the country’s two pioneer theater groups, PETA and Repertory Philippines.

Figure 1. Wearing their ordinary work clothes, the five bakla caregivers, in the play’s opening, sing and dance their collective hardships while in diaspora. Photo courtesy of PETA Library and Archives.
Indeed, there is something path-breaking in how *Care Divas* has been carried out in all of its runs. The play’s director admits that the stage production afforded her a chance to “experiment” with the topic of migrant *bakla*. She writes that it was not so much a matter of narcissism, egotism, or vanity that drove her to embark on such a project than it was curiosity to undo gender boundaries in the staging of artistic creations. For a national or people’s theater company such as PETA, where one’s gender more or less informs one’s output and role as a playwright or director, Legarda notes that she was trying to break free from certain creative overdeterminations and “reinvent the recipe somehow.” For her part, the playwright Magtoto admits her handicap in penning the play: she is not an overseas worker, she barely knows anything about Israel, and she is not gay. However, in order to effectively depict the lives of migrant workers on the Philippine stage, Magtoto has also stated that she compensated for her self-avowed inadequacies by interviewing people who had worked or are working in Israel, as well as by watching films and documentaries on Israeli life.

In keeping with the quirky imagination behind its creation and mounting, *Care Divas* was adapted from the acclaimed 2006 video-documentary, *Paper Dolls*, directed by Tomer Heymann. In this video-documentary, Heymann chronicled the lives of Filipino caregivers who also put up drag shows after their day jobs as unskilled health aids in Israel. In 2013, *Paper Dolls* was made into a musical for the London stage through the company Tricycle Theatre, whose adaptation had been described as a “curious confection” that worked as “part surprising study of cultural contrasts, part affectionate portrait of the world of the drag queen, and part exploration of some knotty ideas about homeland and identity” (“Paper Dolls”). From real-life story, to TV and filmic presentations, to adaptations for the stage as musical comedy (PETA) or musical drama (Tricycle Theatre), the narrative of migrant *bakla* in Israel takes half, other, and many lives in the broad but variegated forms of art and art-making. In this manner, this chain of migration, so to speak, testifies to the ways in which this narrative may be comprehended, analyzed, and interpreted in varying modes, genres, means, and relations of production. That this play has been to and remains entangled with Israel, Britain, the Philippines, and other parts of the world that have seen it in any of its reincarnations can only signify that the narrative of the lives of the *bakla* has not only become “migratory” but also and more importantly “transnational” in its own fashion, interlinking Filipino, Israeli, and British storytellers and art forms, quite apart from the morphogenesis of the text from actual life story to videographic narrative to musical comedy or musical drama. One sees not only the actual transnational migration of the five *bakla* subjects, but also the endless process of circulation and dissemination that their respective lives assume through varied producers and consumers, as well as markets and audiences, across the globe. In all of these changing but intersecting morphologies, what remains clear is that both Filipino migration or diaspora and the practice of making theater or film involve ensembles of agents and publics on one hand,
and generate movements, affects, actions, and relations across spaces and times on the other.

If only for the “experimental” sources and influences that inform the writing and directing of Care Divas, the whole production bears out a so-called “queer perspective” to the degree that it destabilizes the usual practices of a theater group like PETA. As much as it “troubles the fixity of the various subject positions people occupy,” the play also “recognizes the bodily consequences of people’s habitations and movements between and across those different and sometimes discrepant positions” (Blackwood and Johnson 442). If only for this queering—this traversal of conceptual boundaries of the social and the sexual, of gender and genre, of migration and the musical—there is a sense of triumph at the core of Care Divas’s spectacle. There, too, is a sense of moral empowerment in the play’s figurations of migrant bakla, especially when they are shown not as mere victims held captive by regimes of power but as “survivors, heroes, winners” (Abunda, “Care Divas”) who know how to deftly maneuver their way around everyday life and refuse to be defeated in the precarious environment where they reside. Legarda herself articulates how “the dark, dirty, and dangerous work that will be encountered by a majority of overseas Filipino workers can in the hands of a resilient and loving people be turned into a life filled with camaraderie, adventure, and passion for life.” In being “marvelously gay,” “disarmingly funny,” and “out and out entertaining,” the play foregrounds not the tell-tale signs of the destitution of Filipino overseas workers but the agentive practices of survival that migrant subjects like Care Divas’s bakla characters perform.

This essay closely and critically reads the script, stage play, and other signifying practices of PETA’s acclaimed production, in order to explore how these texts and performances prefigure the Filipino migrant worker as bakla and the phenomenon of labor out-migration from the Philippines as “queer.” Unlike other plays with clear-cut arguments about the masculinization and feminization of migrant work, Care Divas complicates this masculine-feminine binary through its figuration of the overseas Filipino worker as a homosexual, who, like women, culturally and symbolically produce the nation but cannot serve the traditional reproductive roles that women are expected to carry out. Upon entering the diaspora, these bakla are also assumed to fulfill both the normatively biological and social functions of men. If women’s exclusion from democratic participation, according to feminist critic Nira Yural-Davis, serves as the very ground on which men have found their entitlements to citizenship and discourses of the nation (625), what then is implied by the exclusion of homosexuals, particularly the bakla, in the formation of national and diasporic life? The first section of this essay proceeds from this query and rethinks the configuration of the nation and the diaspora vis-à-vis the bakla figure.
The second section will demonstrate what it calls “perverse intimacies,” a neologism that the author employs to signify the persistence of traditional organizations of the intimate (i.e., the family and the homeland) on one hand, and the disruption of these intimacies—alongside their corresponding significations linked to the private sphere, the home, and the nation—through diasporic dislocation on the other. If what is intimate is what is considered familiar within a bound geographic space (Pratt 20; Berlant 281) or within certain filial, friendly, and professional relations (Antwi et al. 1), how then is the category transfigured when the very conditions of its emergence are recontextualized by migratory and dispossessed people? Does the intimate totally disappear in foreign, alienating, and uncertain locations of life and labor? Or does it manifest and insist on itself, and if so, in what form?

Finally, the very moment when the thematic of labor migration is conceived as a musical drama-comedy is the concern of this essay’s concluding section. This attempt to problematize the theatrical form of Care Divas is to intertwine form (or the rendering of the play on stage) and content (or the fundamental vision of the play), in order to sense not only how theater of this kind intervenes in the transfiguration of the social phenomenon of migration into a spectacular performance, but also and more crucially to understand what becomes of a tragic topic when it is infused with unrelenting humor and recast in a cosmopolitan principle professing the dissolution of borders and the homeliness of migrant workers in an expansive globe. What aesthetic and political possibilities does a musical drama-comedy afford Filipino labor migration? If Care Divas’s central discourse on queer diasporas is heavily laden with or enabled by song and dance, pomp and pageantry, poignancy and humor, then what does the play’s artistic preference for the musical mode signify about gender, migrant work, diaspora, and Philippine life, especially at a charged time when the nation-state’s territories are no longer proclaimed as tenable and its discourses of national citizenship seem to be less germane now more than ever?

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE MIGRANT AS BAKLA

If leaving one’s homeland for work abroad is a rite of passage involving elements of gambling (Aguilar 99), then exiting the nation can signal insecurity and peril, while entering foreign countries can mean a loss of control and submission to one’s fate. In this turning of the national to the diasporic, the migrant is agent, witness, victim, and mediator all at once. As agent, one embarks on a diasporic journey that involves one’s skills, body, and whole socio-economic history. As witness, one experiences the duality that being in and out of the nation accords the individual
as witness. As victim, one becomes a sacrificial lamb used by institutions, such as the government and the family, in realizing a comfortable existence. Finally, as mediator, one carries traditions and norms from the homeland, all of which need to be negotiated with the habitus of the current land of settlement, of which the migrant worker eventually becomes a constitutive part.

But in light of Care Divas, one is pressed to ask: what if the migrant worker happens to be bakla? How do the dynamics of being an agent, witness, victim, and mediator change, if at all? In Philippine national life, the signifier bakla belongs to an oftentimes emotional and erotic economy of terms indicating effeminacy, transvestism, and homosexuality. However, unlike its Western semantic counterparts such as “homosexual,” “queer,” and “gay,” the term bakla refers to a particular social dynamic that involves cross-dressing (an inclination for putting on attires and behaviors normatively assigned to women) and sexual desire—that is, a need for a “straight” man (Manalansan, “Speaking of AIDS” 196). As such, the bakla embodies a social script that shows his aspiration to become a woman and perform women’s stereotypical emotions, appearances, and mannerisms. Given this mimicry, he is regarded as alanganin, a Tagalog linguistic marker that indicates a state of being neither this nor that. Therefore, in the pecking order of gender and sexuality, the bakla is perceived as weaker than women, even as he—a pseudo-woman, a “woman trapped in a man’s body,” a “psychosexually inverted” figure (Garcia, “Performativity” 272; Garcia, Philippine Gay 44)—is expected to fulfill social tasks and express maternal emotions of tenderness and nurturance normatively ascribed to females. The similarities and differences between the bakla and women are also made more visible in the context of romantic and sexual relationships, in which the bakla (unlike women who are assumed to have direct links to the desires of “straight” macho men) needs to “slave away at work in order to survive and get what he is told he should ‘desire’” (Manalansan, “Speaking of AIDS” 201).

In Philippine popular imagination, the bakla, too, is portrayed to be a seasoned performer, an expert imitator, and a colorful cross-dresser often seen in carnivals, fiestas, church festivals, beauty parlors, community events, and other cultural performances. He is masterful in mediating local and global life-worlds through performance and art, in transforming beauty and glamor for themselves and others, and in “making things look like other things” (Cannell, “The Power of Appearances” 242). He, too, is an adept artist or entertainer, almost always capable of choreographing artistic influences and affectations into a seamless idiomatic or performative repertoire. In other words, the extraordinary achievement of the bakla largely lies in his capacity to initiate transformations, mediate social affairs, and sustain a world of sadness or destitution through a creative expression mostly steeped in or wrung from what is oftentimes perceived as an endless supply
of energy, artistry, and hilarity. Within this scheme, the bakla is often seen as a tragic and comedic figure. It is also in this ambivalent position that the bakla, as British anthropologist Fennela Cannell writes, is “regarded with a peculiar mixture of acceptance and potential lack of respect or even contempt” (240). While these portrayals have been changing in recent times, especially with the internationalization of sexual identities and the surge of capital that allows some male homosexuals to transform themselves into more professional, mobile, and fashionably Westernized gay subjects (Altman 77; Benedicto 321), the stigma against the bakla as a laughingstock and a lowly creature, as deviant and devil-possessed, still stands strong in various locations and public discourses. Despite the channels through which he has found a voice, however, the bakla remains largely excluded not only because of his gender, sexuality, and economic class but also and more importantly because the very systems and procedures of the nation-state function and thrive through the repressions of supposed excesses of figures like the bakla.

This essay argues that it is within this matrix of control and expulsion that the bakla can also be metaphoric of migrant workers. If Cannell, in her careful ethnographic foray into the lives of the underprivileged population in Bicol, a peninsula located south of the Philippine capital, is inclined to appropriate the bakla’s ambivalence (or how he hovers between “dazzling success” and “obvious failure”) in understanding the position of poor Bicolanos in relation to their elusive access to American culture, this essay wishes to extend this argument along the paradox of self-transformation in the context of the diaspora and migrant work. To elaborate, this essay appropriates and extends how Cannell considers the aspiration of the poor to become like Americans as a momentary fulfillment. According to this consideration, such fulfillment is achieved through the transformation of one’s physical appearance, or as an evasive reality that is only as impossible as the bakla’s desire to change his sex (“The Power of Appearances” 251). In this essay, the appropriation and extension of Cannell alludes to the states of unattainability that characterize the lives of migrant workers. Like the liminal bakla, the status of migrant workers can only be equally uncertain as it is positioned between the homeland and the hostland. Cannell describes the poor in terms of their restricted proximity to power and their mere symbolic relation to an elsewhere that is America. Similarly, migrant workers may also be defined by their ambivalent, undeveloped, or limited connection not only to the homes of their foreign employers in particular or to the countries to which they relocate in general, but more significantly to the national space to which they belong by birth, yet from which they are also distanced due to moral obligations or personal ambitions.

Hence to occupy all three subject-positions—poor, bakla, and migrant—is to be thrice excluded from national or diasporic discourses on the basis of one’s class, gender, and race. The bakla is not only considered an eccentric entity of the
homeland and the hostland, an anomalous male figure with a female heart, a carrier of epidemics and corrupted values, and a fragment of any society’s underclass. In his interpellation in various spheres of public life as caregiver, beautician, laborer, performer, and migrant, the bakla is also constructed and disciplined by heteronormative practices that at once engender his marginality as a member of the “third sex” and convert this same marginal(ized) position into a calculated opportunity. Hence, a poor migrant bakla’s existence is not simply a matter of being socially, geographically, economically, and biologically displaced. Rather, the gauge of his existence is dependent on the sensitive negotiation of abnegation and agency—a task that demands a human being not only to choose between sexual constitutions or physical locations, but also and more crucially to offer his living and laboring body in negotiating untenable sexual dichotomies and social roles.

For the migrant bakla, there is no divide between being the light (ilaw) or the pillar (haligi) of the home. It must also follow, then, that there is no distinction between being at home or abroad. These binaries are conflated for or by the migrant bakla whose mobility and homosexuality are tolerated by society in general in order to prop up existing or emergent social formations like the family, and to fulfill familial and social obligations effectively within or beyond the nation.

Care Divas creates a theatrical upheaval in allowing migrant bakla to lay bare and more crucially deconstruct their relations to the nation and its presuppositions about gender, family, and migration. By focusing on the figure of the migrant bakla, the play not only enables queer practices and subjectivities, but also posits political and theoretical perspectives that question the normalization and naturalization of heterosexuality and heterosexual practices involving marriage, family, and biological reproduction (Manalansan, “Queer Intersections” 225).

The social construction of the migrant bakla can be immediately witnessed in Care Divas’s opening scene, which unfolds the intersections of gender, sexuality, class, and migration through the character of Chelsea, who sings the contradictions of his subject-position as a Filipino bakla caregiver in Israel. In the lines cited below, he expresses a deep necessity for wealth and a fantasy for a straight/macho male lover. This initial expression of his sexual and financial aspirations highlights a pathos that comes from the idea of an unattainable life of abundance. It also shows the bakla’s awareness of the fragility of his lifelong dream of owning private property and expressing his unbridled sexual desire. In this sequence, the frustration of the migrant bakla is doubly coded: first for the belatedness if not sheer hopelessness of his wished-for fulfillment, and second for a life-time he so clearly imagines but can hardly achieve in his daily life:

Noong ako’y dalagita nag-ilusyon na maging milyonarya na
Sumisisid sa salapi, nagmumumog ng pera at
Nakatira sa palasyong kulay pink, oh!
Na may garden na malaki at hardinerong macho’t guwapo
Na naka-pekpek shorts!

May butter na palaman dalawang pisngi ng aking pandesal
Mga pamangkin ko lahat ay nag-aaral at
Hindi umuutang sa sanlaan
Araw-araw merong fiesta at palaging may handaan!

Ngunit may joke ang buhay na hindi nakakatawa, uh-uh!
Gumawa ng punchline at sinira ang eksena ko
Biglang nagising ang katotohanan
Akalain mo pagbangon ko ako’y isang care giver pala
Sa Israel!

[When I was a young lady, I had the illusion of being a millionaire who
Swims in cash, gargles money and
Lives in a pink palace, oh!
Who has a big garden and a hunky and handsome gardener
In mini shorts!

Butter fills my pandesal
All my nephews and nieces go to school and
Do not borrow money from the pawnshop
Every day is a feast and a banquet!

But life has its humorless joke, uh-uh!
Made a punch line and destroyed my scene
In reality
When I woke up I am a care giver
In Israel!] (Translation mine)

In these lines, the migrant bakla regards the nation as a source of malaise and a constant reminder of his insufficient resources. Chelsea expresses the pain through the many discontinuities in the national life he has come to know as a dreamy dalagita, an aspirational milyonarya, and a striving caregiver in Israel. Like the trajectory of his deferred dreams, or the itinerary of his self-proclaimed illusions, the physical travel that Chelsea undertakes from the nation to the diaspora is a painful personal undertaking, because as the migrant bakla himself notes, this “humorless joke” is a gag of destiny, or a joke of fate, which has brought him to a condition of distance and labor in what Asian American studies scholar Catherine
Choy calls an “empire of care” (3). For someone whose notion of self is constructed, even if wishfully, in the felicitous language of beauty, the paradox that outlines Chelsea’s life can only be a source of anguish for the migrant bakla: she is an OFW princess, a member of royalty deeply mired in the grit and grime of domestic chores.

While attending to the needs of his charge Daddy Isaac, Chelsea also sings about the major problems of his social class back in the homeland. The drama that he faces is the contradictory flow of affective or intimate labor from the nation to the land of employment. In either case, it is the migrant bakla who is in charge of the care chain: in the foreign country, he toils by caring for others, while in the homeland, he funds his mother’s pressing needs. But Chelsea is more than simply the breadwinner in this case. Because he is a bakla with no responsibility of raising his own offspring or serving his marital partner, Chelsea becomes the instant if not expected caretaker of ailing, needy, and impaired members of his immediate or nuclear family. He serves as the key financial sponsor to the needs of his relatives in the motherland, even as or especially because he continuously carries forth his duties as an overseas worker. Such is the “drama” that Chelsea embodies, which again comes with a disorientating hurt resulting not so much from the inability to accept a life characterized by lack and duty than from the duality of his burden and the irony of his social achievement:

Ang drama ko sa bayang to’y isang mabuting nanay
Ng isang alagang mas matanda pa sa tatay ko
Mabuting na lamang kami’y magkasundo
S sinusubuan ng hapunan, kapag dumumi’y pinupunasan

Naku naku naku, ano ba’ng nangyari dito?
Inaalagaan ko’y ni hindi ko kadugo
Samantalong ang sarili kong ina
Saklay lamang ang umaakay
Dahil ang kanyang anak may inaakay na iba.
Naku naku naku, ano ba’ng nangyari dito?

[My drama in this country is a good mother
To a ward older than my father
Good thing we are in good terms
Feeding him dinner, cleaning him up after defecation

Naku, naku, naku, what is happening here?
I am taking care of a stranger
While my own mother
Is supported by crutches
Because her child is carrying someone else. 

*Naku, naku, naku, what is happening here?*

Apart from struggling with his class status, the migrant *bakla* also has to contend with heteronormative standards that restrict his very alterity in the social fabric. Although the play shows some of the main characters, particularly Chelsea and Shai, fondly interacting with their tolerant masters, the migrant *bakla* is generally considered a minor class citizen, a stranger, and a deviant of the host community. For the most part, he has to repress his gender identity and sexual desires, especially when confronted by legal and religious strictures of his receiving or host country. Moreover, while *Care Divas*, like the documentary *Paper Dolls*, depicts Israel, particularly the city of Tel Aviv, as relatively lenient to homosexuals, there are still stark instances in the play that portray the migrant *bakla* dealing with discriminatory remarks and measured acts of acceptance. In this particular ordering of the social sphere, as Asian American studies scholar David Eng points out, “to ‘come out’ is precisely and finally never to be ‘out’”—a never-ending process.
of contained avowal, a perpetually deferred state of achievement, an uninhabitable domain” (31).

Shai’s conversation with his boss Moishe, for example, is symptomatic of the biases against the migrant bakla. Moishe’s conservative responses register the tolerant attitude of orthodox Israel toward homosexuality, for they can only go as far as allowing Shai to admire men from afar. Meanwhile, sexual contact is forbidden between people of the same sex, and men who engage in anal sex are considered pathologically ill and therefore must undergo therapy. Moishe also brings up the issue of sexual reproduction, and in so doing, places the migrant bakla in a largely, if not purely, heteronormative paradigm. Biologically male, the bakla has to be reproductive to be considered productive. As a result of this, the goodness of Shai’s loob and labas has to be perpetuated and therefore passed on to an offspring. Moishe’s suggestion thus reveals a prejudice against homosexuality. Given the above, not having children and therefore not being able to contribute reproductively to humanity emasculates the bakla.

Shai: I am a good person, right? I am not abomination. You wouldn’t hire a bad person. Right?
Moishe: Of course, of course. We accept you. We accept you. Of course. We know you are attracted to men. That is okay. But if you act upon it, aaay, to’evah! When you have anal sex with them... to’evah. To’evah. Go to therapy. I know someone...
Shai: Excuse me, I don’t have anal sex with men.
Moishe: (Pause. Appreciatively.) You have a good heart, body, mind. You don’t like to pass that to the future generation?
Shai: I don’t have anal sex with men.
Moishe: You like to have children?
Shai: Maybe.

The above scene between the caregiver and his master is disrupted when the latter transforms into the former’s parent who reminds the bakla about his reproductive capacity and his subjectivity as a commodified migrant body. Despite the fact that his mother is still alive back in the Philippines, Shai regards seeing her occasional presence on stage as a form of ghostly haunting, a form of possession (as in the Filipino word sumasapi) in which she takes over the body of other characters in order to relay caveats that humiliate the poor, migrant bakla to no end. By rendering the living mother as a ghost-like character who appears as the lights are dimmed and eerie music played, Care Divas reenacts the nightmarish oppression that the Filipino family and the Philippine nation may inflict on their migrant members. The mother’s intermittent appearances and repetitive reminders
not only affect Shai emotionally and psychologically, they also underscore the paradox in the supposedly comforting space such as the family or nation (Isaac 14-5). Furthermore, the erratic presence of the mother (a natively rooted figure), who possesses Moishe (a foreigner) or other migrant bakla characters while Shai is conducting his daily chores in Israel, may also be seen as a violent interruption of the nation in the diaspora, one that suggests the discontinuities in the narratives of integration or assimilation that certain scholars on migration repeatedly emphasize. To Asian American studies scholar Allan Punzalan Isaac, for instance, these incidents of possession and haunting not only emphasize “the multiple psychic landscapes the migrant inhabits all at once” (12), but also denote “an ever-present condition whereby other places and other times simultaneously demand the migrant’s attention.” Indeed, the screeching voice and the phantom figure of the still-alive but certainly nightmarish mother signify “the irony of the present (instead of the past) and the living (instead of the dead)” to migrant bakla like Shai, whose economic and emotional affinities to the homeland “pull them in different psychic directions” (14).

These petrifying encounters, eruptions, and disruptions become more alarming when the mother pressures Shai to look for a woman with whom he might possibly procreate. This wish is something the migrant bakla strongly rejects, but it is also something that the parent insists on for Shai’s sake. His not having any children, after all, means an end to the family’s bloodline. However, Shai’s decision not to marry and produce any offspring is also easily exploited by the mother who looks at her childless son as an automatic and endless source of foreign remittance. Shai is told: “Mataas naman ang sweldo mo. Wala ka namang pinag-iipunang anak” [You have a high salary. You do not have a child to save for] (Translation mine). Such an avowal implies that it is fine to be childless and away from the family, as long as the migrant worker earns well and continuously remits money to the homeland. “By this logic,” Isaac asserts, “if one cannot re-create such a community through reproduction, then the condition of belonging is to support the family and kin that can do so. Refusing this duty effectively cancels filial membership” (15). Despite or precisely because of his refusal to adhere to heteronormative expectations, the migrant bakla cannot escape slaving away to meet the demands of three social institutions: the family that almost always awaits the arrival of balikbayan boxes; the nation-state that expects remittances from abroad; and the land of employment that pays and “buys” foreign domestic workers for cheap and docile labor. Shai further sings:

Panahon pa ni kopong-kopong ay gan’to na na ang papel namin
Wala nga ‘kong anak pero ang dami kong pasanin
Ang damdamin ko’y hindi mahalaga
Ang importante sa kanila ay ang pera kong ipinadadala.
Kung makahingi sila akala mo ako ay alkansiya
Butasin niyo ang dibdib ko at sungkiting ang pera
Kung gatasan nila ako ganun na lang
Akala yata ni inay kalabaw ang panganay niya.

Oy vey! Oy vey!
Iyan ang drama ko
Tagabuhat ng baldado kong pamilya

[Since time immemorial our role has always been like this
I don't have children, but I have a lot of burden.
My feelings mean nothing
What's important is the money I send them

They beg as if I am a moneybox
They slice into my chest and take some money
They milk me dry
Maybe my mother presumes her firstborn's a carabao.

Oy vey! Oy vey!
That's my drama
Carrier of the weight of my family] (Translation mine)

As seen in the excerpt above, a huge part of Shai's suffering is attributable to the basic unit of the family, whose overreaching shadow becomes the metonymic figure of the Philippine nation to any Filipino national abroad. In Christ-like fashion of surrender and sacrifice, the migrant bakla becomes a selfless subject who is forced to offer himself rather helplessly to foreign work in strange places out of an extreme necessity to survive. In this light, Shai's condition shows that the relation between the migrant subject and his nation may be intimate and tenuous at the same time. Shai's situation demonstrates how the migrant worker is bound to the duty of giving and giving back as a form of maintaining ties with the family. It also reveals that Shai is tied to the obligation of caring for immediate and extended relatives who may possibly watch over his future aged self in the future. What the homosexual and migrant body of Shai further lays bare is that life back home, the nation, and the family are not automatically remembered with tenderness or fondness from the diaspora. In fact, they, too, may be part of “a past time and place far from the nationalist and diasporic fictions of placidity and purity and which are in fact riven with contradictions” (Gopinath 4). Additionally, biological and
ethnic ties, according to Isaac, can be seen as “seamless and pristine only for capital production and consumption” and “riven with emotional coercion” (15).

In Care Divas’s discourse about the family, the migrant bakla is placed in a limbo to the degree that his itinerancy or diasporic status serves as a corrective measure that seeks to turn his gender difference or social subordination into something productive, especially as far as subsidizing or minimizing national or local debts is concerned. For his newfound “families” in the diaspora, he too is the figure of gendered and racial alterity; furthermore, as this figure, he can only prove himself useful if he stays within the confines of work. Certainly, the migrant bakla’s figure remains persistent in national discourses, even as it constantly experiences a vicious process of “invisibilization.” As a figure that is useful in the continuation of society’s prevailing ideologies and structures, the migrant bakla is deployed to minimize gaps between nationally-rooted realities of destitution and internationally concocted dreams of plenitude and possibility. The migrant bakla goes outside national borders in order to extend the lives of others in the nation, particularly through the material or symbolic capital that his travelling body accumulates in the long run. Thus, the ordeal of the migrant bakla is less a process of degradation than it is a facilitation or maintenance of migrancy and kabulakan that secures the continuation of other people’s lives and ways of making a living.

In this formulation, the trope of the family in Care Divas illustrates what feminist critic Anne McClintock describes as the sanctions of social hierarchy that this basic social unity (i.e., the family) has engendered within a putative organic unity of interests (i.e., the nation) (63). And because the bakla is arguably the lowest in the spectrum of gender and sexuality, as well as one of the most excluded in national and diasporic discourses, a cruel objectification seems to exist in the injunction to slave away abroad in order to keep families in the homeland intact. If, through the social unit of the family, the subordination of woman to man has become naturalized as a fact of contemporary life, the demotion of the migrant bakla, as a multiply-displaced entity, has also come to be one of the lowest points in social formations (such as the family) that purport to be organically composed, linearly progressive, and horizontally sustained. In other words, the family, as McClintock pointedly raises, has become “indispensable for legitimizing exclusion and hierarchy within non-familial (affiliative) social formations such as nationalism, liberal individualism, and imperialism” (64). It is the trope of the family that continuously chases the migrant bakla, not only to remind him of his dues as a son or brother but also to emphasize his belongingness to “an organic essence” or a default origin. On one hand, while the iconography of the family, as imagined in official discourses of the state, gives off the semblance of national unity and may even trigger a nostalgia for the comforts of home, Care Divas, on the contrary, underscores troubled intimacies confronting the migrant bakla, who is
willed to achieve his most personal aspirations of wealth, success, and romance in conjunction with his civic responsibilities to the homeland bereft of prosperity and with his duties to his family left traumatized in its penury.

As evidenced in the lives of Chelsea and Shai, the migrant bakla does not only lead a life of censure and contradiction from the family, the nation, and the diaspora. In addition to those, he is required to work around instances of disenfranchisement that hinder him from transforming his idea of beauty into something that may raise his social status or power. Because he is diminished by financial hardships, minoritized subject-positions, and heterosexual norms, the migrant bakla's ultimate dream to transform his kabaduyan into kabonggahan is perpetually threatened. More often than not, the dream of achieving beauty becomes a dashed process for the migrant bakla. This predicament further exacerbates his marginality and drives home the point that his mastery of the idioms of glamor and beauty cannot be wholly accomplished, that his act of self-conversion cannot be freely fulfilled, and that his physical and social attractiveness cannot be easily claimed.

In this series of deprivations, how then does the migrant bakla, as a national figure in foreign spaces, endure? And through what careful expression of emotion or performative repertoire is this endurance excruciatingly or enjoyably conveyed? If no nation in the world, as McClintock further argues, gives women and men equal contact with the rights and resources of the nation-state, then there has to be a way of accounting for those people who cannot be categorized as either female or male and for the experiences they more agonizingly confront than so-called naturally and socially accepted sexes, genders, and sexualities.

PERVERSE INTIMACIES

This essay’s second section formulates the category “perverse intimacies” to highlight how national life does not easily become co-opted in the diaspora as well as how it continuously manifests itself as both a site and source of possible agency for Filipino nationals beyond the territory of the nation. The “intimate” is retrieved from a vocabulary of privileged interiority and domesticity; it is redefined in the context of the diaspora, so that its significations of the familiar and the familial can exceed their native shores and critically account for and thus be conversant with discourses of displacement. As a conceptual category in psychology and social theory, the intimate is conventionally linked to notions of the personal, the private, and the individual. However, more radical and creative usages of the term re-signify intimacy as a means to access and negotiate power (Cannell, Power and Intimacy 228), as a kind of attachment (Berlant 281), and as an encounter between
or among indentured people (Lowe 17-9). From such points of departure, this essay argues that intimacy may earn another semantic valence within migration discourse, especially when it is deployed to refer to the co-mingling of national subjects who, despite or because of their (re)location outside the nation, remain smoothly or vexingly linked to the nation and its fragments. What this section intends to reconsider are the communality and the public tendency of an intimacy that is contingent on the compression of physical space and the (re)formation of affective ties within and beyond the nation. This broadening of the intimate’s scope from the nation to the diaspora, from the home to the workplace, from the person to the group, takes inspiration from cultural geographer Geraldine Pratt, who explains that “intimacy does not reside solely in the private sphere, and does not work within the same territorial and juridical logics that demarcate privacy. Nor is it purely personal; intimacy takes on specific political, social, and cultural meanings in different contexts” (20).

To talk about intimacies as “perverse” is to insist on the local or the national within particular conditions of living, livelihood, and leisure that work for these intimacies’ effacement but miserably fail. Perversity is not just the replication of habits from back home but also the co-extension and co-constitution of a life lived in dis/re-location. Neither static nor self-transforming, this perversity remains contingent on the environment where it manifests and is mediated. Perverse intimacies, then, are increasingly magnified when perceived from or felt within the diasporic or the global, where they are defamiliarized from their homeliness and are transfigured into something else—for instance as linguistic markers of a renegotiated nation and nationality (translational), or as tropes of alliance for uprooted people (transnational), and even as points of performance for minoritized, estranged sectors of a host country (transformational).

These perverse intimacies may be illustrated through figurations of the bakla characters as created by Care Divas, specifically pertaining to their figurations as migrant workers, caregivers, and performers; through interfaces between Filipino and Israeli life-worlds; through employments of gay language or swardspeak; and through personal transformations of OFWs placed in liminal states of being rooted and transitory. There are intimacies that the nation or national life espouses primarily through “other sense experiences of sound, smell, taste, [and through] the ways bodies meet and touch” (Pratt and Rossner 17). More perverse in rootlessness and homelessness, these intimacies are embodied by the unruly, sexualized and gendered body of migrant subjects, and may distinctly be performed by people through linguistic repertoires in everyday life abroad. In other words, these intimacies do not lose themselves easily but in fact remain enduringly present in their (trans)formations in new contexts of living and laboring. As a matter of fact, they do persist in or even transgress regimes of authority, showing that the
homogenization thesis of globalization is frustrated by the local, intimate, and national, especially when they are renegotiated and exemplified by unruly bodies.

In *Care Divas*, perverse intimacy manifests in the language that the migrant *bakla* employ both in their care work and in their drag shows, where humor and sexual innuendos abound. This essay argues that through the lexemes and syntaxes that bear double meanings about gender identities, personal aspirations, and sexual desires, the play is able to destabilize linguistic and cultural imperialism that reigns over migrant workers, subsumes their mother tongue (i.e., Filipino) under a foreign verbal repertoire, and unsettles their autochthony through a certain worldly force and order. *Care Divas* makes use, in particular, of *swardspeak* or gay language not simply to identify the sexual desires and gender identity of these *bakla*, or to mark the social class to which these migrants belong. In addition to that, there is something more radical in the play's employment of this language than merely indicating some socioeconomic functions or documenting points in people's life histories and the complexity of their cultural translations. If *swardspeak*, as social anthropologist Manalansan remarks, “reflects the politico-historical and cultural experiences of multiply marginalized men,” as well as “highlights . . . complicated struggles in negotiating . . . sense of belonging, or citizenship, and self-identity” (*Global Divas* 46-7), then there can only be something perverse in its employment in foreign lands of temporary (re)settlement. To the degree that it surmounts the erasure of what has been left behind in the nation (i.e., one's connection and responsibilities to family members), as well as carries over what has been materially or symbolically brought with oneself to the diaspora (i.e., Filipino values, customs, and traditions), *swardspeak* keeps in view the vexed transactions of identity and politics. There, too, is something intimate in its register insofar as it alludes to the following: first, a faraway motherland (alongside its semantic baggage of family and community) where the contours of this language have been incipiently learned, and second, a modernity (alongside its semantic baggage of progress and prosperity) where the original construction of this language is remade, as the *bakla* who primarily use it becomes entangled in a migratory life. What these linguistic procedures capture, then, are troubled linkages among migrant nationals, the Philippine nation, and an aspired modern self in a wished-for elsewhere that can never ever be realized completely.

The use of untranslatable Filipino expressions and other linguistic signifiers (i.e., puns, verbal acrobatics, campy wit, and sexually loaded words) may show a sense of willingness on the part of the migrant *bakla* to refrain from totally surrendering their rootedness, even if their physical and social constitutions have already become errant in form. The insistence of the mother tongue, however, does not mean a failure of communicative competence in a foreign context. After all, *swardspeak* here can only be grasped as both a product and a process of its users'
active mediation of a local or cosmopolitan gay argot (Manalansan, “Speaking of AIDS” 207). In its accretion and inflection of foreign words, swardspeak not only shows the skillfulness of its speakers in navigating what could possibly be an alienating or overwhelming linguistic experience abroad. Nor is it limited to simply exposing the porosity of purported regimes of dominant languages (such as English) that fail to co-opt even migrants of color who come from less powerful positions. Ultimately, the inherent slipperiness and unruliness of this argot suggest agentive capacities to destabilize the invisibility of a migrant bakla’s ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality, and to intervene in foreign cultures and languages with a pleasure or fun that frustrates the dominant culture’s systems of meaning. To infuse a migrant bakla’s mother language (i.e., Filipino and swardspeak) with the prevailing language in the diaspora (i.e., English and Hebrew) is to participate in the symbolic production of life-worlds, as well as to refuse the logic of assimilation which encourages or engenders the neat capitulation of migrants and immigrants alike to a New World Order. Manalansan is once again instructive in this regard: “Swardspeak then creates a dissident form of citizenship that refuses incarceration to a specific geographical, cultural, and linguistic space but instead enables speakers to be ‘mobile’ as it were by appropriating cultural and linguistic items and imbuing them with specific local meaning” (Global Divas 61).

As “a vagabond tongue that drifts and moves from one place to another” (Manalansan, Global Divas 60), swardspeak can indicate interfaces between the homeland and the hostland, the native and the modern, the old and the new, and how these seemingly extreme poles are not at all separated but are actually connected by geographical borders, sociocultural ties, and imperatives of survival. It is not that migrant workers automatically lose their bonds with the nation, or abandon the intimacies they keep or that haunt them from home, as they interact with global modernity. Because of linguistic markers like swardspeak, the elision of ethnicity is a project which globalization can only enact, and not without a challenge. Hence, the “perversity” of the Filipino language, or swardspeak in particular, can gesture to a modern(ized) self that has yet to arrive, or a Westernization process that has yet to see completion in the reality of the postcolonial subject that is the migrant bakla. The use of swardspeak also suggests that the national body that is predisposed to migratory movements is not at all effaced or paralyzed by diasporic dispersion. In its unruliness, swardspeak remains elusive and dynamic in both content and structure. It is a dissident linguistic artifact that may very well be commensurate with the identities of the bakla in the diaspora, identities which stand in contradistinction to a truly global identity and which refuse to replicate “a colonial narrative of development and progress that judges all ‘other’ sexual cultures, communities, and practices against a model of Euro-American sexual identity” (Gopinath 11). It is in this
manner that the said language, which is one but not the only way to embody agency, can make the migrant bakla’s roots/rootedness an inextricably obstinate part of his routes in the diaspora.

In the interactions between the caregivers and their respective charges, for example, swardspeak and other cultural signifiers of the Philippines emerge rather consistently. These activate as much as they are activated by bodily senses of the migrant bakla who remember the violence or intimacy of their homes all the more in the face of the unfamiliar, the alienating, and the foreign. Chelsea, for example, shows Daddy Isaac a Philippine parol, which he hangs in his ward’s home and likens to the Star of David. He also teaches the Jew the Philippine folk song “Bahay Kubo,” when the caregiver cannot quite comprehend his ward’s English song. These are instances when intimacies of the homeland perversely surface in conditions of displacement, not as bare residues of the nation where the migrant workers hail from, but as junctures that organize and are organized by the realities of Filipinos abroad. As a matter of fact, while these perverse intimacies may come in disfigured forms within spaces of dispersal, they may still show the adaptability of a migrant’s body or his culture to be at once intimate with and estranged from itself, if only to remain defensible in the face of domination. While they may undergo various instances of censorship in their land of employment, these manifestations of the homeland are crucial components and consequences of embodied activities that assemble Filipino nationals abroad, shape their alignments as well as social identities, and facilitate interaction in everyday diasporic life. Whether or not these are comprehensible to the foreigners they address, these linguistic performances and cultural practices capture the interests and identities of their users, as well as establish “a reality that has at least the potential for affecting whoever happens to be listening to [them]” (Duranti 451). Because they open up as well as become integrated in contested spaces where master narratives of domination or resistance are negotiated, these acts of speaking and performing culture still involve agency.

Another manifestation of what this essay calls perverse intimacies may be found in the migrant bakla’s group performance, particularly their drag show, where collective and individual transformations in appearance, emotion, psyche, and social status take place in the case of every single character in Care Divas. If the insistence of a native language like Filipino is appropriated as swardspeak in order to function as both a memory of home and a signifier of a migrant’s displacement, then performance can serve as an obstinate marker of a bakla’s aspiration to become beautiful in contexts that do not allow his person to be such. In this regard, a drag show or a flamboyant song-and-dance number within the play’s main theater performance may constitute “a self-transformative process” that accords migrant bakla “the possibility of accessing power” in the worlds they mediate but in which they remain minor subjects (Cannell, “The Power of Appearances” 224,
228). Performance of the migrant bakla may be seen as an intimate moment that initiates and is initiated by the shrinking of experience and the binding of humans into a community (Boym 227-8).

Indeed, there is something perverse in the intimacy that performance brings about to the degree that outward linkages are drawn inward, and the diasporic interconnects with the domestic, with the ends of making worlds, telling stories, intensifying affinities, and regulating movements. Drag performance in Care Divas not only underscores the predicaments of the bakla caregivers, but also sheds light on the joy they find in being able to cross-dress and unfurl their identities (“magladlad ng kapa”) to a delighted audience in Israel. Not only does it take them out of the private sphere, but also brings them to “collective frameworks of memory that encapsulate even the most personal of dreams” as well as “disclose some of the pleasures of exile” (Boym 227-8). Whereas theater scholar Sir Anril Pineda Tiatco notes that cross-dressing in various instances in the play is “merely ornamental,” that it “merely serve[s] to strengthen the notion of the bakla as an ultimate mimic and an expert in physical transformation,” and that it fails “to contest hierarchies brought about by their transnational situations” (1496-8), this essay argues that cross-dressing or performing kabaklaan in a conservative country may, in itself, already be considered an initial and crucial step in the renegotiation of identities within the strict coordinates of discipline and power. The bakla’s assertion of himself, albeit in theatrical terms, is not to choreograph quite simply an illusion of beauty into his everyday scripts of becoming. Rather, it is also to lessen his personal shame and to expose himself to others in a form that, although far from perfect, may hopefully earn him respect and admiration. According to Cannell: “Becoming beautiful . . . has historically been seen as a protective process, emphasizing a person’s humanity and right to respect, and conferring a layering of power . . . By becoming beautiful . . . one acquires the armoring of a different cultural repertoire” (Power and Intimacy 225).

At a certain point in Care Divas, Chelsea, Shai, and Kayla take off their working clothes and put on their drag costumes. This instance not only shows a figuration of intimacy among migrant bakla who share similar problems, but also an instantiation of a social formation or communality. The three-workers-turned-performers sing:

*Mabuti na lang at may kaibigan laging matatakbuhan*  
*Ang aming lipstick at ang wig at ang may sequins na gown!*  
*Sa piling nila ay nag-iinit muli*  
*Ang nanlalamig naming kaluluwa!*

*Iwanan sandali ang orinola’s suwero at*  
*Tanganang mahigpit ang matabang mikropono*
Ibubuka'ng bibig, bibirit ng notang nasa tono.

Tulad ng mga ligaw na bulaklak
Ihagis man sa putik
Kami'y namumukkadkad
Sa inyong palakpak at halik...

[Good we have friends to whom we can always turn
Our lipstick and wig and sequined gown!
In their presence, our dispirited souls
Become alive again!]

Leave the chamber pot and the IV fluid
Hold tight the fat microphone
Open your mouth, and belt the note in tune

Like wild flowers
Even if thrown into mud
We blossom
In your applause and kisses] (Translation mine)

Problematizing the bakla's penchant for anything extravagant and beautiful, poet and critic Neil Garcia suggests that “beauty has become the one fascination of these identities, for the simple reason that it is one of the few things that they have been allowed to openly engage in, celebrate and enjoy in macho society” (“Performativity” 279). The obsession with beauty does not only bind the bakla together; additionally, it serves as the main source of their creativity and the reason for their community of practice. In other words, the aspiration to acquire feminine beauty opens up not only an intimate transformation within the bakla themselves; it too becomes a potential source of agency, inasmuch as it is their way of registering their national and gender identities in diasporic spaces. Thus, performing beauty may be seen as a creative way of making do with one’s available resources. It also holds potential as a strategy or tactic that may be used to negotiate with, if not struggle against, influence and power that at once enable and constrict migrant bakla. While subversive energies are not innate in performances, and stylized repertoires concerning beauty do not automatically translate to acts that may change histories of subjugation or regimes of power, there remains redemptive hope in a performance like that of the bakla migrants, especially when it renders discussable “questions of embodiment, of social relations, ideological interpellations, of emotional and political effects” (Diamond qtd. in Langellier 130).
In Care Divas, where pageant-like performance given by the group of migrant bakla may be perceived in light of what performance studies scholar Richard Schechner describes as “gathering-performing-dispersing” (qtd. in Dolan 457), to perform is to assemble, to gather as a multitude, to establish liaisons, and to co-function with others in sympathy. It paves the way for assemblies of people and personalities, and for a plurality of narratives to materialize without eliding specificities. To perform is a process fraught with power relations, contestations, and varying socioeconomic contexts. It produces emotionally charged discourses of migration and identity, all of which may function as tropes of alliance among “global servants of global capitalism” (Parreñas, Servants of Globalization 1). It foregrounds the “crucial role that multiple and overlapping histories [have] in producing habits of practice [and] ways of going on” (McFarlane 209). For the caregivers, their performance is an event of intimacy and communitarian spirit, a locus of convergences and connections, a congregation of local and global subjects who are led to the discovery of new homes and communities in the diaspora.

In Chelsea’s opening scene, where he sings and performs his fantasy of becoming a millionaire and owning a palace, the migrant bakla’s song is particularly indicative (especially in its original Filipino form) of an initial agency that rests on the untranslatability of language and the excess of performance. This essay argues that the migrant bakla are able to do more than just express themselves creatively in order to battle loneliness. In addition to that, their use of swardspeak is significant in that it has meanings which can easily escape a naive audience but tickle the imagination of a sharp and sensitive viewer. In this way, the caregivers-turned-performers also reveal the unruliness of their affective and performative bodies that cannot be easily governed. “Matabang mikropono” (fat microphone), “ibuka ang bibig” (open your mouth), “bibirit ng nota” (belt the note) may seem to simply constitute a musical vocabulary on the surface. However, in Filipino gay parlance, these phrases also generate double meanings pertaining to sexual acts commonly associated with homosexual males. Figuratively, the first phrase connotes a man’s genitalia, while the second and third expressions pertain to oral sex.

Chelsea also uses loaded action words (i.e., “sumisisid” [swimming] and “nagmumumog” [gargling]) as well as phraseologies (i.e., “may garden na malaki” [I have a big garden] and “naka-pekpek shorts” [in mini shorts]) that may come across as vulgar, especially in their eroticized significations of male-to-male copulation (i.e., anal sex for “sumisisid” and fellatio for “nagmumumog”) and female reproductive organs (i.e., the vagina for “pekpek”). What is more essential to point out about these Filipino lexemes and idioms, though, is the inadequacy of their English translations to capture the playful sensuality and the subversive quality of the source language (i.e., swardspeak). Like the gender, sexuality, and ethnicity of the migrant bakla, these Filipino gay linguistic signifiers and their attendant
meanings undergo some processes of erasure or neutralization in translation, but they will resurface quite irrepressibly in the embodied practices of ordinary life. As these double meanings are highlighted alongside other accessorial items of beauty, they make manifest gendered and sexual bodies that are “becoming beautiful” and “becoming sensual”—indeed, a revelatory and agentive process—and which rise above the humdrum of the everyday, including the usual duties of caregiving. Even away from home, the migrant bakla use a language that is referential of the reality they have left behind and the reality they have at the moment. If the migrant bakla are barred from the directness of language in a land that knows nothing of their Filipino linguistic repertoire or that misses the idiom of their birth, they instead use a tactic of indirection to actuate and express their experiences as a people in perennial dislocation. If part of their social construction as migrant bakla is the censorship of speech, they articulate their narrative or find their voice through performances, ungovernable puns and jokes, or untranslatable idiomatic expressions with playful significations. This linguistic performance is an intimate moment of transformation of the bakla-caregivers-cum-drag queens from being dispirited to becoming enlivened souls. It is also a direct affirmation of friendship with fellow nationals whose deep aspiration is to make it big in the diaspora.

Eventually, through the help of Nonah and her Israeli boyfriend Avi, both of whom witness the performance of the migrant bakla, the group is introduced to the owner of Club Mosaic, a comparatively bigger and newer club in Tel Aviv. After long deliberations over their group's new name, the five migrant bakla became known as D’Nightingales. More significantly, the transfer of the group to Club

Figures 4 and 5. D’Nightingales perform before the owner of Club Mosaic, hoping to get their big break. Photo courtesy of PETA Library and Archives.
Mosaic foregrounds a poignant camaraderie among them; they are gathered at a particular conjuncture where they stabilize their connections and decide on their group’s newest name and goals. This scene produces layered discourses of migration, kabaklaan, and Filipino identity. Furthermore, it shows how an event such as a production number can bring to the fore prospects for the migrant bakla. Because of the reinforcement they receive from one another, their dream to make it big as Filipino nationals working and residing abroad intensifies. They regain their self-esteem as workers, and thereby learn to generate new possibilities for themselves. In light of this, they all sing “We have to make it vig in Tel Aviv! We have to make it vig in Tel Aviv!”

During their audition to Club Mosaic, the speaking lines of each performer emphasize ideas of world peace, pulchritude, and harmony; they also hint at the group’s predilection for beauty pageants. As all five bakla performers present themselves as D’Nightingales (the initial name by which their performing group is known), they also articulate their desire to earn money, maximize their creativity, and flaunt their sexual desires and gender identities:

Thalia: Hi, I am Thalia! I believe in caring for others.
Jonee: I am Jonee. It is my belief that we must be united as one.
Chelsea: And I’m Chelsea. I love Israel.
Kayla: Hi, I am Kayla. I want to give peace a chance.
Shai: And I’m Shai, or you can call me Shaina, because it means beautiful for long. Together we are beautiful. Together we are...
All: D’Nightingales!

The convergence of the migrant bakla initiates “a latent possibility of new politics and movements based on desire and becoming” (McFarlane 211). This coming together shows how Care Divas’s characters form a diasporic intimacy that is harnessed through their becomingness and showmanship. In opening another venue where the national and the transnational overlap and inform each other, the performance and the convergence of the migrant bakla emphasize that “the process of reassembling . . . ask[s] us to consider how an alternative world might be assembled” (211-2).

Unfortunately, not all members of D’Nightingales get to perform at Club Mosaic. The owner chooses only Chelsea, Kayla, and Thalia, and excludes Jonee and Shai. This decision almost divides the group. Chelsea, however, tries to appease Jonee and Shai: “Huwag na lang kaya tayo magperform sa club kung di naman pala tayo kukuning lahat?” [Maybe we should no longer perform in the club since all of us won’t be hired anyway?]. (Translation mine) This proposal draws negative reactions
from Thalia and Kayla, who are bent on performing despite what happened. To pacify everyone, Shai says: “Huwag n’yo na akong intindihin. Ganoon talaga yoon di ba? Kanya-kanyang taste lang yan. Congratulations, girls. Makikilala na rin D’Nightingales!” [Do not bother. That’s how it goes, right? It’s a matter of personal taste. Congratulations, girls. Finally, D’Nightingales will be recognized!] (Translation mine). This scene ends with Thalia declaring: “Magiging pride tayo of our nation” [We will become the pride of our nation] (Translation mine).

When the impulse to earn is just too strong to resist, the group finds itself on the brink of dissolution. However, members of D’Nightingales find remedies to hold the group intact. Thalia’s assertion, “Magiging pride tayo of our nation” [We will become the pride of our nation], is fascinatingly sanguine and aggressive at the same time. Magiging indicates a futurity, a becoming, and an unfolding of a vision that each migrant bakla may hold on to. It points to something that is absent in the present but may hopefully materialize in the future. Additionally, it suggests the ability of the migrant bakla to rise above their condition and act upon the forces hindering them from traveling or being mobile. Tayo refers to a cluster, a sense of membership to a group and thus, a sense of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion. To refer to an “us” is to claim a “belongingness.” Tayo becomes a marker of sameness among members and an indicator of difference in contrast to others. Furthermore, it is also an acknowledgment not only of the agency of each member in the group but also of the group itself—its social arrangement, the challenges it encounters, and the forces that perpetually solidify and challenge its making.

“Nation,” meanwhile, suggests both territory and target. While serving as the real or imagined cartography with which the migrant bakla associate themselves, the nation is likewise the very reason they toil so hard in Israel. That national pride can be realized through performance reveals how these migrant bakla find competence and mastery in the drag show they put on. Like the bakla in Bicol that Cannell describes, the characters in Care Divas exhibit élan in performing a song or dance well, in a country that only knows them for the most part as caregivers, illegal workers, and aliens. For the drag queens, performance here may appear as a “small act of triumph; a small act of possession of [their] culture” (Cannell, “The Power of Appearances” 232) which generally has excluded the poor, the migrant, and the bakla. In making it big as performers, the caregivers-turned-drag-queens may demonstrate a deep understanding of the idioms of performance, or an adeptness in changing their physical appearance. In succeeding beyond their tasks as caregivers and in being appreciated as drag performers, they may also show their audience in Israel and their relatives back home “an impossibly audacious act of self-transformation” (232) in which they do not only don outfits of another gender and another culture but also reveal a capacity to breach the limits of their native shores, surpass their social roles as men, and
demonstrate a spectacular talent in overcoming the marginalization that afflicts performers and migrants of their kind in the diaspora. In wanting to make the nation proud by way of making it big in Tel Aviv, the migrant bakla exemplify that attempts at transcendence speak of a sensitive intermediation of the simultaneous rootedness and itinerancy of their linguistic/cultural/performative idiom and body. Therefore, allusions to the nation and performances in the diaspora can signify an empowerment that accommodates the unruliness or perversity of the national subject that is strategically self-fashioned overseas in order to realize a foremost ambition amidst adversity: the continuation of the self.

The intimacy among members in performance is not free from conflicts, however. Upon Kayla’s arrest for being an illegal worker, the remaining members of D’Nightingales have to adjust to this organizational change. Apart from being exoticized as Asians who need to wear Vietnam's national costume for additional novelty, the inclusion of Nonah, a female friend, as the replacement of Kayla, the lead performer, stimulates tense bickering among the performing bakla. The situation worsens when after the performance, Club Mosaic’s owner shoves them to the entrance area and asks them to kowtow to every customer entering the front door. When the music subsides, they take off their costumes and continue

Figure 6. Some of the drag performers with their female friend, Nonah, wearing a traditional Vietnamese costume at Club Mosaic. Photo courtesy of PETA Library and Archives.
to squabble with one another. Whereas Thalia and Chelsea feel happy about their performance, Shai takes issue with the owner’s sudden change of plans, particularly the relegation of the performing bakla to being mere supporting acts to Nonah. With Kayla’s arrest and Nonah’s sudden inclusion in the group, the members realize the minimal control they have over their performances, their group, and their fates in Israel.

The sense of dispossession is further aggravated when Chelsea meets and falls in love with the Palestinian Daniel, who masquerades himself as Faraj. The migrant bakla chooses to coddle the illegal worker for a day in the house of Daddy Isaac, whose eventual death has also rendered Chelsea technically undocumented. Soon after, the lover convinces his fellow caregivers to accommodate his beloved in their small flat—a request Shai, Jonee, and Thalia acceded to with reservations. Largely due to cultural differences, tension in the household erupts between the Palestinian and the Filipinos. While all of these are happening, the Intifada intensifies in the background.

Love certainly becomes Chelsea’s major flaw, which inevitably leads him to his gruesome death in a bomb explosion that happens during a chase between the police and Daniel/Faraj. This intense scene, rendered on stage with red lights, smoke effects, and tense music to connote the bloody end of the Filipino laborer’s life, highlights not only the downfall of the migrant bakla Chelsea but also and more sharply the vulnerability of undocumented migrants to the violence of the receiving nation-state. Chelsea and Faraj’s tension-filled encounter with Israeli authorities simultaneously happens with the remaining caregivers singing, in the background, of their friend’s woeful narrative of love and loss.

Hindi mo naman matatawag na martir
Wala naman siyang dugong bayani
Hindi siya nilasing ng puso siya
Pinili niyang maging tanga
Pinili niyang maging tanga
Sa ngalan ng pag-ibig pinili niyang maging tanga.

Kung tutuusing siya ang pinakamatalino
Naging sabaw ang utak nang nahalikan
Hindi siya tinangay ng puso niya
Pinili niya maging tanga
Pinili niyang maging tanga
Sa ngalan ng pag-ibig pinili niya na maging tanga.

[You cannot call him a martyr]
He did not have the blood of a hero
He was not intoxicated with his heart’s desire
He chose to be a fool
He chose to be a fool
In the name of love he chose to be a fool.

In fact he was the most intelligent
He turned mindless when kissed
His heart did not take him away
He chose to be a fool
He chose to be a fool
In the name of love he chose to be a fool] (Translation mine)

**Figures 7 and 8.** Some scenes between Chelsea and Faraj that happen before the gruesome death of the former and the eventual capture of the latter. Photo courtesy of PETA Library and Archives.

**THE MUSICAL OF MIGRATION**

In the play’s penultimate scene, set a year after Chelsea’s death, the audience hears only voices of the remaining migrant bakla who fondly celebrate their friend’s life and his teachings about toiling overseas. In a prolonged conversation
that reveals Shai and Jonee to be in New York, Kayla in Manila, and Thalia in Israel, the stage is filled with a festive mood and nostalgic banter. The group of bakla plan to synchronize their discrepant timezones to honor Chelsea as the epitome of Filipino migrant labor, whose virtues are worthy of emulation. Soon after this verbal exchange, a spotlight is shone on a migrant bakla at the center of Care Divas's almost bare stage, a scene initiating a pageant-like production number that is in bold contrast with the harrowing episode of danger and death that occurred earlier. After a relay of strict evictions from Israel's nation-state (as in the cases of Daniel/Faraj and Kayla) and a violent bombing resulting in death (as in the case of Chelsea), Care Divas concludes with a song and dance number, whereby the migrant workers stage a performance which calls for the acceptance of differences and which turns their homelessness into a sense of belongingness to the world that they may, sooner or later, conquer.

Shai:  Ito talaga! Parang di ka natuto sa kanya. Ayaw na ayaw pa naman niya pag sinasabi mo’ng “Zeh mah sheyesh.” Anong sabi niya sa yo?

Jonee: “Hindi uso ang ‘Hanggang dito lang tayo.”

Shai: Korek! Di ba sabi niya lagi, “weno ngayon…?”


Shai: O'nga. Malaki ata kita natin dito.

Thalia: Magaling ata tayo.


Thalia: Malambing tayo.

Shai: Madaling matuto.

Jonee: At maganda tayo.

Shai: May bago na tayong pangalan.

Jonee: Alam ko, alam ko...Care Givahs!

Shai: O kaya ito: Ladies and gentlemen, the Care Divas!

(Magpapalakpakan sila. Magbabago uli ang ilaw at magiging lugar ni Avi ito. Pupuwesto na sila.)


Avi: L’chaim! (To life!)

Jonee: Ladies and gentlemen, the Care Divas!

(Isang bonggang-bonggang production number ang mangyayari sa gawi nina Shai, Thalia, Jonee at Nonah. Papasok si Kayla. Para bang nasa
“Oh really! As if you did not learn anything from him. He didn’t like it when you would say “Zeh mah sheyesh.” What did he tell you?

Jonée: “It’s not fashionable to say ‘That’s all we can do.’”

Shai: Correct! Didn’t she always say, “So what?”

Thalia: “So what if we clean up groins and butts? So what if we’re only caregivers. We are caregivers, that’s it.”

Shai: Yes. We earn big here.

Thalia: We are excellent.

Jonée: They should admit it. They hire us because they cannot do what we do.

Thalia: We’re affectionate.

Shai: We’re fast learners.

Jonée: And we’re beautiful.

Shai: We have a new name.

Jonée: I know, I know... Care Givahs!

Shai: Or this: Ladies and gentlemen, the Care Divas!

(All of them will clap. Lights will change and the stage will be Avi’s bar. They will position themselves.)

Shai: Chelsea, this is not goodbye. We know you’re still with us. Thank you for everything. Thank you for not depriving your real self to us. This is for you, wherever you are. This is for all of us, wherever we go from now on.

Avi: L’chaim! (To life!)

Jonée: Ladies and gentlemen, the Care Divas!

(One big production number will happen, with Shai, Thalia, Jonée and Nonah taking the lead. Kayla enters. They seem to belong to one place, but they really belong to different worlds. The borders or divisions between them will be removed. Eventually, Chelsea will join them, and so will Isaac, whom Chelsea will pull out from the audience, happily.)

(Please note mine)
and more on the redemptive qualities—such as skillfulness, resiliency, inner beauty, determination, and compassion—that they share with one another. In the following lines, from the finale song “Saan Ka Man Dalhin” [Wherever You Are Brought], they collectively assert their dreams of being accepted and of inhabiting a world that recognizes what is universally conceived as “human.”

Harang!
Ikaw ba’ng naglagay ng harang?
Tingin mo sa sarili mo ay parang
Ikaw lang ang dapat mabudburan ng ligaya
Sino ka ba?

Balang araw ay magigiba ang bakod mo
At makakapasok ang tulad kong
May karaniwang pangarap
Na gaya rin ninyo.

Saan ka man dalhin ng ‘yong mga paa
Kung saan pa man sumayad ang ‘yong kapa
Saan pa mang lupalop yon
Huwag kalimutan ang iyong ganda

Huwag ipagdamot ang kabutihan ng pusong kumikirot
Sabihin man nilang ika’y katuwa-tuwa lang
Mga manikang walang pangalan.

[Fences!
Did you put up these fences?
You see yourself as if
You’re the only one deserving of happiness
Who are you, anyway?

Sooner or later your fences will collapse
And someone like me can enter
I also have dreams
Just like you

Wherever your feet take you
Wherever your cape lands
Wherever that place is
Do not forget that you are beautiful
Do not refuse to share the kindness of your aching heart
Even if they say you’re only as funny
As dolls with no names] (Translation mine)

This essay argues that the play’s ending, which calls for acceptance in a borderless world, signifies something important about the form of musical theater, the phenomenon of labor migration, and the so-called demise of the nation. There is something curiously pleasurable in the play’s concluding pageantry that comes after dark incidents of capture, deportation, bombing, and death. Such an ending reinforces the prevalence of good over evil, and the advent of the best of times in a season of sorrow and duress. This is musical theater as guilty pleasure at its best, or as the ultimate balm of the bourgeois theatergoer who does not want to leave the theater venue disturbed about the realities of social life. If musical theater is the form that requires the most egregious excess of expenditure, even as it is also known for raking in the most revenue to theater outfits (Wolf 52), then Care Divas can only secure its profitability and marketability with an ending that not so much injures the sensibilities of its audience or dwells on the wounds of others, but tactically transforms them into something simultaneously inspirational and aspirational. Musical theater conventions dictate this final act to be so, and this is what PETA’s phenomenal production channels accordingly.

Furthermore, Care Divas’s call for a world without borders, which theater scholars like Tiatco and Isaac consider as part of PETA’s current inclination for a cosmopolitan ethic of openness to otherness or difference, is indicative not only of the changing configurations of migration and citizenship in the country and in the world but also of the play’s overall mode and form. This cosmopolitanism, and by extension its implicit post-nationalism, carries a promising picture of migrant workers or Filipino nationals freely moving around the world without the strain of social class. This brand of worldly citizenship, a disposition of being at home in the world, is commonly espoused by some academic quarters from the First World, which PETA tries to appropriate in the Philippines and for its national citizens via Care Divas. In its cosmopolitan outlook, the play proffers a hopeful rendition of humanity as well as a more humane understanding of what it is like to inhabit a purported shrinking world where the dictum of interconnectedness is equally shared by everyone.

One may also detect a cosmopolitan or a transnational strain in the way the play converses with other art forms such as film and video-documentary and with other theatrical modes like realism and melodrama from such countries as Israel and London. From Israel to London to Manila, Care Divas travels and transfigures itself as a piece of commercial theater that interweaves certain film and videography
productions into a web of artistic relations. In line with this, it is worth noting that the introduction of this essay mentions how PETA’s play adapts Heymann’s *Paper Dolls* as well as constructs dialogues with the adaptation of the Israeli documentary by London playwright Philip Himberg. Additionally, it should be noted that both the ending of *Paper Dolls* and *Care Divas* depict the endurance of the migrant self to circumvent threats of marginalization, see beyond the risks of dislocation, and carry on with life despite hardships in both the nation and the diaspora.

Moreover, *Care Divas* may be appreciated for adding political and ideological nuance to a theater tradition that almost always foregrounds the plight of proletarians or that directly critiques the sheer neglect of the Philippine nation-state toward its citizenry. Because Magtoto’s play calls for the removal of all kinds of physical and symbolic borders and espouses the unrestricted entrance of migrant subjects into this open space, repatriation or recommitment to the nation is obviously neither the main trajectory nor principal message of *Care Divas*. After all, there is little hint at a movement back to the homeland in the play’s ending, since the ideological underpinning of Magtoto’s piece seems to be one of *palabas*. It is an outward motion which sets aside an individual’s rootedness in his nation, and as such it puts its hopes on the universality of a person’s confident status of being a man in/of the world. Thus considered, the stage production may be seen as a work about migrant workers who make themselves responsible for their itinerancy, and all for the better, because with beauty and glamor, boldness of mind and strength of spirit, they can and will outwit the odds and carry on resiliently.

The confidence sensed in the final act of *Care Divas*, where the migrant *bakla* finally transform their *kabaduyan* into *kabonggahan*, may have well contributed to the play’s resounding success. It is to both capitalize on the Filipino people’s penchant for pageantry conventionally associated with the *bakla*, as well as resonate Philippine society’s fondness for a certain kind of *aliwan* or entertainment: one that affirms shared values and beliefs, reflects the overall psychic life of the Filipino people within or beyond the nation, and props up the collective aspirations of a suffering and surviving country. When situated in a period of booming tourism industries, much vaunted virtual connectivities, and teeming fantasies of upward mobility—all of which recast the procedure of migration as leisure and mileage and not purely labor—the play’s light-filled ending endows a sense of pleasurable optimism to those ensnared in the vicious cycles of lack, exclusion, and violence.

Aesthetically, *Care Divas* subscribes to formulas of Western musicals and the Philippine *bodabil* (Fernandez 318-9), not only in its highly entertaining stage movement, catchy songs, lively dialogue, and almost excessive dazzle, but also in its plotline of romance, sheer populism, and commercial scale. Because of the play’s mixed humor, musicality, and social commentary, some parts of the play
are even viewed in relation to the “slapstick, comedy-bar-routines [Filipinos] have
grown accustomed to” in the country (Del Rosario, “Care Divas”). Whereas its form
may be brimming with American influences, particularly those from Hollywood
and Broadway musicals, the music and spectacle of Care Divas, like those of the
Philippine bodabil, are packed with musical trends of their time and spring from
the deep well of popular cultural signifiers (i.e., jokes, puns, and allusions) known
to local viewers. The play further employs drama and comedy in ways that touch
the human heart with relays of penetrating pathos and in-your-face laughter. Kara
Ortiga, a newspaper reviewer, exalts the play in this manner: “Finally, here is
an originally written play with our own humor, vernacular and culture injected
into the script. These should be the types of plays shown in our national theaters
and promoted for students to see, as, above all the sexual innuendo, it carries
substantial educational value” (“Doting caregivers”). Like most mainstream musical
productions, whether in film or in theater, PETA’s hit “offers a vision of musical
performance originating in the folk, generating love and a cooperative spirit which
includes everyone in its grasp and which can conquer all obstacles” (Feuer 320-1).
There is contagious energy in the closing of the play, especially when the migrant
bakla give their most outstanding production number while donning their glitzy
costumes and colorful makeup, as well as gracefully dancing and singing to the
upbeat music that Vincent de Jesus composed.

However, even as Care Divas relies on some formal traits of musical theater, it
also revises, to a certain extent, the mode’s traditional “middlebrow position,” “overt
commercial aspiration,” and heterosexual orientations (Wolf 51-2). This deviation
easily makes PETA’s production a project that queers normative stage musicals and
contributes to national and transnational discourses of migration. First, the strain
of romance between Chelsea and Faraj/Daniel is much too premature, implicit,
and homosexual for it to be at par with the usual heterosexual love angles of
traditional musical plays. Given that the Filipino migrant bakla’s relationship with
the undocumented Palestinian refuses “the easy aesthetic closure that national
heroism or normative love pairings offer” (Isaac 20), it cannot be considered to
occupy the same level as conventional romances in drama, television, and theater,
where male and female lead characters demonstrate and fulfill their love for each
other. Therefore, Care Divas’s subplot of a forbidden and aborted romance, which
grimly ends with Chelsea’s death and Daniel/Faraj’s arrest, “brings to bear the
history and the social and temporal precarity of both parties of the love team that
goes beyond nation and homo- or heteronormative love stories” (Isaac 20).

Second, while other musical plays, especially those so-called “megamusicals”
produced in Broadway, are unabashedly mainstream and multibillion enterprises,
Care Divas is produced by a premier theater institution known for its nationalist
contributions and commitments to the Philippine Left (Samson et al. 17-28;
Fajardo 179-181; Pambid 197). That there is a convergence between PETA and the musical—“the most popular form of theatre in the world” and a “jet-setting genre” (Savran, “Trafficking in Transnational” 318)—is not really surprising in Philippine theater history. Despite PETA’s long-standing affiliations with and contributions to nationalist programs and principles, this essay finds little to no surprise at how the theater company, especially at this juncture in the new millennium that sees a sea-change in contemporary notions of national life, appropriates what cultural scholar David Savran calls a Western form, a truly transnational entertainment, and “the most U.S. American form of theatre [that] is becoming increasingly stateless” (318): the musical. An institutional pivot such as Care Divas may be seen as a manifestation and consequence of PETA’s recalibration of its rhetoric, aesthetics, and politics depending on the reconfigured sociopolitical dispensations in the country, as well as the changing demands of a technologically savvy, globally exposed theater audience in the Philippines. The play may have utilized the musical form—one in which the most successful theater productions of the Western world are rendered—to broaden PETA’s market base and to make it more inclusive of patrons and followers who prefer foreign spectacles than local ones. With its deviation from the strictly nationalist ideology that PETA observed and perpetuated in the past, as well as its emphatic enunciation of a diasporic, transnational, global, and cosmopolitan concern such as labor migration, Care Divas may have also employed the musical theater’s innately migratory and spectacular form to aptly stage the equally itinerant and colorful lives of the migrant bakla.

The ideologies of Care Divas about migration, citizenship, and labor are nowhere more manifest than in the final performance of the migrant bakla, where discourses of beauty and glamor are entwined with discourses of global success. If this play fulfills its conclusion through a litany of values establishing the Filipino people’s viability as a global labor army, as well as through a performance emphasizing the freedom of humans from the shackles of social discrimination, then it is also crucial to take a step back in gauging the very ideological paradigms from which this finale (legitimizes a utopic notion of equality) seems to have sprung. This essay argues that making an inventory of much glorified Filipino traits (i.e., skillfulness, creativity, resourcefulness, warmth, and excellence) is a tricky undertaking precisely because it shares with the Philippine state, in particular, a rhetoric of empowerment (Guevarra 525), which fetishizes the status of migrant workers as modern-day heroes or paragons of a new brand of Filipino citizenship in order to legitimize the departures or to obscure the socioeconomic factors contributing to the marginalization of Filipino nationals. That the play overly banks on beauty and glamor suggests Care Divas’s tendency not only to romanticize the dreariness of migrant labor but also to operate on a capitalist logic that “requires not a rejection but an incorporation of tradition, ‘marching out into the world on the strength of one’s unique culture and traditional values’” (Gi-Wook Shin qtd. in Savran,
“Trafficking in Transnationalism” 325). While zooming in on these traits may have been decided on by the play’s playwright or director in good artistic faith—to uplift spirits, disengage the audience from pain, elevate the whole production from the defiles of misery”—PETA’s phenomenal hit cannot, however, escape the ramifications of its essentializing enunciations that reduce the plight of migrant workers into a checklist of ethical characteristics and further naturalize the order of things for Third World subjects in the diaspora. As Gopinath explains, cultural productions that “do not address the imbrication of diaspora with transnational capitalism shore up the dominance of the latter by making its mechanisms invisible” (8).

This, then, raises the question: what could the resurfacing of Chelsea and Kayla in the end possibly suggest? Could this reappearance be seen as an instance of “hauntology,” in which the present is unrelentingly chased by the past and the future remains uncertain? While the reunion of the labor migrants in the last scene of Care Divas may suggest a conviviality among the bakla caregivers, it also seems to trivialize Chelsea’s violent death, Kayla’s ill-fated deportation, and other adversarial circumstances that the migrant community undergoes in Israel. Resurfacing these two characters and the role they take on in the play’s final merrymaking might present a bright ending for migrant workers; however, it may also blunt the edges of a radical critique against oppressive conditions of labor migration. The uplifting interconnectedness painted by the play’s concluding moments notwithstanding, the play remains ideologically problematic in its depiction of migrant struggles, especially because it has the tendency of eliding the conflicts and stratifications in the lives of migrant laborers. In this sense, the convivial assemblage that these migrants form out of their displacements can potentially perpetuate an image of a global Filipino whose skills are neither challenged by anyone: not by foreigners, and not even by socioeconomic inequalities. Such a global Filipino has a consciousness that is defined by a liberal humanist standpoint, whereby individual autonomy prevails over a heteronormative and class-divided society.

Care Divas celebrates the bakla caregivers for their meaningful experiences and their enriching friendships amongst themselves and with others in a foreign land. From caregivers to care divas, from migrant nationals to cosmopolites—these transformations are achieved in a quirky culmination that features an extravagant group of bakla in their white sequined gowns, falsies, boa feathers, make up, and big hair. Curvaceous in their tight-fitting clothes and high heels, the bakla sing and dance about recognition and persistence, kindness and triumph of the human spirit. All of these happen as laser lights fill the stage and touching music reaches everyone’s ears. All in all, the entire scene offers the audience an assuring gift of hope. Indeed, there is a cosmopolitan strain in a triumphal conclusion that wishes to reclaim the free spaces of a world that knows no boundaries and accommodates
various ways of interfaces and co-habitations among people. It is a hopeful image and a promising objective, which is absolutely aligned with musical theater's devotion “to producing pleasure, inspiring spectators to tap their feet, sing along, or otherwise be carried away” (Savran, “Toward a Historiography” 216). In addition, this shift in sensorial registers of shock, mourning, and celebration may enact “the very emotional agility demanded of migrant characters on stage” (Isaac 21). This change in mood and mode also reframes existing narrative tropes and static dramatic endings in order to accommodate “the generative, even multiplicative, potential of emotionalism amid precarity” (Isaac 9). Isaac argues: “[T]his affective agility answers the demands of the continual suturing of the multiple pressures of national histories and spaces that are not one’s own or that one has left” (10).

This impulse in Magtoto’s play to breach national borders may indeed be examined in relation to the sociohistorical developments in the nation’s and the theater company’s constitution through the years. If PETA’s early vision for a national theater was defined by the changing economic, political, social, and cultural realities of the 1970s and the 1980s (Fajardo 180), then what possible changes have probably taken place in PETA’s artistic principles, projects, and overall vision over the past decades, particularly since the Philippine nation-state has been strongly influenced by neoliberal, global, and transnational logics? If PETA’s melodramas produced during the martial law period, for example, were used by their producers as “potent vehicles for political expression” (Fajardo 180), then to what ends are more recent musicals like Care Divas employed? If “both artists and percipients develop a particular artistic taste and evolve a peculiar aesthetic sense fashioned by the conditions of their environment” (Fajardo 193), then what might plays like Care Divas suggest about the conditions of culture and society from which they are wrought?

This essay argues that the ideological and aesthetic trajectory of Care Divas may indicate that the Philippine nation’s mood and metaphor for labor migration have palpably changed over the years. In Care Divas, the narrative and spectacle of the Filipino diaspora have become triumphant in outlook and pragmatic in politics. If PETA’s pre-millennium plays, particularly those mounted when the whole country was under dictatorial duress, were largely meant to develop among Filipinos a specific nationalist ideology, agitate spectators against authoritarian rule, and mobilize audiences in new democratic spaces (Vera 105-6), stage productions in the new millennium are distinct for their entertainment and commercial values that seek to uplift the human spirit. If playwrights and directors in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s were not hesitant to categorize their works as “a medium of self-expression” and “a medium of advocacy” (105-6), or to surrender themselves to the intents and purposes of underground or subversive groups that aimed for “a cultural revolution” through art and theater (105-6), artists, playwrights, and
directors of plays in the first decade of the 2000s do not demonstrate the same bold and consolidated commitment against the government, the same alliance with progressive and activist groups, and the same radical impetus to change or subvert hegemonic Philippine cultural, political, and social institutions. Perhaps, the new millennium demands less of the formulaic and propagandistic nationalist call that was usually heard in previous PETA plays. If, on one hand, pre-millennium plays emphasized the importance of ethnic affinity and the struggle to forge a national community within a specific territory, plays like Care Divas, on the other, seek to highlight “cosmopolitan” Filipino overseas nationals who may not necessarily abandon their homeland but at the same time would no longer feel so troubled by their distance or expulsion from it.

Could this shift in the plays on labor migration be considered “a reflection of a brewing aesthetic crisis happening within the ranks of cultural workers all over the country” (Vera 107)? Could this change in dramatic and theatrical sense, style, and sensibility be taken as a confirmation “that a dogmatic rendition of the main objective of popularizing the revolution has stunted and stultified the numerous versions of plays performed by avid, young revolutionary cultural workers” (107)? Could this persistent preference for musicals, alongside the institutional inclination to see labor migration from a transnational or global standpoint, be at once a manifestation and an outcome of the incipient denationalization of the Philippines and its continuing Americanization or Westernization? Or could this shift in the scripting and staging of the labor diaspora signify a recognition of the Filipino people’s growing willingness to be dissociated from a grounded national community, to trot the globe, and to embrace their subject-positions as professionals or proletariats in the affairs of families, companies, and communities across the world? In other words, how much of this shift in theater production values can be linked to a larger sociopolitical phenomenon like globalization, which allows not only the free-flow of capital and people, but also the liberal movement of art commodities and cultural practices from one country to another?

Produced at a time when the nation-state has been losing its stronghold over migrant workers, Magtoto’s play seems to recognize that Filipino nationals are increasingly becoming exposed to the world and gradually earning what anthropologist Aihwa Ong calls “flexible citizenships” (770). It also seems to acknowledge that the idea of rootedness in the Philippine nation, the prospect of homecoming, and the ideology of nationalism are weakened by perennial and circular displacements. Care Divas does not only account for the Philippine population’s global and diasporic participation in the world but also underscores virtual or real connections within and across cultures. In this regard, the play foregoes neither PETA’s orientation as a national or people’s theater, nor its nationalist strains which were most prominent in the 1970s up until the 1990s. Instead, with the stiff
competition among theater companies in the country today, the changing viewing preferences of theatergoers, the more technologically-advanced and commercially-driven mechanisms (like ticket-selling) of contemporary theatergoing, as well as the morphing needs of PETA at present (especially in relation to the maintenance of its own theater venue in Quezon City), Care Divas may be a symptom as well as an effect of PETA’s efforts to modify its erstwhile militant leanings and its much foregrounded “aesthetics of poverty” in order to widen its target audience, situate itself in an ever-evolving capitalist market, and keep itself current and relevant vis-à-vis issues concerning survival confronting the nation and its citizens.

With the onslaught of capital-driven industries, the surplus of spectacular images from various media, and the pressing demands of a continuously globalizing notion of theater in the Philippines, PETA contends with its nationalist roots on one hand and the continuously transnational, global, and neoliberal Philippine present on the other. However, PETA’s negotiation of its political ideologies and market practices yield problematic outcomes that are evident in and exemplified by plays like Care Divas that seek to inspire migrant subjects by highlighting their capacities to act upon their fates in the nation and elsewhere but, in the same breath, mollify inhuman forms of labor migration through sedating spectacles and an uncritical rhetoric of empowerment. The emphasis that PETA places on the migrant bakla’s agency, as well as the “queering away” of their gender, race, and class, may easily fall prey to tendencies that saturate capacities of individuals to reflect upon and resist their social realities but at the same time turn a blind eye on structural forces of oppression.

If PETA invokes all its hopes for humanity at the cost of the contending geopolitical forces highlighting why inequality in this uneven globalizing world transpires most visibly in the lives of migrant subjects or diasporic nationals, then stage productions like Care Divas will eventually fall short in their potential of redeeming workers of the world from their misery. In the case of Magtoto’s play, efforts to celebrate equality, dissolve forms of barriers and hierarchies, and bank on beauty as access to a world without difference tend to romanticize the perilous nature of both the bakla and his migrant community. Could it be wishful thinking that sustains the idea that the powerless can simply reverse their position and move on from systems of oppression? Or could this emphasis on a borderless world and the unbridled success of the Other/the marginalized/the Third Worlder be considered an act of self-cultivation that manages a person’s vulnerabilities in order to pass off as viable within capitalist ideals of economic competitiveness and entrepreneurship? As the production renders the plight of migrant workers as more attractive, as well as obfuscates the critically serious nature of human labor, one can only sense a fetishism of people and feelings, as well as an illusion that regards agency as sufficient to see oneself through until the very end. The strobe
lights, the lively choreography, the disco ball hanging from the ceiling, the rising music filling up the theater hall, the rhetorical call for acceptance, and the campy performance of it all serve as a sleight of hand that licenses viewers to congratulate themselves for making perfect sense of the fear and pleasure they may find in the spectacles of danger, deportation, discrimination, and death in *Care Divas*.

So even if this play may be considered a landmark in Philippine theater for its cosmopolitan and post-national approach to labor migration, its concentration on the *bakla* as caregiver, and imbrication of homosexuality and migrant work, it still has to be made accountable for this ending that, while proffering a marvelous watch on PETA’s stage, mystifies the burden of displacement through the notion of a transcendent self whose “spontaneous emergence [comes] out of a joyous and responsive attitude toward life” (Feuer 315). Hence, the commendable efforts of *Care Divas* to expose what goes behind the lives of migrant *bakla*, to reduce the diaspora’s alluring First World aura, and to illustrate the agentive capacities of Filipino nationals in antagonistic circumstances abroad become re-mythicized as the whole musical extravaganza turns into a joyous tale of camaraderie and reintegration whose truth-effects “emphasize the unity-giving function of the musical” (319).

It is no coincidence, therefore, that the migrant *bakla* remain interlinked and bound by friendship until the very end of the musical, despite their disparate locations in New York, Manila, and Israel. It is also no accident that *Care Divas*, as performed in Manila, the Philippine capital, is also related in terms of production to that in Israel (because of *Paper Dolls*) and to that in London (because of Tricycle Theatre). Could these institutional and narratological linkages be an affirmation of theater’s form that cuts across cultures and countries, or that accumulates into its fold various sources and purchases, in order to become itself? Could they be a proposition about the Filipino people’s ineffaceable entanglement in geopolitical circuits and sociohistorical affairs of the world? Could they indicate the “partial citizenship” that is believed to characterize migrant workers from the Philippines, who build transnational communities that transcend the nation-state and at the same time maintain their members’ nationalist-oriented affiliations with those similarly dislocated from their motherland (Parreñas, “Transgressing the Nation-State” 1142-3)? Or finally, could they foreground the incipient dissolution of Philippine national borders, whose people are caught in cycles of homecoming and leave-taking, or situated in between their entitlements to nativity and their aspirations for globality?

If the removal of borders and the acceptance of diversity are two of the main calls for action in *Care Divas*, then there is something consistent in how these are exemplified through PETA’s tie-up in 2012 with Repertory Philippines, a theater
institution founded in 1967 that offers “yearly seasons of popular foreign plays, mostly from Broadway and London’s West End” and “trains actors in the modes of the Western theatre” (Fernandez 322). Quite remarkably, this joint venture indicates an adjustment of territories, a recognition of sameness amidst alterities, as well as a convergence of commercial principles and social advocacies. Whereas some pundits find this collaboration between the two theater giants uncanny, especially because of their distinct aesthetic and ideological alignments, others find the arrangement a strategic feat.  

There is something telling about how, in calling for a borderless world, these institutions with national and Western orientations have merged, traded artistic teams and techniques, and shared audiences in a mainstream market that, while based locally, continuously maintains its ties with and draws inspiration from theater entities outside the Philippines. Care Divas enables and is enabled by these partnerships, traversals, and mergers. This mutual agreement between PETA and Repertory Philippines to restage Care Divas in a bigger and more mainstream venue in Makati, the country’s premier business district, underscores “the ever-expanding popular success and appeal of the show and the existence of migration in the imagination and lives of many Filipinos” (Isaac 6).

Through its figurations of migrant bakla, its use of queer language and performance, and its reliance on and revision of the conventions of musical entertainment, this stage production, then, reveals its unique power to mediate the very lives of others in music, dance, comedy, drama, and thrill channeled through the “live theatre people round the world love most” (Savran, “Trafficking in Transnational” 337). There is optimism in how these elements cohere and lure audiences to believing in a world where diversity reigns and borders are shattered. So when the play ends with the song suitably titled “Saan Ka Man Dalhin” [Wherever You Are Taken], which talks more about the assurance of the migrant bakla’s arrival to his desired destination than the uncertainty of his migratory or transnational travel, Care Divas emboldens anyone leaving the homeland in order to eke out a decent living and endure. The play’s final song induces pleasure among its spectators via its investments in visions of elsewhere and notions of going beyond geographic, social, and gender limitations. Through theatricality, musicality, and tragicomedy, Care Divas throws into sharp relief a nation and a diaspora that at once enable and control their migrant subjects and their capacity to work around repressive social regimes of power. It is in this critical tension between social structures and human agency that the play finds its potency to theatricalize migration along the axes of gender, language, and performance. This is the musical of Filipino labor migration in the new millennium. Audiences and critics can only hope that as PETA prepares for its golden year in 2016 and plans to celebrate this historic event with a restaging of Care Divas (Guerrero, “How PETA is gearing up”), the theater company and its hit production will constantly reassess their purported emancipatory politics.
and refuse all conventional techniques allowing a slew of sentiment, song, and spectacle to lapse into sheer escapism and fantasy.
Figure 9. The final production number of the caregivers-cum-drag performers, who sing and dance to the tune of “Saan Ka Man Dalhin,” a song that calls for acceptance of diversity and a world without borders. Photo courtesy of PETA Library and Archives.

Figure 10. The whole cast of Care Divas in their glamorous garb. Photo courtesy of PETA Library and Archives.
Notes

1. This essay is a revised version of a chapter in the author’s MA thesis titled “To the Ends of the Earth: Examinations of Palabas and Labor Diasporas from the Philippines (1970–2010).” The author would like to thank his thesis adviser, Dr. Ruth Jordana Pison, for her intellectual and editorial contributions to the essay. Thanks are also given to the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research and Development of the University of the Philippines, whose financial grant largely supported the author in accomplishing this academic pursuit.

2. Known for its conducive yet culturally complex atmosphere for homosexuals, Tel Aviv is oftentimes called the Gay Capital of the World.

3. During its two-month run, a wide-range of audiences enjoyed the musical. Audiences included students, gay groups (friends as well as couples), OFW families and balikbayan, celebrities such as Sharon Cuneta, KC Concepcion, Regine Velasquez, Ogie Alcasid, as well as directors such as Maryo J. Delos Reyes, Joel Lamangan, and Brillante Mendoza to name a few.

4. According to PETA’s Curriculum Director and former production designer, actor, and director Brenda V. Fajardo, “PETA is known for its commitment to the development of a people’s theater that mirrors Philippine social realities—a people’s theater for empowerment, a potent agent toward personal and societal transformation. Thus, PETA has used its creative ability to survive in spite of its perennial poverty” (181).

5. The details in this paragraph about the director and the playwright are taken from the play’s souvenir program.

6. The author would like to thank Dr. Oscar V. Campomanes for this crucial insight about the intermediality and textuality of Care Divas. This essay benefitted greatly from his erudite comments and suggestions during the 2015 Kritika Kultura Criticism Workshop at the Ateneo de Manila University, of which the author was a writing fellow.

7. Again, the author remains grateful to Dr. Campomanes for this critical note on the translational and transnational nature of the play.

8. All quotes by the director and the playwright of Care Divas are lifted from the play’s souvenir program.

9. PETA plays such as Katas ng Saudi and Amah: Maid in Hong Kong focus on overseas construction workers and domestic workers, respectively.

10. In referring to intimate labor, this essay takes inspiration from sociologists Eileen Boris and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas who define the term as “the work of forging, sustaining, nurturing, maintaining, and managing interpersonal ties, as well as the work of tending to the sexual, bodily, health, hygiene, and care needs of individuals” (2–8). In using affective labor, the author utilizes Michael Hardt’s employment of the theoretical handle as a “work that produces or manipulates affects such as feelings of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement or passion” (96).
11. In a personal interview with Allan Punzalan Isaac, Legarda, the play’s director, says this about Care Divas’s ending: “We are emotional but we don’t wallow. It isn’t just personal; it’s about the community. We don’t wallow because we have a community that we can go to and talk to and cry with and laugh with. If you are migratory you are like that. If you have to leave, then . . . you find another community and it just multiplies” (8).

12. This collaboration with Repertory Philippines may be seen as a turning point, or perhaps a break, in PETA’s history and character as a people’s theater. Previously, this collaboration between PETA and Repertory Philippines was unimaginable. Aesthetically, ideologically, and politically, these two theater groups were largely seen as divergent. In his article, “The Raha Sulayman Theater and the Production ‘Minsa’y Isang Gamu-Gamu,” theater director and playwright Chris Millado distinguished PETA’s artistic constitution from that of Repertory Philippines: “The term ‘petang-peta’ points to a collection of characteristics that distinguish PETA from other modes of established practice. What makes PETA “peta” is different from what makes Repertory Philippines peculiarly “rep”—the outstanding difference being that the former plays in Pilipino and the latter produces the latest hits from Broadway and West End in English” (qtd. in Pambid 197).
Works Cited


—. Philippine Gay Culture: Binabae to Bakla, Silahis to MSM. Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2009. Print.


