

Pratt G, Johnston C.

[Crossing Oceans: Testimonial Theatre, Filipina Migrant Labor, Empathy, and Engagement.](#)

*GeoHumanities*

2017

DOI link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/2373566X.2016.1278178>

**Copyright:**

© Copyright 2017 by The Authors. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The moral rights of the named author(s) have been asserted.

**DOI link to article:**

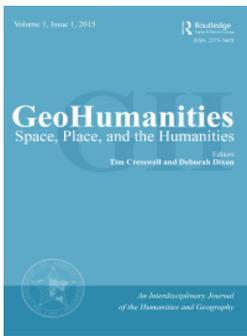
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/2373566X.2016.1278178>

**Date deposited:**

24/02/2017



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0)



## Crossing Oceans: Testimonial Theatre, Filipina Migrant Labor, Empathy, and Engagement

Geraldine Pratt & Caleb Johnston

To cite this article: Geraldine Pratt & Caleb Johnston (2017): Crossing Oceans: Testimonial Theatre, Filipina Migrant Labor, Empathy, and Engagement, *GeoHumanities*, DOI: [10.1080/2373566X.2016.1278178](https://doi.org/10.1080/2373566X.2016.1278178)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/2373566X.2016.1278178>



Published by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC. © Copyright 2017 by The Authors.



Published online: 21 Feb 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 46



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

---

# FORUM ON EMOTIONS, EMPATHY, ETHICS, AND ENGAGEMENT

---

## Crossing Oceans: Testimonial Theatre, Filipina Migrant Labor, Empathy, and Engagement

Geraldine Pratt

*University of British Columbia*

Caleb Johnston

*Newcastle University*

Framed within the geopolitics of empathy, we describe the process of taking a testimonial play, based on verbatim research interview transcripts with Filipina domestic workers, their families, employers, and nanny agents in Vancouver, Canada, to the Philippines to present to audiences there, including to members of domestic workers' families. Aspects of the script and the staging of the play were reworked to solicit empathy in a context where the challenging experiences of domestic workers in Canada sometimes are not heard—even within families, given the popular image of Canada as a land of opportunity and the perception that Canada is relatively inclusive in terms of labor rights and paths to permanent residency. Interviews with seven family members who attended the play offer some clues to assessing performance as a space for critical, sometimes uncomfortable forms of empathy. Rather than a purely affirming experience, we argue that empathy can lead to a fuller recognition of the suffering on which one's good life depends and challenge fantasies of the good life, in this case, attainable through migration to Canada. **Key Words: empathy, Filipina domestic workers, Philippines, testimonial theatre, transnational families.**

We have turned to theatrical performance to speak to communities beyond the university and to provoke critical thinking and public discussion about the migration of women from the Global South to care for children and the elderly in Canada. Our play, *Nanay: A Testimonial Play*, invites small groups of audience members to move through intimate spaces to experience verbatim monologues developed from interviews with migrant domestic workers, their children left behind in the Philippines, Canadian employers who hire Filipino domestic workers to care

GeoHumanities, 00(00) 2017, 1–13 © Copyright 2017 by The Authors.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

The moral rights of the named author(s) have been asserted.

Initial submission, April 2016; revised submission, October 2016; final acceptance, November 2016.

Published by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.

for their parents and children, nanny agents in Canada who broker these arrangements, and government officials who create and administer immigration policies in Canada and the Philippines. This project, emerging out of years of conventional social science research on temporary labor migration (Pratt 2012), responds to and can be understood within the wide-ranging questioning of the scale, scope, efficacy, and possibilities of politics at the present moment in time. Diagnosing our political time as one of impasse, Berlant (2011), for instance, believes that we live in a moment that is at once mired in old fantasies of the good life that create obstacles to achieving what we desire, and ripe with the possibility of reattaching to public life and politics in new and more life-sustaining ways. Like many others, she understands inventing new genres of research and theory to be one part of the urgently needed process of reinventing publicness, imagining new modes of living unhinged from existing notions of the good life, and creating new idioms of political attachment. We frame our translation of conventional research interview transcripts into monologues to create testimonial theatre within this context of experimentation with alternative ways of creating and sharing knowledge of our worlds to build new ethical and political commitments.

We have worked to animate and put into public conversation the different perspectives of those entangled in what Hochschild (2002) has called “the global care chain.” Despite an extensive body of scholarly research documenting the problems associated with the Live-In Caregiver Program (LCP), the program through which women mostly from the Philippines enter Canada to work as temporary foreign domestic workers (for summaries see Spitzer and Torres 2008; Pratt 2012), and an exponential growth in temporary foreign worker programs through the first decade of this century, neither in themselves generated substantial or sustained public debate. Working collaboratively with the Philippine Women Centre of BC (PWC) and professional theatre artists in Vancouver, Canada, our hope has been to provoke some of this much-needed discussion. We have wanted to expand audiences’ visceral understanding of the complexities and contradictions of the situation; stimulate intercultural understanding within and between Filipino and non-Filipino audiences, and between employers, policymakers, and domestic workers; and create the setting for more nuanced and challenging discussions about the structural conditions (in the Philippines and Canada) that lead so many Filipino women to leave their children in the Philippines to do care work abroad and create the demand for live-in caregivers in the absence of high-quality affordable child and elder care in Canada. Our commitment to working in this performative mode comes from within the understanding that we think through our senses, that politics is always already conducted through emotions and affect, and that theatre is an ambiguous time-space. It is space in which it is possible to experience other worlds with an emotional intensity that can potentially coax audience members from existing identifications so as to open room for new ideas and political alignments. In Rancière’s (2004) felicitous phrasing, theatre creates a time and space to redistribute the sensible, to reconfigure what can be seen, heard, felt, and thought.

To induce empathy is, we understand, a complicated aspiration. As Benjamin (2003) famously put it, “If there were such a thing as a commodity-soul . . . , it would be the most empathetic ever encountered in the realm of souls, for it would be bound to see every individual as a buyer in whose hand and house it wants to nestle” (31). With capitalist bioeconomies boring deeply into our bodies and subjectivities, empathy is a highly marketable resource, commodified in an expansive and expanding range of intimate labors (including care work). So, too, the capacity to empathize operates within complicated gender and other power relations. Addressing

the infamous character of the botanizing, objectifying urban flâneur (the target of so much feminist critique; e.g., Wilson 1992), Benjamin also captured the masculinist qualities that can attend empathy: “Empathy is the nature of the intoxication to which the flâneur abandons himself in the crowd” (31). Consider also that the capacity to empathize with the suffering subject is a hallmark feature of the liberal bourgeois subject, which is marked and in some sense defined by its capacity to empathize, reinforcing the sensibility of liberal goodness (e.g., Berlant 2011). Feminists have for many years raised hard questions about the politics and geopolitics of empathy given familiar patterns of who testifies and who witnesses and empathizes with narratives of pain and suffering, patterns that can reinscribe hierarchies of race and geopolitical privilege (Mohanty 1986; hooks 1990; Pedwell 2014). It is within this swell of critiques of empathy that we have aspired to a more complicated and compromised form of witnessing and empathetic engagement between Filipino and non-Filipino audiences around the subject of care, one in which empathy moves between and across employers and migrant workers, caught in different ways in the economies of the commodification of empathy and intimacy, and the devaluation of feminized care work and domestic labor (Pratt 2012).

When our play was first performed at Vancouver’s PuSh International Performing Arts Festival in 2009, our sights were set on intercultural understanding, and we have considered elsewhere our success achieving this (Johnston and Pratt 2010; Pratt 2012). Here we pursue a new site of empathy that was identified in the assessment of the play that took place with our collaborators at the PWC of BC at the end of the run of twelve sold-out performances in Vancouver. When we met to think about and evaluate our process and what was achieved by collaborating on the testimonial play, domestic workers from the PWC (whose stories were used in the play) foregrounded an unanticipated site for building empathy: their own transnational families in the Philippines. The need for this had already been intimated during the play’s run in Vancouver, when PWC activists worked hard to ensure that the children of former domestic workers came to see the production with their mothers. These activists hoped that seeing the play together would build empathy within these families by allowing children to better understand the extent and nature of their mothers’ sacrifice, and mothers to more fully appreciate the challenges faced by their children, who typically are left for many years in the Philippines in the care of their relatives before reuniting with their mothers in Vancouver.

Experiencing the play in Vancouver expanded ambitions for transnational communication and led domestic workers at the PWC to want to tell their stories as domestic workers in Canada differently to their families in the Philippines. They wanted to speak honestly and openly to their own family members there about their difficulties working abroad in Canada. These are experiences that they otherwise find difficult to tell, in the first instance because of a reluctance to worry their families who are so far away and dependent on their remittances for their livelihood. Further, when they tell stories of their lives in Canada to family members in the Philippines, some feel that their stories are not heard or empathized with, given the ways in which popular discourse in the Philippines situates both the family and the nation as the rightful beneficiaries of the sacrifices of overseas Filipino workers (Tadiar 2009), and the popular image of Canada as a land of opportunity (Paul 2011; Constable 2013; Polanco Sorto 2013). Although Canadian policies for migrant domestic workers are generally thought to be (and indeed are) more inclusive in terms of labor rights and routes to permanent residency as compared to those of most other countries, this view also sustains a powerful fantasy of liberal inclusion that is at some distance from the

lived experience of many domestic workers in Canada, who are often vulnerable as live-in employees and deskilled through the process of fulfilling the terms of the LCP (Pratt 2012). In part responding to the desire of some of our collaborators to share with their families their difficult experiences in Canada, we worked to take the play to Manila, transporting stories told in Vancouver to audiences there. In November 2013, we collaborated with the Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA) to stage a professional theatre production of *Nanay* at the PETA Theater Center in Quezon City in metropolitan Manila.

### RETHINKING THE GROUNDS FOR EMPATHY IN MANILA

We reworked the content and staging of the play for Manila in anticipation of some of the conversations that we thought it would be important to generate there. There are two monologues of Filipino domestic workers in Canada in the play (for script, see Pratt and Johnston 2014). In one, a domestic worker tells of her great optimism leaving the Philippines to work overseas, tied to the opportunity that this creates to establish her own financial independence (from both her irresponsible and unfaithful husband and her patronizing father and brothers), a source of income that will allow her to send her children to good private schools in Manila. In the Vancouver and Berlin productions, this monologue was performed by a Filipina actor working alone in close proximity to the audience. In Manila, the director, Alex Ferguson, staged this monologue (in the backstage kitchen area of the theatre) with another delivered by a Canadian woman who laments her history of trying to get dependable child care from within the existing supply of Canadian labor; that is, without relying on Filipino live-in domestic workers. She tells of how the unreliability of child care provided by Canadian workers leads her to quit her job to care for her children at home. The two professional actors delivered their monologues in the same cramped space, at points mirroring each other's bodily movements. Their monologues were kept separate but there were occasional moments of surprised or curious visual recognition, intimating the possibility (and need) for a conversation about social reproduction across Global South and North (Figure 1). The second domestic worker verbatim monologue is one in which the domestic worker tells of a series of terrible work situations in Canada. Staged in a confined and sweltering dressing room, this monologue was meant to disrupt preconceptions of Canada as an idealized migration destination. The major change in Manila was that more Tagalog was integrated into the monologue by the Manila-based theatre artist and cultural worker, Joanna Lerio, who was performing it. The actor felt that this brought her closer to the character and we hoped that it would do the same for the audience (Figure 2).

We anticipated that a third monologue, one of a child who was first left by her mother in Manila and then brought to Vancouver as a permanent resident after six years of separation, would generate considerable interest in Manila, given ongoing public concern in the Philippines about the children of migrant domestic workers (Battistella and Conaco 1998; Scalabrini Migration Center, 2003–2004; Parreñas 2005). The monologue indicates that the problems of family separation are not resolved after migration and tells—through the verbatim monologue of one youth interviewed in the course of our research—of some of the challenges of Filipino youth in Canada (Pratt 2012; Kelly 2014). In response to a



FIGURE 1 Canadian employer and domestic worker mirror their actions.  
Photo by Caleb Johnston. (Color figure available online.)

criticism of the Vancouver production (that the monologue format overstates the isolation of individual domestic workers and gives little indication of the vibrant organizing and other forms of sociality among domestic workers in Vancouver), we organized and video recorded a focus group with Filipina activists in Vancouver in which they laughed and complained about their Canadian employers and talked about their lives as domestic workers in Vancouver. In Manila, we used some of this video material in the child's scene to accentuate and make more complex the challenges of family separation and reunification. As the character tells of her loneliness and feelings of estrangement from her mother, the child of the domestic worker turns the sound of the video on and off and addresses some of her monologue directly to the video image of the most prominent and expressive of these women, who is evidently enjoying the companionship of her sister domestic workers as she speaks about her life in Vancouver (Figure 3). Finally, in a fourth scene set in a foyer of the PETA Theater, we incorporated verbatim material from a representative of the Philippine government into an existing monologue performed by (a supposed) representative of the Canadian government. The scene takes shape as a mutually congratulatory dialogue between the two state representatives in which they jointly celebrate the Philippine and Canadian government policies that facilitate the export and import of overseas Filipina workers (OFWs). We introduced the Philippine government representative on the assumption that it was the Philippine state's labor export policy that was of most direct consequence to the



FIGURE 2 Domestic worker tells her story in a cramped space. Photo by Caleb Johnston. (Color figure available online.)

audiences there (see Pratt and Johnston 2014). During this scene multiple still photographs of a domestic worker appear in a Microsoft PowerPoint presentation, photos of the actual mother of one of the family members who was able to come to Manila to view the performance.

### CONNECTING TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES AT PETA THEATER CENTER

There were thirteen performances at the PETA Theater Center between 25 November and 30 November 2013. There was an extended (recorded) talkback at the end of every show. In addition, eight family members of six live-in caregivers in Canada were able to come to the PETA production. Most flew from other regions or islands: Baguio, Cebu, and even Leyte (just days after the latter was hit hard by typhoon Haiyan/Yolanda), taking time from work and making a great effort to come to Manila. With the help of May Farrales, a Filipino-Canadian who was both a former member of the PWC and a PhD candidate at the University of British Columbia, we were able to interview all but one family member after they saw the play. We draw here mostly on the family interviews to assess the play as a means of facilitating communication and building empathy within transnational families.



FIGURE 3 Child of domestic worker has a mediated conversation with her mother. Photo by Caleb Johnston. (Color figure available online.)

A number of those we interviewed confirmed the impressions held by their family members in Vancouver: they had little understanding of circumstances in Vancouver. Some did know or had intuited negative aspects of their loved ones' experiences in Canada. Carlos, whose mother left when he was seven years old, and had returned only twice (once when he was sixteen and again when he was twenty years old), was asked whether his mother ever shared her experiences as a domestic worker. "Sometimes she shared," he said, but "I know she's hiding something. She doesn't want us to feel bad also. But of course, I know. I know the nature of her work."

Other family members spoke of a slow unveiling of details as they grew older. In Grace's case, this happened when she became an OFW herself, working as a nurse in Saudi Arabia. Her sister left when she was still in elementary school. She doesn't recall her sister telling her anything negative about working as a caregiver in Canada: "I didn't know anything about the reality of what's life like being a migrant in [Canada]. So I was even thinking that everything is okay, everything is nice." And "when they come home, you think they're rich. They go here and there but you don't know that they just borrowed that money. When you see their hands, you think they have allergies but really it's just because they always clean the toilets." Even when she was in college, Grace recalls being "one of those persons, frankly speaking, taking for granted our family working abroad. Like I mean: 'I need money on this date.' Wow, when I go working [as an OFW in Saudi Arabia], I said [to my family asking for money] 'Oh my god, you need to wait for many days for me to make this money.'"

It was when Grace was working as an OFW, and when she began to consider the LCP for herself, that her sister told her the truth of her situation in Canada:

She told me what she experienced from her previous employers: like there's no salary or that the salary given is not the same exact amount as what they agreed. She experienced, what do you call that? Like you are working as a housemaid because you are living twenty-four hours in [your employers'] home only so when they need they can easily—when it's time for you to rest—they will just knock on your door and they will ask you to come. And you can't help it. [My sister revealed for the first time:] "I was cleaning—this is what I'm doing for so many years [in Canada]. This is what I'm doing for so many years, cleaning houses." Oh my god, [I said] "When you went there, you know, you had finished your education already. You had finished your college. Then you go there: you just wash butts, you clean houses and then you will not be able to rest properly." Plus, you get homesick, when you get there. You're by yourself. You don't have your family to help you forget the hardships. You're alone. . . . [My sister] said, "You will just cry when you're abroad." That's when I realized what happened to her. We became close when I went [to work abroad] because I understood her.

Grace reasoned that her sister did not tell them the truth of her life in Canada because "she is worried that maybe we will worry about her."

Like . . . if she will tell the real situation there, *baka yung*, maybe my father and mother will get worried about her and maybe she's thinking about the education or the financial situation for the family. So she's in the hot spot. She cannot say, "I'll go home." When you go home, what will you do? Your family will not have something to eat. Really at that time when she went abroad, we were very . . . life was so hard at that time really. . . . You do not leave for yourself, you know. You love your family. You help. But I think it's too much. At least I did my part. I finished school. But my sister, she will do everything for the family. Look, I'm crying!

May told a similar story of receiving the benefits of her sister's remittances without knowing the facts of her sister's life under the LCP. Asked whether her sister shared that she was not working as a nurse in Canada, May said, "No, she did not. She just said it's not good. She just said that she didn't like how [her employers] treated her so she left [that particular job]. That's what she said." May now knows that her sister is not working as a nurse:

May: But she [did not tell] me [until] I was in first-year college. When she came home to Baguio, [I saw that] she's taking an exam for nurses [in Canada]. No, not an exam, she's reviewing so that she can take the exam. And if she passed, she will work as a nurse there [in Canada]. But, I don't know [whether she has passed the exam]. I'll ask her about that. Because she does not tell us about it anymore. Because she has to work. She has to send us money [laughs]. So she cannot go to school full time. Yah she told us that she has to send money [laughs].

Interviewer: She said that she has to send money?

May: Yah, she says that. She only told me those things here in Baguio about those money, money, money things. She never told me about those when I was in high school.

Interviewer: *Kasi bata ka pa*. [Because you were young.]

May: Yah. I think that's what she thought. Well, I'm not really that curious, I'm not thinking about what she's working at. I don't know. So yah, that's it.

Some of the reactions to the play suggest that audience members, including family members, would prefer to maintain fantasies of the good life in Canada. In talkbacks after each performance, audience members repeatedly asked for examples of happier experiences and this was the case for family members as well. When two brothers expecting to join their mother in Canada within the year were asked in an interview if there was anything missing from the play, one responded, “The stories of those who succeeded or the accomplishments of those who are working, those rejoining with their families and stuff like that.” Asked a similar question, the daughter of another domestic worker in Canada said, “I think the happy moments. The happy moments. I think all the play stated [were] the hard moments of the workers. I think the lack of the play was [that it is] missing the happy moments. The happy moments when the workers [are not at work]. What are they doing? Where are they hanging out?” The sister of another domestic worker had a similar concern that something was missing: “Um . . . the good things about Filipinos [laughs]. At least, there must be or should be something good about Filipinos there in Canada. Like they are good caregivers. They work very hard. Because they are nurses. . . . So the play, *mas maganda sana kung may ano kung na i-portray* the good things that they are doing. Not just those things that are very negative. Better *sana kung nag-play din sila ng mga* Filipinos who are doing great there, who are not just nannies.”

Is it too simplistic, though, to read these statements as merely turning away from the suffering of overseas Filipina workers to maintain the fantasy of the good life available in Canada? In an effort to expand our thinking of where political potential might lie, Tadiar (2009) has urged us to look more closely at other aspects of living labor: modes of affective, communicative, and intellectual work that “fall away” in conventional, including conventional leftist or feminist, narratives of global capitalism. These practices of self-making and communal sociability hold within them, she has argued, transformative political potential. By placing a daughter’s monologue of her troubles in the conversation with a video of domestic workers laughing and complaining about their employers or speaking about the opportunities opened up by the long nights of lightness in a Vancouver summer (as one does), we were ourselves suggesting that something more emerges in the lives of domestic workers in Vancouver, within and alongside the humiliation and hard work that they experience. There emerge alternative forms of intimacy and sociability and new sources of wonderment. Apprehended from the perspective of the daughter performed in the play, these new forms of sociality could be read as further sources of pain and loss. It is possible that the fully sensual and intimate performance experience allows audiences to experience a complexity of emotions and the deep contradictions of Canada, simultaneously a source and site of loss, opportunity, newness, humiliation, and suffering. Empathy, then, can be a complex and uncomfortable experience.

The son whose mother’s images were inserted into the government officials’ dialogue seemed to grasp this complexity and take pleasure in it, remarkable insofar as he is the only member of his nuclear family remaining in the Philippines. His mother has been able to sponsor his younger siblings to Canada as her dependents, but he was too old to qualify as a dependent and be included within this family migration. Previous to coming to the play, Carlos knew little of his mother’s involvement in the PWC, organizing and serving domestic workers in Vancouver: “She rarely shared that.” He was surprised to see her images in the play:

I wonder “What’s my mom doing there?” [laughter]. For me, I’m happy. Because I can see in her smile that she is enjoying. I always want my mom to be happy, to enjoy once in a while her life. She made a lot of sacrifices. That’s why I want her to have all the happiness she can have.

The play also stimulated empathy for the suffering of domestic workers. Although Carlos already had intuited that his mother shielded him from negative aspects of her job, and Grace and May had learned more of their sisters’ experiences over time, they spoke of the ways in which the play solidified this knowledge. From Carlos:

After watching the play it was like I was able to picture the nature of my mom’s work, my mom’s relationship with her employer, see how she adapted. I was really a bit saddened by that. But I know it’s the real deal, you know? That’s the real thing. [Long pause.] (Carlos)

I liked Joanna [a monologue of the domestic worker in *Nanay* who tells of her difficult employment situations], not really liked but was touched. *Nakarelate ako. Nakarelate* because *di ba* about this Joanna, she worked, [like my sister] for employers who did not like her or treat her well . . . [My sister], she also experienced that and I am seeing it in my own eyes [in Joanna’s scene]. And Ligaya [the monologue of the domestic worker who tells of her reasons for leaving Manila], she left for her son, right? For her children. [My sister also] left because she has to. I don’t know if she has to but she left because she wants to help us. To send us to school. . . [We are now] a lawyer, pharmacist, nurse, and psychologist: we are all professionals because of her help. What she sends us is our tuition fees, which is much money. So yah. But now life is easier for her. Ay, no! That’s not the case! She’s also in great debt in Vancouver because she helped my sister have her own pharmacy. So thanks to Canada. [Laughs] (May)

The play was not only a vehicle for transporting stories across oceans and generating new witnessing relationships within transnational families, but a means of sparking transoceanic conversations within and beyond transnational families. When May spoke with her sister after seeing *Nanay*:

[My sister] was actually laughing, not laughing at me, but the way I talked to her about it [the play]. When I told her, “Well you know it’s all true,” she laughed. I don’t know why she laughed. But she said “Yah, I told you everything about those things.” Because it’s actually . . . she tells us about those things. It’s not really that new to us [these] issues about working abroad. It’s not really that new. So yah, I told her I know it’s true and she said, “Yah, I know, I told about those, right?” That’s what she said. And then she was laughing. It’s not laughing about those experiences. I think she was laughing because I was the one telling her those things [about life under the LCP].

When we met up with May’s sister in Vancouver several months later, she was still amused that May had assumed the role of expert on Canada’s LCP after seeing *Nanay*. She also noted, though, that May is now more interested in and concerned about her life in Canada. When they speak to each other, May asks more questions—and more specific questions—about her work and life in Canada.

For Grace, the play had an even more decisive effect. Asked whether the play had changed her perspective, she responded: “Even my decision! I was even planning to go to Canada through the LCP program. I was even telling my sister ‘Wow, I love you because you sent me to this play and now I was very enlightened.’” She has decided not to migrate to Canada under the LCP but to continue to practice her profession as an OFW nurse in Saudi Arabia. In the cosmic gamble of self-making and fate playing (Tadiar 2009), after seeing the play, Grace

reassessed the stakes of permanent migration and the loss of professional standing in Canada against the risks of temporary migration as a nurse to Saudi Arabia.

## EMPATHY AND POLITICS

Performance theorist Jill Dolan (2005) has celebrated the capacity for performance to build moments of collective empathy among audiences as “utopian performatives.” Performance, she writes, can “inspire moments in which audiences feel themselves allied with each other, and with a broader, more capacious sense of the public, in which social discourse articulates the possible, rather than the insurmountable obstacles to human potential” (2). But empathy might go in other directions as well. Empathy need not elicit feel-good emotions. It might be deeply uncomfortable if it unsettles existing identifications and assumptions about the world or opens up a struggle *within* a subject across different sites of empathy and antagonism. Rather than affirming liberal goodness, empathy can allow—as it seems to have done for some family members—a fuller recognition of the suffering on which one’s own (relatively) good life depends, and challenge fantasies of a good life attainable through migration to Canada. Further, different audience members might empathize with different characters and not with each other. Partial, incomplete, contradictory capacities for and failures of empathy can be as or even more productive as moments of collective empathetic understanding. Performance space is ambiguous and unpredictable and holds the possibility of creating a time and space for conversations across these gaps and failures. In our view, this is a key potential for politics.

Public reactions to *Nanay* at PETA Theater Center during talkbacks were by no means uniformly positive and criticism, indeed a failure to empathize with the play, was as helpful as agreement and praise. A small number of audience members objected to the fact that most of the play was in English and felt that this made it an extension and exercise of U.S. colonialism; that is, an ineffective medium for inducing empathy. Others felt that it perpetuated existing tropes of domestic workers as either victims or heroes, and offered no concrete direction for political action. Those who critiqued the play as a colonial practice or as a means of perpetuating stereotypes without offering an agenda for social change could be interpreted as intimating that the play itself marketed empathy within existing relations of hierarchy and power. Members of Migrante International, a migrant organization based in Manila, approached the matter differently, empathizing with the testimony of migrant workers and family members and the play’s implicit critique of the Philippine state’s reliance on OFW remittances, but questioning our choice to present *Nanay* at PETA Theater Center because a professional theatrical production is largely inaccessible to most migrant families in the Philippines. If our intent was to speak to migrants or potential migrants, in their view we had missed the mark. We were overwhelmed and undone in other ways by other audience contributions in the talkback, for instance when a young university student, surrounded by his friends who moved in close to put their arms around him to comfort him as he spoke, told everyone present of his great unhappiness about having to join his mother in Canada within the next month. He rejected migration as his fantasy of the good life and his deepest desire was to stay in Manila to complete his studies there. The performance was the context for eliciting these diverse reactions, which made us think about and engage the issues in new ways. Empathizing with the monologues of domestic workers and their children in Canada was the starting point for, and not the end of, a conversation.

Criticizing Ranciere’s political theorizing more generally, and his theorizing of the political potential of theater more specifically, Dean (2009) has argued that his faith in the political potential of performance is sociologically naive because it assumes some level of mutual understanding that is “far fetched” (32). She noted that to be able to speak to another, to discuss and disagree (and empathize), we must “count them right in most matters” (32). In her view, increasingly we communicate, often via electronic media, within geographically dispersed but narrowly conceived like-minded communities. She argued that fewer and fewer common assumptions are held across these different communication worlds. If this is even partially true, it seems to us to make the case for the intimate time–space presence of theater where it seems possible—through a full sensory experience of narrative, bodily presence and set—to create incomplete, partial, but sufficient common understanding in enough that matters to explore what reinventing publicness might look and feel like. In our case, it led to a collaboration with our critics, Migrante International, and production of a—hopefully less colonial, less elitist—play that was performed on the basketball court in Bagong Barrio, a migrant-sending community in metropolitan Manila, in October 2014. This, though, is another story (Pratt, Johnston, and Banta [forthcoming](#)).

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank May Farrales for arranging for family members to attend the play and for coordinating and conducting the interviews with family members. We are grateful to Teilhard Paradela, a PhD candidate in history at the University of British Columbia (UBC) and native of Cebu, and May Farrales, a PhD candidate in geography at UBC and former member of the PWC in Vancouver, for cofacilitating the talkbacks after every PETA performance. We were immensely fortunate for the opportunity to work with PETA colleagues, and we are grateful to everyone who worked on the production. We thank three referees for their close and generous reading of the article and their thoughtful comments.

#### FUNDING

The production would not have been possible without the support of a Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Public Outreach grant (410-2011-2520 and 12R06577) and a United Kingdom Economic and Social Research Council grant (ES/K000594/2).

#### REFERENCES

- Battistella, G., and M. C. G. Conaco. 1998. The impact of labour migration on the children left behind: A study of elementary school children in the Philippines. *Sojourn* 13 (2): 1–22.
- Benjamin, W. 2003. *Selected writings: Vol. 4, 1938–1940*, trans. E. Jephcott, ed. H. Eiland and M. W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Belknap.
- Berlant, L. 2011. *Cruel optimism*. London: Duke University Press.
- Constable, N. 2013. Commentary 1 book review symposium. *Progress in Human Geography* 37 (4): 597–98.
- Dean, J. 2009. Politics without politics. *Parallax* 15 (3): 20–36.
- Dolan, J. 2005. *Utopia in performance: Finding hope at the theatre*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

- Hochschild, A. 2002. Love and gold. In *Global woman: Nannies, maids, and sex workers in the new economy*, ed. B. Ehrenreich and A. Hochschild, 15–30. New York: Holt.
- hooks, b. 1990. *Yearning: Race, gender and cultural politics*. Boston: South End.
- Johnston, C., and G. Pratt. 2010. *Nanay (Mother): A testimonial play*. *Cultural Geographies* 17 (1): 123–33.
- Kelly, P. 2014. Understanding intergenerational social mobility: Filipino youth in Canada. IRPP Study 45, Institute for Research on Public Policy, Montreal, Canada. <http://irpp.org/research-studies/study-no45/> (last accessed 23 January 2017).
- Mohanty, C. T. 1986. Under western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Boundary 2* (12.3): 333–58.
- Parreñas, R. S. 2005. *Children of global migration: Transnational families and gendered woes*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Paul, A. M. 2011. Stepwise international migration: A multi-stage migration pattern for the aspiring migrant. *American Journal of Sociology* 116 (6): 1842–86.
- Pedwell, C. 2014. *Affective relations: The transnational politics of empathy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Polanco Sorto, A. G. 2013. Behind the counter: Migration, labour policy and temporary work in a global fast food chain. Unpublished dissertation, Sociology, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada.
- Pratt, G. 2012. *Families apart: Migrant mothers and the conflicts of labor and love*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Pratt, G., and C. Johnston, in collaboration with the Philippine Women Centre of BC. 2014. *Nanay (Mother): A testimonial theatre play*. In *Once more, with feeling: Six affecting plays*, ed. E. Hurley, 49–90. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Pratt, G., C. Johnston, and V. Banta. Forthcoming. A travelling script: Labour migration, precarity and performance. *The Drama Review (TDR)*.
- Rancière, J. 2004. *The politics of aesthetics: The distribution of the sensible*, transl. G. Rockhill. London: Continuum.
- Scalabrini Migration Center. 2003–2004. *Hearts apart: Migration in the eyes of Filipino children*. Quezon City, Philippines: Scalabrini Migration Center.
- Spitzer, D. L., and S. Torres. 2008. *Gendered barriers to settlement and integration for live-in caregivers: A review of the literature*. Toronto: CERIS.
- Tadiar, N. X. M. 2009. *Things fall away: Philippine historical experience and the makings of globalization*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Wilson, E. 1992. The invisible flaneur. *New Left Review* 191:90–110.

GERALDINE PRATT is Professor and Canada Research Chair in Transnationalism and Precarious Labour in the Department of Geography at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2, Canada. E-mail: [gpratt@geog.ubc.ca](mailto:gpratt@geog.ubc.ca). Her interests include transnational precarious labor and work at the interface of social science research and artistic practice.

CALEB JOHNSTON is Lecturer in Human Geography in the School of Geography, Politics and Sociology at Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 7RU, UK. E-mail: [caleb.johnston@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:caleb.johnston@ncl.ac.uk). His work engages the intersection of performance and politics, with interests in testimony, witnessing, subaltern urbanisms, and precarious labor.