



In Conversation with Rhacel Parreñas

Interview by Bubbles Beverly Asor

Rhacel Salazar Parreñas is Professor of Sociology and Gender Studies at the University of Southern California. Her areas of research include labor, migration, transnational feminism, economic sociology, gender and the family. Her earlier works examined the constitution of gender in women's migration and transnational household formations. Her more recent works focus on the intersections of human trafficking and labor migration and examine the experiences of "un-free" migrant workers, including migrant domestic workers in Dubai and Singapore and migrant sex workers in Tokyo. She analyzes how morals mediate the experience of unfree labor vis-a-vis the state, migrant community, and workplace, for example by examining how moral views on prostitution are negotiated by sex workers in the process of their labor migration or how the moral views of employers result in varying experiences for domestic workers who are outside the boundaries of legal protection

Bubbles Beverly Asor (BBA): Thank you so much for taking time out of your busy schedule for this interview. Maybe we can talk about your intellectual biography first.

Rhacel Parreñas (RP): Ok. So I got my bachelor's degree in Peace and Conflict Studies. And why I studied Peace and Conflict Studies is because I wanted a more participatory action type of education. So Peace and Conflict Studies while there is a component that looks at politics of war, roles of intergovernmental bodies like the United Nations (UN), there is also a component of it that looks at community organizing. I was

very committed to learning about low-wage migrant workers – women low wage migrant workers even as an undergrad. When I decided to major in Peace and Conflict Studies at UC Berkeley, the focus of my studies had been on low wage immigrant women workers. As part of my studies, senior year, I was required to do volunteer work at a local NGO. I chose Asian Immigrant Women's Advocate and I focused on Filipino low-wage immigrants, like nurses' aides. And then I had to make a decision whether to continue in that path, just doing more labor activism, or getting a PhD. So I decided to get a PhD with my undergraduate thesis adviser, Evelyn Nakano Glenn..... So my focus on low-wage immigrant women workers is something that I have been basically doing since I was 18 years old when I started college and I am just continuing it today... While my PhD thesis was on Filipino domestic workers in Rome and Los Angeles, since then, I have done more ethnographic works focusing on different aspects of low wage immigrant women's lives. I focus on Filipinos... My motivation for focusing on Filipinos initially was really political because when I was an undergrad, there was not one book published on Filipino American experiences

BBA: So this was in the early 1990s?

RP: I was in college from 1988 to 1992. Back then, there were no publications on Filipino Americans. That was also the case when I started grad school...

BBA: So what attracted you into studying low-wage immigrant women workers?

RP: I think my motivation was personal like a lot of our motivations when we choose our study is personal, right? My parents and I migrated when I was 13 years old. My parents were highly educated with professional jobs in the Philippines. My mother actually taught at De La Salle University. She has an Ed.D (Doctor in Education) from Philippine Normal College and then my mother ended up getting a post-doc at Boston University. My father pursued his studies at the School of Education in Harvard University.... they were highly educated and holding professional jobs in the Philippines but when we migrated...

BBA: You migrated as a family?

RP: Yes, when we migrated, they could not easily get jobs that recognize their degrees. So initially, my mother, to survive, had to work as a hotel housekeeper, and then I had aunts who migrated, who had bachelor's degrees in the Philippines, and then to survive, they found themselves working as domestic workers in New York. And so I think I was always curious about their experiences. I was particularly curious about that feeling or you know how they felt, doing the job they do, knowing that they are highly educated. So then I was always sort of fascinated by what that experience was like.

BBA: Did you talk with them about that?

RP: Oh yes, yes I did. I was even still in high school and I was curious about it. And I think you see that if you are familiar with *Servants of Globalization*, that curiosity continued with me when I asked all these college educated domestic workers what it's like to do the job that they do. My interest in trying to capture the emotions, the emotional processes and how those emotional processes are socially constructed in migrant women's experiences, has always been there. But politically, I focus on Filipinos, just because, especially when I started this career, there was really nothing written on them, and that when I was doing my dissertation, there was still nothing really on them, Filipino Americans and even contemporary experiences, there was really almost nothing...

BBA: Any particularity with the Filipino migrant experiences comparing them to other migrant groups in the United States?

RP: The difference between Filipinos and Mexicans, for example, is the fact that Filipinos are a group of highly educated migrants doing low wage jobs. I believe that has also been documented for Peruvians but not Mexicans. So the fact that they go to wide range of countries, that makes them very distinct as well. So I think they represent the widest diaspora globally. I also think the wide range of occupations that they occupy makes them unique. So when I was in grad school in 1995 or 1996, Christine Chin's book, *In Service and Servitude*, about Filipino domestics in Malaysia came out and then in 1997, Nicole Constable's book, *Maid to Order in Hong Kong*, came out.. so those studies are inspiring for me to see, right? But at the same time I thought that it was important that a Filipino also do that work, right? So there were really no Filipinos doing that work but then Rick Bonus.. his book on... I can't remember the name, *Locating Filipino Americans*, I think is the book. It was published by Temple University Press, and it was about the spatial dynamics of Filipino American incorporation. It was I think published in 1998 or 1999... So when *Servants of Globalization* came out in 2001, there was really nothing. I mean it was really still like one of the first books surprisingly on Filipino Americans because it included Los Angeles but also it included Filipinos around the world like Italy. Then after me, there were more like in 2003 or 2004, other books came out. There was a bunch of us going to graduate school at the same time in different places.

BBA: But *Servants of Globalization* is not just about Filipinos, right? It is a multileveled analysis of macro and micro structural forces surrounding migration.

RP: Yes, I was very fortunate that the interest in the book extended beyond people who are interested in the Philippines.

BBA: But people who are also interested in globalization?

RP: Yes, people who are interested in gender inequalities, people who are interested in family formations but I think that really comes down to the fact I had a great supervisor. Evelyn Nakano Glenn was the best advisor. She always asked me the right questions. In many ways I just internationalized the work she was already doing.

BBA: But how did you choose your field sites?

RP: Field sites? Everyone said I was very intelligent because Rome was such an exotic location.

BBA: People must have expected you to do it within the US, just like Los Angeles. But comparing Rome and Los Angeles?

RP: Yeah, at that point of my life, I had not yet returned to Asia. I migrated when I was around 13. I was in my 20s at that time and I really actually feared going back to Asia.

BBA: Oh how come?

RP: I don't know. It was just like, it was so foreign. You know what I mean? Because I grew up in the US and never came back to Asia.

BBA: Did you have a sort of identity issue?

RP: I had no idea. It just became the kind of "unknown." So then I said I wanted to go to Europe because it was a little bit more glamorous, right? But people were also telling me to go to the Middle East. I was like, "Oh my God, that is so scary." I don't want to go to the Middle East so then I just picked... So what happened was.. So I knew Filipino domestic workers were going everywhere. So when I was picking a topic for my dissertation, Flor Contemplacion was executed. This was in the early 90s. I was doing my fieldwork in 1995, 1996... there was a lot of media attention on Filipino domestic workers as I was choosing a dissertation topic. So I said, "I am going to focus on Filipino domestic workers." But my instinct told me that I should not just focus on the US

just because in the US, there are not many domestic workers from the Philippines. So I actually first went to Spain just because I thought that the Philippines, as a former colony of Spain, would have many Filipino migrants. Migration system theory argues that migration is never randomly selected but that it occurs because of pre-existing ties like colonialism, economic trade, etc. So then it just seemed so obvious to pick Spain. So I actually did fieldwork in Spain for a few months, did a lot of interviews and never used them. Because when I was in Spain, everyone told me, "You should go to Italy because they are mostly in Italy." So then I just dropped Spain but well, I didn't actually drop Spain. So let me see Italy and I went there. Oh, then I saw that the community was much bigger there. So I ended up also doing fieldwork in Italy. Strategically, I knew if I just did Filipino domestic workers in Europe, I would never get a job in the US because no one cares about Filipinos and no one cares about migrants in Europe. So then that was why I had to include Filipinos in Los Angeles so I can get employed which was very smart because I did get employed. So then I never really planned on a comparative study. It was really more of a practical decision because I wanted to get a job, right? And that just worked out...that the comparison made sense. But as I was starting to write my dissertation, that three country comparative study.... as I was trying to do it, I realized that my brain capacity was limited and I could not do, like I could not do it well. So I dropped Spain. I transcribed those interviews but never even bother analyzing them because it was just too much, too overwhelming. So then I just dropped Spain and did Italy and the US.

BBA: In the second edition of *Servants of Globalization*, you mentioned Denmark as part of the comparative study. I am just curious why you still didn't include Spain.

RP: Yeah, so what happened was... Ok let us fast forward to now. I am now going back to domestic work because something I realized that I never focused on and I couldn't really focus on in the context of the US was that most of them are what you can call "unfree

workers.” So most domestic workers outside of the western hemisphere don’t have the flexibility and freedom to participate in the labor market, but instead they are tied workers. That experience of being a tied worker is so salient. It defines and embodies their experiences of migration. It puts significant amount of power on employers. This is the situation for au pairs in Denmark, that is they cannot easily quit their job but they are tied to their employer. This is not applicable to Spain.

BBA: Regardless of their legal status? Even in the US?

RP: Not in the US but everywhere else. Domestic workers in Singapore, in Dubai, right? So in the US, there were those who got residency through the labor certification program and this situation of being a tied worker applied to them. This labor certification program existed before, but not anymore. Domestic workers could be sponsored by their employers to get a green card. But the problem with that process was that it took seven years to get a green card. So during the 7 years that you’re waiting to get your green card, you are considered an out of status migrant. As an out of status migrant, you cannot work for anyone else, you cannot even leave the country because your application for residency is pending so it can still be declined. Also, like your children and dependents cannot follow you because technically your application could still be denied. So you are in this position of limbo. Really when you think about it, they’re also in a position of indenture vis-à-vis your employer. I had interviewees in *Servants of Globalization* who were in that position. I never even thought to hone in on that. So then the rise of trafficking as a concept made me reflect on my earlier data. I realized some of my informants, their experiences bordered human trafficking in a way because some of them were making 400 dollars a month while being stuck with their employers. I mean they were making such a small amount of money during this time of limbo.

BBA: So what led to this topic?

RP: So I should just say that a lot of our decisions as

academics are never really rational. But I think what happens is that opportunities present themselves and you just run with it. After *Servants of Globalization*, so I did that fieldwork in 1995, 1996, a huge question that came up concerned their experiences as mothers with children in the Philippines. This led me to spending two years in the Philippines to just look at their children. So then that work resulted in *Children of Global Migration*. Afterwards, I was looking for the next project. I was actually taking Medical Sociology at University of California, San Francisco because I wanted to study nurses but from a more contemporary perspective. So Catherine Ceniza Choy gave us a historical account of it and I wanted to look at a more contemporary perspective. One of the things that I wanted to do was to do an ethnography of an actual hospital to look at racial dynamics in the hospital. I also wanted to look at hospitals in a poor area and in a rich area. So I was preparing to do that kind of study and even taking classes in medical sociology so I can be equipped to engage the work.

BBA: There is really not a lot of work on contemporary Filipino nurses in the US.

RP: Yes, I mean there is Anna Guevarra but we don’t really get the sense of that whole experience, the daily experience. She gave an emphasis on the state, the construction by the state, but she doesn’t really give us that sense of everyday experience.... We can expect that more from an ethnographer, right? I like to do that. When you read my works, I like people to get the sense of what people I am writing about are experiencing, you know from their perspective. So I was planning that but then I got this email from Ruri Ito. This email basically said, “would you like to go to Tokyo and spend a year here as a visiting professor. You don’t have to teach and you only have to do research on whatever topic you want” I was like, “Oh my God!” This was in 2005 and I felt so lucky. Of course, why not?

BBA: So where in Japan were you based at?

RP: So I was at Ochanamizu University where Ruri

Ito was a professor of gender studies at that time. I had no plans of going to Japan. Japan is expensive. I don't speak the language. It was so foreign. So I just took Japanese language classes and I had a private tutor but my Japanese was still awful, remains awful. And then I knew that hostesses were the biggest group there. So then I was reading all this background information and there were not many studies about them. There were a lot of anecdotal claims. So then they were identified as human trafficking victims by the US Department of State in their trafficking in persons report. All these preconceived notions that they were prostitutes, that they were forced into their jobs. I went there to study them and to gain access to the field, I ended up working as one.

BBA: How did you make that methodological decision to work there?

RP: To work? Oh because I couldn't get access. No one wanted to talk to me. But I was motivated. I told myself, "I am going to find them." So I started going to church on Wednesdays because they pray the rosary. Then I met a nun and I told her how desperate I was.

BBA: A Filipino nun?

RP: Yes, then I said I wanted to work as one and she walked me literally to the nearest club, knocked on the door, the *mama-san* came out and the nun said to her, "this journalist wants to work as one." So they let me in and I worked as one. And it was great! Then of course, all these misconceptions came out like they were not forced to prostitution, they are not even prostitutes. They flirt for a living. You know, you sit at the bar, you tell the guy, "You are so good looking" and maybe tickle him but you don't even have to do that.

BBA: Pour a drink?

RP: Yes, you pour a drink for him. You show deference, extreme deference. Then he teases you wanting to go to bed with you and you tease him back. You

kind of string him along as long as you can. What I learned was that if you do sleep with this person, he stops going to the club because then they won in the contest already. So there is no kind of temptation, flirtation anymore, the pinnacle has been reached. So you want to prolong that as much as possible which is like non prostitution. Actually prostitution works against them because it ruins the business. I mean some develop romantic feelings from all the flirting and they end up having a romantic relationship.

BBA: So these are surprising findings?

RP: Oh yeah. What happened was that I became a reluctant participant/interlocutor on human trafficking, right? When the book, *Illicit Flirtations*, came out, the US Department of State publicly came out in the national public radio, to say that I don't know what I am talking about. So then they denounced the book. Because I basically said that all their claims are false.

BBA: So the book is about the problematization of labelling these women as trafficked victims.

RP: Yes, so the book became how does being labelled "trafficked victims" shape these people's migrant experiences. Because at the end of the day, they are migrants who face huge...huge structural vulnerabilities. So you know, they are indentured workers, if they end up there, they are working for the club and they cannot work for anyone else. They don't get paid until at the airport. Six months of working without pay. And also, they end up having a manager before they leave. This manager has control over them for five contracts. I mean they are indentured to different sets of people. So it is multiple layers of indenture but then the labelling of them as trafficked victims does not even address the biggest problem they face, which is indenture. Instead, it talks about them being forced to prostitution which is really not going on there. So the book talks about the misidentification of Filipino hostesses as trafficked victims, not really seeing how they are victimized and what does it all mean. So I think being part of that discussion led me then to basically address these questions: what is unfree labor?

What is that experience of being stuck with a person and not having power to change your job and being beholden to them, having this person have power to fire and deport you at will? I mean they can literally just take you to the airport because they didn't like what you did. So when I started thinking about a study on the unfree labor of domestic workers, I said ok I am going to do Denmark, United Arab Emirates and Singapore. I wanted to cover my bases. The reason why I wanted to cover Denmark is because I wanted to establish that this isn't some "barbaric Asian thing." That this is something universally shared by domestics across the board. And that I didn't want it to be reduced to a cultural barbaric practice in Asian or Middle Eastern societies. It is funny like I always wanted to do this three country study and I realized that my brain capacity is limited. Oh my God, I can't do this. This is too much. I am going to drop Denmark.

BBA: But you do collaborative work?

RP: Now I am collaborating with Rachel Silvey. So I am now in the position that I feel like I have studied Filipinos so much that I should start comparing them to other groups. Rachel Silvey, because she has been studying Indonesians, and I am comparing Filipinos and Indonesians in Singapore and the United Arab Emirates. So that is what we are doing. We are finding some differences. We are still in the data collection stage. One huge thing.. well we haven't analyzed our data but something that we are moving away from first is the narrative of structural violence. So everyone who writes about domestic work in the Middle East explains their experiences through the lens of structural violence. They say that the kafalah which is the sponsorship system that also exists here in Singapore results in structural violence. So then it suggests a uniform effect on people's lives and that uniform effect is one of subjugation, trafficking, slavery, making this person work forever, not giving them days off. But from our data, looking at Singapore and the United Arab Emirates, we cannot ignore the diversity of experiences among domestic workers. We cannot ignore that some domestic workers have been with their em-

ployers for 28 years. Some can last for only a month. Some get paid x. Some get paid y. Some get days off. Some do not get days off. Some get their phones confiscated Monday to Friday. Some can just babble forever. Some can watch all the Korean drama that they want but some cannot. And so to reduce their experiences to the structures that shape them which is what happens when we reduce the kafalah to the concept of structural violence... I think is intellectual laziness. It is reductionist. It does not unpack it. It does not challenge you to ask what is really going on there, what accounts for this diversity despite the severe structural constraints that they face.

BBA: What can you say about the US Department of State's critique that you focus on the process but not on the crime?

RP: Really? I didn't know that.

BBA: That was what the spokesperson of the US Department of State mentioned in the radio interview. What can you say about that?

RP: The thing about it is that human trafficking is a crime, right? But by reducing it into a crime, there has to be a criminal. I feel that not all inequalities and subjugations can be reduced into criminal elements. So like for example, the domestic worker who does not get a day off, that means their employers are criminals which you know is not the case, right? I feel that it's reductive. I don't like the term "trafficking" because first trafficking is a crime and there is only one solution which is rescue and abolition. We know that abolition does not work for Filipinos because if you tell Filipinos, "you can no longer go to Singapore," you know they will all panic because they are so dependent on this source of income. So I feel like if you focus more on the process itself, you become more accountable to the experience of the people you want to save because you become more accountable to what they really want. Just to give you a more concrete example. I think what they don't like is that by focusing on the process I called attention to the migration of the hostesses in Japan as not being one of trafficking

but instead of indentured mobility. For Filipino hostesses who went to Japan, they have two options in life – unfreedom of poverty or the unfreedom of servitude or indenture. They are going to pick the unfreedom of servitude because there is some economic mobility or upward mobility that it promises. The unfreedom of poverty has no promise of anything positive. So by calling attention to that process, you realize that they are dependent on this occupation which then suggests to you that maybe we should improve the terms of the occupation or maybe let's make this occupation safer. So the solution is not just to rescue them and prosecute the employers because prosecuting the employers is not going to do anything for the women. So I think that is a good disagreement we have but I feel that if you focus on the process, you are able to speak from the experiences of the actual people that you want to save and you can actually provide more productive solutions.

BBA: Twenty years after you wrote *Servants of Globalization*, what have been some of the changes in the research topics, debates and discussions within migration studies or sociology of migration? But you mentioned in the second edition of the book, many discussions still resonate today.

RP: One thing that still resonates is this discussion of the care chain which I am personally so sick of...

BBA: Already too exhausted?

RP: It is like a never ending cycle. They keep on talking about it but they forget what has already been said. And so it is just a never ending cycle. I will give you a perfect example. Besides Nicola Yates, there was an application for a grant that I just read recently in which it says that the care chain does not deal with race.... And I am thinking in my head, "if you guys even look at the teleology of the idea, you would realize as I said in the book, this came from Evelyn Nakano Glenn's idea of the racial division of reproductive labor, and the only thing that this very simple idea is doing is that it's internationalizing what Evelyn Nakano Glenn argued. Like Black women are leaving

their kids and taking care of other people's kids. And this is because of the racial inequalities in the US that limited job opportunities for women of color – Black women, Latino women, Japanese women. Me internationalizing it points basically to reproductive labor as also a way that we can look at inequalities across nations. That is the only thing it does. Very simple observation, that's it. But I feel that people are nit-picking. They nitpick it so much that they forget what has already been said.... the critique that it doesn't deal with race is an erasure of my advisor's contribution... With domestic workers in general, it is interesting how we still have twenty years later... Your question is where is the direction discussions have gone, right? What is interesting about domestic work is that and I think Martin Manalansan calls this out. We really don't have enough studies that look at their process of self-making. So me, I am a labor scholar and migration scholar next. So for me, I am most interested in the labor process. Even in *Illicit Flirtations*, it is the labor process that motivates my questions.... So even if I focus on the family, I feel like it is because it is so key to understanding the labor experiences of domestic workers. But I feel that we don't have enough work that looks at the self-making process that domestic workers undergo outside the workplace. That became clear to me after spending a few months here in Singapore because in Singapore what is so fascinating that I didn't see elsewhere... maybe this is also the case in Hong Kong... is that a lot of domestic workers do a lot of productive activities on their days off. Not all of them but a significant number of them take classes for make-up, cosmetology, computer, balloon making, cooking, baking, photography and caregiving as well. They do all sorts of activities. The question is why do they do it? A lot of them because they want to acquire skills that they feel that they can tangibly take home with them when their stay here is over... It is like a suspended benefit. But at the same time they feel this is a way to create self-identification beyond the labor that they do.... But it is really interesting. Groups of domestic workers have invited me to various fund raisers. What is interesting is like someone will have a premature baby and will get saddled with this huge hospital bill. It's not a domestic worker

but a professional nurse who will get saddled with this huge hospital bill here in Singapore but you see all these domestic workers come together to raise money for this nurse. And they have this activity called "Shoot for a Cause." What it is you can go there and then a cosmetology expert would put make up on you. Then you have a photo session like you can be like a fashion model. You can keep your picture and you donate whatever you want. Most of these domestic workers are donating about 50 dollars to do this. Then they have this memento for this fashion day shoot.

BBA: Is it organized?

RP: Oh yeah, I will show you pictures later. And so for these domestics, the image of themselves is not this downtrodden sweaty domestic worker but the image they want for themselves is that one of a beauty queen. So they also have these beauty contests as well. So for me, this is really interesting but this has not been sufficiently studied. So this process of self-making for low wage domestic workers is very interesting. Another thing that we haven't sufficiently looked at is this thing about.. this experience of being an unfree worker. A lot of people have nodded to it but they have a very universal explanation of it. Oh this is structural violence, this is oppression and nothing else. But I feel that it is a morally mediated experience and that employers do not have a uniform response to it. Some employers consciously try to mitigate it. Some employers are totally clueless and some employers totally abuse it.

BBA: Why do you think scholars don't consider the employers' side of the story?

RP: I think people are afraid of access. I think it's also part of the class bias for researchers that they think wealthier people are less likely to talk to you versus poor people because the latter have more free time which is quite the opposite, right? Because poor people actually have less time. They have to work.

BBA: Could this also be the reason why there is not

much written about highly skilled migrants?

RP: Maybe but I think for highly skilled migrants, people think that it's uninteresting and that they don't have problems.

BBA: So I think many discussions you mentioned in your books are still there. For example, partial citizenship, gender..

RP: It's very nice and I am very grateful. I will just tell you that I am very grateful. That is not planned. For me I just do this work because I have a very strong commitment to giving voice to low-wage migrant women workers, and that what I want is for people to understand their experiences from their perspectives, for people to know about the problems they face, and that the whole plan is you identify those so that the services they need can be provided. I think with this project for UAE and Singapore, it's good that a lot of intergovernmental bodies have been interested in our data and we gave a talk at the US Department of Labor, at the international bureau.

BBA: Not many people are working on human trafficking especially in the Middle Eastern region.

RP: I think it's the access. There is this woman, Amrita Pande. She is very good. I think she has one of the richer data.

BBA: So how do you gain access to these seemingly difficult to access field sites?

RP: Perseverance. I will just tell you about our data. We have 85 interviewees with Filipinos and 52 Indonesians in Dubai. Rachel Silvey did the 52 interviews for the Indonesians and I can talk about the Filipino interviewees. When you go to Dubai, you realize every retail outlet has Filipino workers from Starbucks to Timberland. And they really have this strong, much stronger than in Qatar, *kabayan* sentiment. Stronger than in Qatar but I realize that in Qatar, it's not so strong because a lot of Filipino service workers are wives of professionals so they are very reluctant

service workers. You know what I mean? Some of them are snubbing you in their shop but in Dubai, they're super nice. So we go like, "Oh Filipino! Where can I find domestic worker?" They just tell you where to find them. "Oh I know undocumented workers, let me introduce you to one undocumented." Then they tell you, "These are the parks that they go to, these are the places of worship they go to, these are the rich neighborhoods where they are likely to be." So we went to food courts, we went to parks. People tell us, "go out the parks at 6 in the morning because they are walking their dogs." We met a lot of people walking their dogs at 6 in the morning.

BBA: What positionality do you usually take? How would you introduce yourself to them?

RP: You just speak Tagalog and you know, you don't wear makeup and you don't wear jewelry. Your compartment is not like "let me establish my class." The opposite of that. They also know we are not domestic workers. For them, it's nice for them to talk to you. Oh wow, here comes a middle class Filipino who doesn't look down on us. There, they're very compelled to speak because they feel like their stories need to be told. So our interviewees include those who have days off, without days off, includes those who have been there for a long time, the newcomers. We diversified mostly by making sure that they worked for a variety of employers. The employers of our domestics include Emirati, other Arabs, Egyptians, Iranians, Indians, Filipinos, Westerners. The hardest group to access was the undocumented but then after we got in there, they just let us into their homes. They know each other. They tell us how they can spot a new runaway. They help each other out and then then take in the new runaways.

BBA: Is this the case because there is no institutionalized support system in Dubai?

RP: Well, the institutionalized support system means they will be sent home. If I run away, I have 72 hours to report to the consulate or the embassy to assist me

to go home. But if I want to continue working as an undocumented, I just have to run away. Some of these people.. I am just shocked because they knew no one. Zero networks. But they just show up in a Filipino migrant neighborhood, asking for help. That is crazy! It is just like putting yourself in a super vulnerable situation because some co-ethnics may take advantage of you. So we have such a rich, diverse pool of domestics. We don't have a dominant area of origin but only a few are from Metro Manila and the rest are from outer provinces. So they are not from Davao City but they are from the boonies of Davao. We have a picture of the map that shows their region of origin, you see the whole country from the northern to the southern tip; they are covered – from Kalinga, Vigan way down to the South.

BBA: So what is your interpretation of this?

RP: It shows you that migration from the Philippines is not really network determined as much anymore but it's institutionally determined and it is agency dependent. So this agency dependency gives people a wider reach of where they could migrate to and the fly-now-pay-later system also widens the reach of people. So I feel like we have such good data to speak about what is going on in the UAE.

BBA: You seem to find fieldwork quite enjoyable.

RP: It's funny actually. You romanticize it when you're not doing it but when you're doing it, you hate it. Like for example, I went to the Philippines. I spent two weeks there not so long ago and every day I was going to the OWWA (Overseas Workers Welfare Administration) seminars from 8 am to 6 pm, Mondays to Saturdays. I was staying in Makati but I had to go to OWWA Bocobo, OWWA Pasay and OWWA Intramuros.

BBA: It must be very tiring with all the traffic jam.

RP: Oh my God! But it was so amazing. It really gives you the best perspective. One of the questions, for example, for the book which we will eventually write....

is what do sending states do knowing they are sending citizens to highly vulnerable situations. We are looking at deployment programs of Indonesia and the Philippines. What we are finding especially in the case of Dubai is that Filipinos are much more empowered. Places like Dubai, there are no labor standards, there is no minimum wage, yet a lot of these low-wage domestic workers have a rights-based consciousness. "I should get a minimum wage." "I should have access to my cellphone." "I should do this." I should do that." Then you were like, "where do you get that sense?" A lot of them would say that it's from the Pre-Departure Orientation Seminar (PDOS). A lot of them give credit to PDOS. The PDOS gives them a baseline of rights, not that the rights are high, it's like a low baseline but still it establishes a baseline. In contrast, Indonesia doesn't really do that. Indonesians are more likely not to speak up about their situations. This is interesting.

BBA: This is quite interesting. Ten years ago, Filipino migrant workers wouldn't even credit much to PDOS but now they're using it for their leverage.

RP: I didn't know what PDOS was until Dubai. So what happens is they get there, their first employer doesn't usually recognize the minimum wage but a lot of them want to keep their good status because they don't want to be deported and they don't want to be undocumented but then they have a bargaining chip when the employer wants to renew their contract. That is when they pull out the PDOS basics.

BBA: They say they endure the first year.

RP: Two years. Then they demand, "give me a day off, give me the 400 dollars, give me this and that." So when you ask them where they learned about 400 dollars, why 400 dollars. Oh I learned this from PDOS. So it made me very curious about PDOS and I forced myself to go to the Philippines. I attended 80 hours of PDOS. So right now what I am doing is sitting in employment agencies here in Singapore. I am trying to get 40 hours. So tedious, just sit there, doing nothing, just watching people. What I am

looking at is quite interesting. If you go there on a Sunday, sit there... the employers come in returning domestics. Then you hear the employer's perspectives on why they want to get rid of this person like garbage, like without warning. It's crazy. And you also have the domestics coming in.. "I think I want to transfer." Then you hear their stories why they think they deserve a transfer. So I am just there sitting, eavesdropping.

BBA: You are very fortunate to have access to the employment agencies.

RP: You just persevere. You don't stop until you gain access. For example, I was sitting there and someone is selling *suman* (rice cake) so I bought suman for the whole office. Then if you do that, you are not just a burden. At times I asked them where do you eat lunch? We buy lunch in Inasal. What is good there? This bangus, this and this. So next Sunday when I go back there, I buy special dishes from Inasal for them. If you do that, they start opening the door. It's the same thing when we spent hours and hours at the Philippine Embassy.

BBA: Are they friendly to researchers?

RP: Yes. Well not at first but then we started buying cooking oil for the shelter for the runaways. They wouldn't take our money but I think we spent around a thousand dollars for cooking oil, the food they need for runaways. Me and my students. We ended up stocking food for them. We also had a thanksgiving meal for them and to reciprocate, we also had this dance performance. My students had a dance performance for the runaways so they wouldn't feel that they are the only ones being gazed at. They also gazed at my students.

BBA: It is interesting how you engage your students in your research.

RP: Oh yes, yes. It's good teaching. I used them.... because they are like white. They are able to interview employers for me. We interview a lot of employers in

Dubai and in Singapore. I used Chinese grad students here and I used white students in Dubai. Actually, it's not funny. If I interview the employers, they might think of me as a domestic worker. They won't be as honest about the situation. You know what I mean. So they were openly racist with my students which was amazing. If it was me interviewing them, I don't think they would be as forthright.

BBA: There are many issues going on in the US regarding undocumented migration, Brexit in the UK, the so-called migration crisis in Europe, what do you think is the value of sociology of migration or sociology in general to make sense of both these old and new issues?

RP: I think the value of sociologists is that we are the ones skilled to identify the social and political issues that are facing displaced individuals. I really speak as an ethnographer. The value of being able to look at the world from the world of those in need. And I think that is really necessary for us to share their perspectives because it helps gain empathy for them, so that others will be in a position to help them.

BBA: You started with advocacy and activism, do you feel that there is really a public sociology as opposed to let's say the more objective, academic and scientific sociology?

RP: Is there a public sociology? What I came to learn is that if you want to do public sociology, you have to commit to writing twice because if you continue to write for your typical audience, it's like incomprehensible to the outside people. Public sociology basically for me is just doing socially relevant work and making sure that relevant work is heard outside the walls of academia. You pick studies that are speaking to socially pressing issues in society right now.

BBA: Your works have been very influential in many areas but do you have any favorite among your works? Is there such a thing as a favorite work for you?

RP: This is the first time someone asked me this

question. Do I have a favorite? My least favorite work is *Children of Global Migration*.

BBA: Very interesting.

RP: It was too easy. It was like the gendered constitution of those families was too predictable but when I was there, people were telling me "Ilaw ng tahanan" (Light of home).. That kind of stuff, you know. Are they really telling me this? Because it was so black and white. Then part of me wondered if I didn't push it hard enough. When I was talking to children and left behind parents, it was amazing to me that they were so gender conservative. In retrospect, I realize that I should have honed in on class differences. So what I did in that book was compare children with two migrant parents gone, children without their migrant father and children without their migrant mother. What I should have done is consider class and how gender shifts across class differences because I think that would have given me more nuances. So hence that is my least favorite book because I took an easy way out. You know what I mean. I didn't challenge myself by taking into account, say let me compare a nurse with domestic workers. Let me compare the child of a captain of a ship with a child of a low ranking officer. This wants me to look at my data again but I am too lazy. I think variances would make a difference. Deirdre McKay writes about families in the Ilocos region and she is so interesting because she critiques *Children of Global Migration* as too Western in its construction of gender, and that I take Western ideology and superimpose it into Filipinos. For me, a white woman telling me this is the most ironic thing in the world and I don't know if she sees the irony of it. What is interesting is that if you look at her studies, she is looking at working class families and if you look at working class families, I could definitely see how they would have lesser resources which would force fathers to do care work. What is interesting in my study is that there was a diversity of classes, it wasn't just working class families. What I did was I mostly looked at children in four different schools from private to public. One private was easy to get into; one private was difficult to get into. One public

was easy and another difficult to get into. You have diversity there. I really feel that I should have compared classes. My suspicion is if I am a nurse, my child would complain more and would not see migration as a necessity. If I am a domestic worker, my child would think we didn't have a choice. To be honest, I did mostly find other women take over the work. Also, most of them were not in intact families. Oh this is something that we haven't written about. And I have been seeing this in my data, tons of migrant women come from non-intact families. Tons of single moms even in Dubai. I sort of mention that a little bit in *Servants* but no one ever ran with it. But I think someone needs to study this more. There is really no father to begin with to take care of these kids. Because there are no fathers to begin with so there is a lot of gender inequities in the pre-migration experience. We really need more studies on that.

BBA: Do you see yourself doing this for a much longer time? Or are there more researches you wish to work on or research questions you wish to address?

RP: My undone project is the nurses. I feel like if I do the nurses, that would complete the trajectory. I would have completed all the labor migrant groups

of Filipino women. Many nurses in the US have three jobs. It is insane. I don't know how they handle three jobs. So it would be interesting to know why they have three jobs. Why are these women so crazy as to take three jobs in three hospitals? But we don't know because no one has written about them. We don't know why these women are so driven and why don't they just work in one hospital with tons of leisure time? But no, they don't have double shifts but triple shifts. A lot of them are concentrated in undesirable jobs.

BBA: Thank you. Thank you very much for your time. I really enjoyed this conversation.



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