What the Papers Say

Representing Violence Against Overseas Contract Workers

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This article explores the case of Flor Contemplacion, a Filipino domestic worker in Singapore who was sentenced to death in 1995 for the supposed murder of a young boy. The totally different versions of the case presented by the media, especially the Singapore and Philippine presses, are explored. Violence against overseas domestic workers has long been acknowledged in sociological research. However, previous media analyses of the Contemplacion case have not addressed such violence. Here, negotiation of gender discourse in media meanings of violence with respect to the Contemplacion case is presented, thereby bringing a different approach to media and cultural analysis of the case, and contributing more generally to the dearth of media analyses of gender and violence. The article endeavors to show how media and nationalist discourses are inextricably interwoven and felt politically in the lives of Contemplacion, the other individuals involved, other overseas domestic contract workers in Singapore and their employers, and media audiences.

Keywords: Filipino domestic workers; overseas contract workers

When Flor Contemplacion, a Filipino domestic worker, was arrested, tried, and executed in Singapore in 1995 for murder, Asian and other presses reported on the case. Media discourse flowed into public spaces and across the borders of Singapore and the Philippines and into public spaces through national dailies and newspaper reports dispatched by translocated journalists. In this way, presses from Singapore, the Philippines, and other parts of the Asian region publicly mapped the lives of those involved in the drama. These were Contemplacion; one of her alleged victims, Delia Maga, also a domestic worker; family and friends of Contemplacion and Maga; Philippine and Singapore government officials; lawyers working on the case; Filipinos and Singaporeans
repatriated from the other’s country in the dramatic aftermath; and even other journalists, television anchor people working on the case.

Although the transnational space the media occupied was “open,” it was nevertheless discursively regulated by the newspaper industry, national governments, and the citizenry. The press became a major conduit of social meaning with respect to the Contemplacion case, and in both Singapore and the Philippines, they articulated, reiterated, critiqued, and extended national narratives of ethnicity, gender, and class.

Violence against overseas domestic workers has long been acknowledged in sociological research (e.g., Hilsdon, 1998, 2000; Javate de Dios, 1992; Piquero-Ballescas, 1992). However, previous media analyses of the Contemplacion case have not addressed such violence (see, e.g., Mules, 1999; Mules & Kitley, 1996). According to Van Zoonen (1994, p. 123), this omission would be characteristic of the general paucity in gendered analyses of the media, particularly in Asia (see also Gallagher, 1980; Jensen, 1986). Because popular media have neither the “language nor the vision” to engage in “systemic or cultural problems or solutions” (Erdman, 1995, p. 642), violence against women is often represented in the media as either individual resistance or individual deviance. In this article, by contrast, negotiation of gender discourse in media meanings of violence with respect to the Contemplacion case is adopted, thereby bringing a different approach to both media and cultural analysis of the case itself, and contributing more generally to the dearth of media analyses of gender and violence (see Van Zoonen, 1994, pp. 8-9). Below, I endeavor to show how media and nationalist discourses are inextricably interwoven and felt politically in the lives of Contemplacion, Maga, their family and friends, other overseas domestic contract workers in Singapore and their employers, and media audiences.

DETAILS OF THE CASE

In 1987, Contemplacion, a poor married woman with four young children, left the Philippines alone to work in Singapore in domestic service. In 1991, Contemplacion visited Maga, another domestic worker who was looking after a young boy called
Nicolas Huang. Maga was due to return to the Philippines soon for vacation, and Contemplacion gave her some gifts to deliver to her family, as is the custom for Filipinos abroad. That same day, two deaths occurred: Nicolas drowned in the bathroom, and Maga was beaten and strangled to death. Contemplacion was arrested, confessed to the murders, and was subsequently charged and imprisoned to await trial by the high court. She was found guilty and sentenced to death. Appeals against the conviction and requests for a stay of execution were all unsuccessful, and Contemplacion was hanged in March 1995.

Here, the story bifurcates. According to the Singapore version, Maga had refused to take Contemplacion’s gifts, and Contemplacion, thought to be deranged at the time, lashed out in anger, killing Maga and Huang. The Philippine version, however, suggests that during Contemplacion’s visit, Nicolas drowned in the bathroom from an epileptic fit, after which Maga called her employer, Wong Sing Keong, and sent Contemplacion home. On finding his son dead, Wong beat and strangled Maga in a fit of rage. According to this account, Contemplacion was coerced into a confession without a lawyer present, after having been drugged and administered electric shocks. She was detained, reportedly under Singapore’s Internal Security Act for nearly 2 years. Convicted through her original confession, which she tried to retract, she entered a plea of insanity on advice from the Philippine consul in Singapore in the hope that this would result in the commutation of her prison term, but instead she was sentenced to death. In March 1995, her family found out about her plight through public radio, and her children went immediately to Singapore to say goodbye to her but were refused a final embrace by prison officials (R. Contemplacion, personal communication, June 25, 1996; C. Guban, Migrante-Philippines Spokesperson, personal communication, June 26, 1996). She was hanged on Friday, March 17, 1995.

Nongovernment organizations in the Philippines who had started campaigning for migrant workers in the 1970s, led by two Marxist-oriented groups, Migrante-Philippines and Gabriela, took up the case. The media, which publicized and protested against the death sentence, locally and internationally, worked in conjunction with the nongovernment organizations.
Contemplacion’s execution initiated a wave of protest among the Philippine citizenry who thought she had been framed. They denounced the Singaporean government and accused President Ramos’s government of gross neglect. A besieged President Ramos downgraded diplomatic relations with Singapore, sent planes to collect those Filipino domestic workers who wished to return home, and called for an inquiry into government actions over the case. The inquiry report exonerated several heads of departments and contested that Contemplacion committed the alleged murder. A further forensic examination of Maga’s remains to verify specific aspects of her murder was sought from an “independent” team from the United States. Forensic results indicated that Contemplacion could have been the murderer. Ramos (1995) capitulated, renewed diplomatic relations with Singapore, and asked his country to “put this sad episode behind us” (p. 12).

**APPROACH**

Media representations of the Contemplacion case reveal different ideological processes of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and violence at work in both Singapore and the Philippines. As indicated above, the Singapore media framed Contemplacion and Maga as murderer and victim, respectively, but in the Philippines it was widely believed that Maga’s male employer had killed her and that Contemplacion became a victim of the criminal justice system of an authoritarian state. Violence such as that which surrounded Maga and Contemplacion is often considered one of the risks of participation in the increasing globalization of women’s labor in the Southeast Asian region and beyond. In the private sphere of domestic labor, human rights for workers are not adequately safeguarded by either host or labor-sending states (Hilsdon, 2000). Violation of domestic workers is largely outside the scope of international labor laws and conventions (Charlesworth, 1995). Such violence, whether in Singapore or elsewhere, is directly linked with domestic workers’ lack of citizenship rights as women and workers in both host and home countries (Stasilius & Bakan, 1997). These issues of violence against women will be explored in detail below through the murder case representations.
Singapore and Philippine daily newspapers, namely Singapore’s The Straits Times, the Philippine Daily Inquirer, the Manila Times, and the Manila Chronicle, were read by the author at significant points in the chronology of events, from Contemplacion’s arrest in May 1991 to her execution in March 1995. Using three The Straits Times articles as a starting point, this methodology produced an analysis of the language employed, which also incorporated additional newspaper images and different media texts. As Kozol (1995) argued, news and entertainment media attempt to maintain clear distinctions, but they “share cultural assumptions and aesthetic forms” (p. 648) that facilitate analyzing them together. Therefore, I referred to analyses of films about Contemplacion, particularly The Flor Contemplacion Story (Lamangan, 1995). I used data from interviews with Contemplacion’s family, her lawyer, and her Changi Prison cellmate. I also referred to discussions about Contemplacion and the lives of other domestic workers informed by a feminist and/or postcolonial perspective in the fields of anthropology, sociology, and geography and to government reports, such as the report of the Gancayco commission of inquiry of the Philippine government (Gancayco, 1995) into the deaths of Contemplacion and Maga.

Media are part of a cultural and material struggle over gender and its intersections with class and ethnicity, and both media audiences and producers, and the texts themselves, construct meaning. The media analysis used in this article commonly focuses on encoding or production of text and its decoding or analysis. I also use cultural analysis to encode and decode news texts. In semiotic analysis, I identify the relevant signs in the news texts and their dominant aspects. I study the linear progression of the narratives containing the signs (syntagmatic analysis) and ask what their absent opposites are (paradigmatic analysis) and how these relate together syntagmatically (Berger, 1995; Van Zoonen, 1994). In this way the semiotic analysis of the text develops into the broader cultural critique (Van Zoonen, 1994).

THE PRESS IN SINGAPORE AND THE PHILIPPINES

The Singapore press claims that informing the public of government policies, programs, opinions, and actions is its main role
(Birch, 1993; Yeoh & Huang, 1999b, p. 1151). Furthermore, journalists such as Leslie Fong, chief editor of *The Straits Times* (in 1993), reiterate that the contemporary role of the press is to promote consensus among the citizenry and to prevent erosion of the values on which Singapore’s economic success is based. This type of journalism is regarded as inferior in the West because of its government bias, yet Singaporean journalists defend the importance of the role of the press in nation building (Birch, 1993). The Singapore press has been solely responsible for reporting on Singapore since former Prime Minister Lee decried foreign journalists’ accounts of Singapore as interference. As a result, many foreign periodicals continue to be banned. In contrast, the Philippine press, at least prior to martial law, was regarded as one of the freest in Asia (Rosenberg, 1974). During martial law, however, regulations prohibited materials that spoke out against the government in a shutdown unequalled either in the Philippines, Singapore, or other parts of Asia (Rosenberg, 1974). The press, however, like other politically active organizations in the Philippines, operated underground during this period, honing a tradition critical of state policies, programs, and practices.

The Philippine and Singapore presses employed their respective traditions during reportage of the Contemplacion case between 1991 and 1995, thereby developing a major conduit of expression of national disagreements over the case. *The Straits Times* detailed government action and relayed government opinion on the case (i.e., Contemplacion’s arrest, the trial, appeals against the conviction, and requests for a stay of execution). This newspaper also reported on the Philippine government’s role in the case: President Ramos’s difficulties maintaining diplomatic relations with Singapore, his “embarrassment” over alleged government incompetence, and his management of an unruly citizenry. When the Philippine press criticized the Singapore government’s handling of the case, *The Straits Times* vigorously defended the government: Contemplacion, it argued, admitted her guilt and never retracted it; she had access to lawyers throughout the period of her imprisonment, and the law had been upheld and justice done. *The Straits Times*, unlike the press in the Philippines and elsewhere, reported neither on the execution nor subsequent protests against it in Singapore.
In contrast, the Philippine media, particularly the press, assumed an active role in the case that went beyond mere reportage. They actively advocated and joined in protests against Contemplacion’s conviction and death. Some journalists lobbied President Ramos to intervene in the case, traveled to Singapore to report on the hanging, and arranged Philippine TV coverage of the Changi prison vigil. They severely criticized both the Philippine and Singapore governments’ handling of the case and called for resignation of key government officials.

GENDER AND VIOLENCE

I now turn to an analysis of specific news images and text to highlight ideological processes at work in the representation of violence against women. Such analysis reveals a racialization and sexualization of Filipino domestic workers in Singapore and the Philippines.

In a newspaper article published posthumously, the drawing of a bulky, muscular, masculinized Contemplacion dominates that of a petite, feminine Maga, arms folded, head tilted. Both are accompanied by personal height and weight differentials (“NBI Physicians,” 1995, p. 25): Contemplacion is “medium-built”; Maga is “small-built.” The caption and its images frame a critique of a draft of the report of the Philippine government inquiry into the deaths of Maga and Contemplacion (Gancayco, 1995), which, among other things, contests the verdict that Contemplacion committed the murders.

The aggressive bodily presentation of Contemplacion is, according to Chesney-Lind (1999), stereotypical of media representations in which violence is usually masculinized, that is, a woman cannot kill unless she resembles a man. In addition, the victim status of the “true” woman is upheld in Maga’s diminished form. Aggression and passivity are similarly gendered in the Philippine Gancayco inquiry report (Gancayco, 1995), critiqued in the surrounding The Straits Times text. According to the report, Contemplacion was considered “not strong enough” to inflict the battering that the forensic exam revealed Maga had received (Gancayco, 1995, p. 12). Such a murder “would have to be committed by a man.” Continuing the gender polarization, The Straits Times rebuttal argues that if Maga was strangled first, then
Contemplacion, with a “taller and much heavier build,” could have inflicted the other wounds. The female body as presumed perpetrator and victim of violence is thus gendered in limited and hostile ways; male aggression is normalized, albeit illegally, and patriarchal culture is preserved.

In both presses, however, attention is deflected away from stories of violence against women, to focus on “larger,” “more significant” issues. Press discourse in which Maga was battered and killed by her employer, and Contemplacion was framed through a police cover-up and executed by a brutal Singapore criminal justice system (Alejandrino, 1995, p. 5; Deligero, 1995, p. 4; Gonzales & Fernandez, 1995, p. 1; Requejo, 1995b, p. 1), gave way to discussion of the plight of all overseas contract workers. Similarly, the Singapore press put in the forefront the defense of Singapore’s sovereignty and state legitimacy over all other aspects of the case. In this way, the normalcy of violence against women was denied.1

Every year, approximately 650,000 Filipinos, of whom 50% to 60% are women and 90% of them migrate for work in 161 countries. Many are university graduates deployed far away from their own homes and families in the Philippines to the homes of other people to keep house for strangers. The Philippine government’s reliance on the remittances earned by overseas nationals and its dependence on investment, trade, and aid ties with the countries in which these Filipinos work constrain criticism of conditions under which they work. (Hilsdon, 2000).

Press coverage of the murder of Maga and execution of Contemplacion, however, became a significant reminder in the collective memory of Filipinos of the abuse of Filipino overseas contract workers presumed prevalent over time and space. The press engaged with the citizenry, joining their marches in the streets and analyzing their protests, thereby engaging them in media production. Citizens’ outrage, sympathy, and protest served to intensify the accusations of violence surrounding Contemplacion’s life and death. Singapore was presented as uncaring and brutal, taking the unpardonable action of refusing to allow a stay of execution to examine new evidence (Gonzales & Fernandez, 1995), and Philippine government officials and departments accused of neglect underwent a “trial by media” (for example, see Fernandez, 1995; Requejo, 1995a, p. 1). Contemplacion’s case became emblematic of all alleged abuse.
and neglect experienced by Filipino overseas contract workers in their host countries, and she became the embodiment of a hero and martyr, a title commonly bestowed on all overseas contract workers (Almario, 1995; Feria, 1995; Son, 1995). She had sacrificed for her family: a victim, selfless worker, and savior of the Philippine economy.²

Researchers have suggested that grief about the general plight of contract workers was at the basis of bestowal of hero status on workers by citizenry and government (Hilsdon, 2000; Mackay, 1997; V. Rafael, personal communication, September 12, 2001). State discourse of overseas contract workers as heroes and martyrs masks the government’s inability to ameliorate any perceived detrimental effects of overseas contract work. Furthermore, writers have suggested that President Ramos acted to request a stay of execution to save his ambitions of winning a majority in the upcoming half-senate elections (Hilsdon, 2000; Mackay, 1997; also see Kulkarni, 1995; Schmetter, 1995; Tiglao, 1995). Overseas contract workers, including domestic workers, are skeptical of their ascribed status. According to Pertierra (1995, p. 54, as cited in Flores, 2000, p. 80), they mistrust and distrust the state, which “sends them away,” woos them back, awaits their remittances, and through its neglect allows them to be violated. The state in this sense operates as a male pimp (V. Rafael, personal communication, September 12, 2001), living off the earnings of the “maid trade.”

Although the intensifying grief was represented through several media forms, the feminization of hero/martyr imagery was reinforced mostly through film. The Flor Contemplacion Story depicts Contemplacion, like other female overseas workers, extending her traditional role as homemaker, in which she “sacrifices” for “the hearth, home and heaven” (see Hilsdon, 1995, pp. 38-39) to domestic service abroad, the salary from which supports her husband and family (Tolentino, 1996, p. 53). However, filmic framing of women’s work abroad in terms of provision for children, as I have argued elsewhere, enables female overseas workers to be perceived as fulfilling their state-endorsed female roles (Hilsdon, 1995, 2000). In the culture of spectatorship that surrounded The Flor Contemplacion Story, Filipinos related mostly to the sacrifice and victimhood of Contemplacion. Leading actor Nora Aunor, with whose off-screen life of familial sacrifice, loss,
and tragedy they could identify, increased spectators’ identification with Contemplacion as a “martyr” (Flores, 2000). The film, however, written in a register of “metonymic terror and oppressive conditions” (Flores, 2000, p. 90), which the Philippine people believe engulfs domestic workers in Singapore and other places, became a vehicle for expression of concern for contract workers, more so than the press because of its global circulation. The Flor Contemplacion Story played to packed audiences in several countries, including Italy, Germany, and Hong Kong, to packed audiences (Flores, 2000, p. 90).

Victimization of domestic workers was explored extensively in the film. Like other migrant wives, Contemplacion suffered abuse at home: a philandering husband who “spent big” with his wife’s earnings (Hilsdon 2000, p. 175) and who sold the rights to her life story for Australian $150,000 (about U.S. $88,500) after her execution. Contemplacion’s guilt about abandoning her children was palpable in the film. Furthermore, her twin sons told me they “missed [their] mother’s care,” and Russel, her daughter, spoke to me of her mother’s regret that being the household breadwinner left no time for mothering (J. Contemplacion, personal communication, June 25, 1996; R. Contemplacion, personal communication, June 25, 1996; E. Duterte, Kanlungan spokesperson, personal communication, June 24, 1996; “Saudi Arabia, Japan,” 1992, p. 9).

In contrast to filmic victimization of domestic workers, Filipino feminist writers and activists also emphasized the liberating aspects of working abroad. Despite the potential threat of violence, women who work abroad are considered to have unknown freedom (Javate de Dios, 1992; Piquero-Ballescas, 1992). They escape family abuse or pressures to marry, and they are able to financially support children after marital separation. They have traveled overseas and have “the promise of making concrete the cultural standards of middle class living... betamax [video], TV, cassette recorders” (Tolentino, 1996, p. 60), white goods, land, houses, and owning businesses like their employers in Singapore or Hong Kong (Hilsdon, 1998, pp. 52-55). Although such autonomy may threaten the national vision of the family and traditional roles of women, it facilitates new notions of the family, such as wage-earning couples. Through the migration of women, Tolentino (1996) argued, men are forced to learn these notions too. In this way, ideologies of male privilege are challenged.
In the Singapore press articles, journalists defended the state’s regulatory mechanisms. The murders were constituted as an attack on national values of peace and order, necessitating Contemplacion, as a convicted killer, to be subjected to the tough laws and expediency for which Singapore is well known in the West. She received the most severe punishment possible for her crimes and experienced the unwavering resolve of the Singapore state in carrying her punishment out. By “molding the people into law-abiding national citizens” (Ang & Stratton 1995, p. 180), this sustained policy, based on an authoritarian model, has reportedly lowered Singapore’s crime rate (Hilsdon, 2000). The British press, however, has described Singapore’s “passion for executing criminals” (Balakrishna, 1995) as harsh, albeit in a system based on the British colonial model. The British press has criticize Singapore’s “worsening human rights record” (Balakrishna, 1995). In the face of international media criticism of its criminal justice system (see Carreon & Burgos, 1995), the Singapore government invokes sovereignty: “Every society must decide what it considers appropriate for its circumstances. We have never claimed universal validity for our approach [to criminal justice], but it works in Singapore and we intend to keep it that way” (Jakarta Post, 1995, p. 1; also see “Editorial: Give Diplomacy,” 1995, p. 34; “Editorial: The Law,” 1995, p. 28; “Editorial: Truth Will,” 1995, p. 28; Ghosh, 1995, p. 20).

Through the execution of a “criminal” like Contemplacion, social order is restored and political stability, a presumed basis for Singapore’s continued exponential economic growth, is achieved.

RACIALIZATION OF DOMESTIC WORKERS

The article “How to Avoid Danger When the Maid Has to Be Left Alone” (Goh, 1995) is fueled by an image of what “foreign” maids are capable of. It uses interviews with employers and domestic workers to suggest ways that employers might increase surveillance and control of their domestic workers to guarantee their families’ safety. Anxieties of readers are presumed to be heightened by reliance on overseas domestic service as important to the economic success of family and nation.

The social (re)production of the “maid phenomenon,” however, remains unaddressed in The Straits Times article mentioned above. The influx of overseas domestic labor to Singapore
commenced in 1978 because the supply of local labor could not match the exponential demand caused by Singaporean women’s dramatic increase in participation in the formal economy. Overseas domestic workers in Singapore have rapidly become essential to a fast-developing industrial state. Their influx commenced in 1978. In 1998, 100,000 foreign contract workers, of which 75% were Filipinos, lived and worked in at least one eighth of Singaporean households (Yeoh & Huang, 1999a). The “maid trade” has its roots in Singapore’s patriarchal culture, which has created a sexual division of labor, including the unequal situation in which women do all the child care and housework. The contemporary Singaporean wife and mother passes on and shares these tasks of reproduction with the household’s domestic worker.

Local and migrant live-in female workers, however, have performed such reproductive tasks throughout Southeast Asia for centuries. Migrant Chinese workers, who serviced Singaporean households until the early 1900s, paved the way for extensive recruiting of domestic labor overseas when local workers were unable to meet the demand and were more likely to dictate working conditions and salaries (Yeoh & Huang, 1996, p. 484). The contemporary formation of the “maid trade,” underpinned by historical roots, is fueled by contemporary aspirations of the Singaporean middle class to have a maid and by the Filipino domestic workers who wish to have a middle-class lifestyle. Such aspirations are bolstered by the more and less privileged positions occupied by nations in the globalizing of the economy. Thus, exponential economic growth in Singapore and high unemployment and low wages in the Philippines contributed to the prevalence of live-in Filipino domestic workers in Singapore. These factors, however, have produced a contemporary work environment that arguably cannot be made safe for migrant women.

In the Goh (1995) article, however, it is domestic workers themselves who are othered as dangerous, naive, conniving, lazy, stupid, and irresponsible. These largely degendered characteristics are reminiscent of those bestowed historically by Western colonizers on their native hosts. Elsewhere in The Straits Times (Chua, 1995), Filipinos are similarly presented as happy, nonchalant, having a short attention span, romantic, and compassionate but irresponsible. In the domestic sphere such irresponsibility is
considered dangerous, ameliorated only through increasing regulation of an employee’s work and personal life. In this “colonial master” and “foreign slave” relationship, male and female “masters” advise The Straits Times audience to “educate the maid with instructions and drills not to let in strangers... Show her the repercussions of careless action, i.e., death and loss of job”; monitor the maid’s activities, such as by “conduct[ing] spot checks... of rooms and work completed”; “be alert about who the maids’ friends are”; and “keep an eye on the house and the maid” (Goh, 1995, p. 18). Creation of a distinction of superiority in relationships with employees is reminiscent of when colonial “Whiteness” was a key ingredient of orientalizing the “other.” Furthermore, Yeoh and Huang (1998) reported that employers’ surveillance and control of domestic workers inside the home are generally aimed at limiting domestic workers’ mobility outside the home. It goes beyond knowing who the maid’s friends are and restricting local and international telephone calls. The day off (usually Sunday) often becomes a significant site of negotiation (Yeoh & Huang, 1998).

Thus, the article presents the “normal” Singaporean family circumscribing a foreign domestic worker’s relationships, especially her subordination to both employers. As women, she and her female employer, however, are subordinate to her male employer. Purushotham (1998) explained the origins of this patriarchal structure in the “creation of a better life” for middle-class women. British colonizers fueled the struggles for the development of this “normal” family form, comprising mother, father, and two children, after becoming disturbed by the existence of polygamous households characterized by continuous pregnancies and women marrying at 10 years old, both perceived as dangerous for women. To this end, it replaced a myriad of family forms, including concubinage, secondary marriages, larger household groupings, and homosexual marriages, which existed prior to the late 1960s. In the resulting Singaporean family form, modernity is tempered by its relation with (Chinese) antiquity. Young women marry, give birth, and raise children, while men are breadwinners, public figures, and “natural” household heads.

The master-slave relationship portrayed in the Goh (1995) article is often explained by female employers as a type of gendered cooperation (Huang & Yeoh, 1996; Yeoh & Huang, 1998,
Although Filipino domestic workers are subjected to employers’ authority and superiority, the sharing of tasks, most notably the prime task of caring for children, is often amicable and mutually supportive. Employers acknowledged their workers’ skills and experience, and domestic workers often incur employers’ respect and admiration for being the main breadwinners in their own households in the Philippines, for having university degrees, and for being fluent in several languages. However, female employers control selection of the worker through age and ethnicity (Yeoh & Huang, 1999a). Some prefer young, unmarried domestic workers who can be trained more easily in housework and child care and have few family responsibilities in their home country. Others prefer older, married domestic workers with experience of housework and child rearing. Some prefer “homely” Indonesian domestic workers to “sociable” Filipinos.

Singaporean female employers, however, do not regard their authority relationship with Filipino women as a feminist issue, where their own gendered exploitation of having to do all the housework and child care is displaced to other women (Huang & Yeoh, 1996). Furthermore, Filipinas in the Philippines are expected to perform their traditional role as homemaker after their own waged work. In this way, Tolentino (1996) argued, the Filipina body is prepared in the Philippines for this and other gendered work in transnational space. Contemplacion and other Filipino domestic workers join the entertainers at U.S. military bases and tourist sites in Asia, whose bodies are inscribed with a type of transnationalism, identified through their consumer goods adventure overseas, the underbelly of which is their own potential maltreatment and abuse.

The racialization of Filipino women in the Goh (1995) article in the Singapore press is similar to their sexual and racial othering around the world as domestic workers, “mail order brides,” and sex workers. As victims of domestic murder in Australia, Filipinas have been represented in media reports as neurotic, vindictive, irresponsible, and sexually promiscuous. Although the voices of murdered Filipinas have been silenced, Saroca (2001) argued that their killers’ perspectives have been highlighted. In Hong Kong, Filipinas are reported to deliver sexual services along with domestic work. Chang and Groves (2000) attributed this partly to the global media advertising of Filipinas as prostitutes.
In Japan, the term *Japayuki-san*, used to describe immigrants who come to Japan, has been sexualized and racialized to refer to Filipinas. As Mackie (1998) argued with respect to Japan, media texts in Hong Kong, Australia, and Singapore attempt to “contain” Filipinas and deny them other individual and cultural identities. In Singapore, as elsewhere, such controls are linked to broader national and global discourses practiced directly by the state through its policies for foreign domestic workers.

**STATE POLICY AND VIOLATION OF DOMESTIC WORKERS’ RIGHTS**

State policy in Singapore allows the market to dictate wages of foreign domestic workers, and fails to address their conditions of work in the Employment Act. State policy also requires employees to pay both a high monthly levy and bond. As Yeoh and Huang (1998) argue, such policies tend to drive employers to excessive control over their domestic worker’s activities. Employers pay only the salary rates specified by recruiting agents (Huang & Yeoh, 1996) and work conditions are defined in a contract between an employer and the worker, often mediated by a placement agency (Yeoh & Huang, 1998). Domestic workers’ salaries have been standardized by informal agreement between employers “to keep the market stable.” Salary differentials between domestic workers could result in claims for wage increases. Although wages are much lower than those for local domestic workers, there is no labor tribunal to which domestic workers can appeal. (Huang & Yeoh, 1996). Employers forfeit their bond if their worker fails to comply with state conditions of residence: this includes regular (i.e. 6 monthly, pregnancy and venereal disease) tests which serve as a basis for either deportation or renewal of work permits. The latter is possible for a maximum of 8 years if domestic workers do not marry Singaporeans (Hilsdon, 2000).

Huang and Yeoh (1996) argue that the states’ refusal to guarantee foreign domestic workers the same protection under the Employment Act as other workers disregards the domestic worker as a “real” employee and domestic work as “real” work. The hands off approach by the Singapore government places the domestic workers like Maga and Contemplacion in the hands of
potentially abusive employers and recruiting agencies (Huang & Yeoh, 1996). The private sphere in Singapore as elsewhere is a dangerous place for female domestic laborers to live and work, a position long argued by writers such as Stasilius and Bakan (1997). Moreover, ideological conflict in which overseas workers’ rights could be debated in the press or elsewhere, while prominent in the Philippines media, is absent in Singapore (Birch, 1993).

RHETORIC OF IMPARTIALITY

Two chronologies of the key events surrounding Contemplacion’s conviction and hanging were published, one in *The Straits Times* (“Chronology of Events,” 1995) and the other, a substantially longer one, compiled by the International Labor Affairs Service of the Department of Labor and Employment for the *Manila Times* (“Flor Contemplacion Case,” 1995). Both press chronologies are imbued with Singapore government claims to impartiality concerning Contemplacion: President Ong responded to requests for a stay of execution as “special treatment,” which “we cannot give. . . without undermining the impartiality with which Singapore deals with such crimes” (“Flor Contemplacion Case,” 1995, p. 4). “[Contemplacion] was given full recourse to the due process of the law” (Ghosh, 1995, p. 20). The expediency of Singapore’s criminal justice system resonates with zero tolerance approaches to crime elsewhere, considered essential to create a stable social environment for economic development (Hilsdon, 2000).

Yet we need to examine more closely claims to impartiality as a prerequisite for economic success. Although considered Singapore’s raison d’etre, it is insufficient for national representation (Ang & Stratton, 1995). Impartiality, as defined by Ong in the press article, focuses on “equal treatment” of Contemplacion with respect to her ethnicity: “Those convicted of having committed murder in Singapore have been sentenced to death regardless of their nationalities” (“Flor Contemplacion Case,” 1995, p. 4), President Ong is reported to have said. The practice of impartiality in the Singapore criminal justice system is intended to unite a multi-ethnic citizenry whose presumed needs for a crime-free environment are given primacy over individual transgressions (Ang &
This collectivism is included in a set of national “Asian” values institutionalized in Singapore’s multiracial society with the aim of producing a unified authentic Asianness (Birch, 1993, p. 2). Singapore’s reported obsession with claims to legitimacy and sovereignty is thought to derive from such an aim originated after British colonization, when Singapore, already a multicultural trading center, fought for a merger in 1965 with the Federation of Malaysia but was forced out like a “bastard child” (Ang & Stratton, 1995, p. 182). As a result, Singapore has used the three nominated races—Chinese, Malay, and Indian—as building blocks to develop an authentic national culture, avoiding and eradicating “cultural contamination” from within and without (Ang & Stratton, 1995, p. 190). Because hybridity has been equated with lack of national identity and purity, official national narratives deny Singapore’s thoroughly hybrid culture with mixture and fusion (Ang & Stratton, 1995). Internalization of Western orientalizing discourses (Heng & Devan, 1995) produces a devalued notion of “foreigners,” evident in government policies and practices concerning, and employers’ treatment of, foreign domestic workers. Domestic workers are marginalized in a civil society that does not yet address pluralistic social needs and concerns. Civil society in Singapore is about “home,” “citizenship,” and “strengthening the core,” not about spaces at the margins occupied by those who have little access to the nation’s social facilities (Yeoh & Huang, 1999b, p. 1152). Hence, domestic workers who occupy transnational space such as that in Singapore are not yet part of an ethnoscape, by which Appadurai (1990) meant the “landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guestworkers” (pp. 296-297).

The focus on ethnicity, however, obscures its intersections with gender and class in the production of national narratives and the treatment of foreign workers. For example, the national “narrative of reproductive crisis” claims that highly educated women, mainly Chinese, are failing to produce as many babies relative to those produced by poorly educated women, mainly Indian and Malay (Heng & Devan, 1995, p. 195). Heng and Devan (1995) argued that eugenics policies imbued with genetics and sociobiological arguments have been used by the state to retraditionalize the family toward Confucian ideals, thereby...
strengthening its Chineseness. Confucian paternalism is thought to guarantee cultural continuity and economic success, rooted, according to former Prime Minister Lee, in the hard values of Confucianism, rather than in softer values of the cultures and races in the Malay archipelago and Indian subcontinent. For Prime Minister Lee, the Philippines is also a “soft” culture: “Too much democracy” has guaranteed its status as the “sick man” of Asia (Chee, 1995, p. 19). This narrative has arguably worked in association with that about the role of working women in nation building, to facilitate the exponential growth of the “maid trade.” Use of Confucian paternalism by employers manifested in disciplining domestic workers has arguably been encouraged by the state to strengthen the Chinese patriarchal family and avert a slide into economic and, more broadly, social chaos thought inevitable by the “invasion” of “softer” cultures (Heng & Devan, 1995, p. 195). More recently, Confucian paternalism perhaps underpins pronouncements by the Singaporean government for women to take over the care of their children, thus guaranteeing cultural continuity by reducing dependence on a predominantly Filipino domestic workforce.

The above discussion contests the straightforwardness of Singapore’s claims to impartiality in its treatment of both citizens and residents. I suggest that national narratives discussed here are partial with respect to gender, ethnicity, and class and they affect institutional practice. This paves the way to critique Prime Minister Ong’s claims of impartiality of the criminal justice system in the treatment of Contemplacion, whose innocence has been widely claimed. Her Philippine lawyer has suggested that “here [was] a Filipina who did not finish elementary school, without relatives and friends. . . picked up as allegedly committing a double murder, pinned down by an influential and rich family [the Wongs, Maga’s employers]” (R. T. Capulong, personal communication, June 27, 1996).

The findings of the Gancayco commission of inquiry (Gancayco, 1995), the national bureau forensic investigation, and subsequent interviews I conducted with Contemplacion’s family and friends provided evidence for the claim that Maga’s employer, not Contemplacion, killed Maga. Angie Pamurog, who formed a close friendship with her cellmate “Mama Flor,” reiterated Contemplacion’s claims that Nicolas Huang died from an
epileptic fit in the bathroom during Contemplacion’s visit to Maga and that Contemplacion had only admitted to the murders because she had been forced to (A. Pamurog, personal communication, June 27, 1996). In addition, Frenilla, a Filipino domestic worker in Singapore, reportedly overheard a discussion between Wong Sing Keong and her employer, his brother. She claimed that Wong admitted in the conversation that he killed Maga in anger after his child died while under her care (Gancayco, 1995). Later, when Wong phoned Maga’s family in the Philippines, they ignored his requests to bury her repatriated body without changing the clothes. On inspection, they found Maga’s skull damaged and shoulder broken (Gancayco, 1995; R. Contemplacion, personal communication, June 25, 1996). A forensic anthropologist found that Maga was strangled by a left-handed person, and Contemplacion was right-handed (Gancayco, 1995). This and other compelling evidence was dismissed in The Straits Times as unsubstantiated claims, fabrications, and wild accusations.

As argued above, employers’ authority over domestic workers in Chinese middle-class households such as the Wongs is unquestionable apart from possible mediation by the placement agency on an employer’s request. In this setting, abusive acts, such as the murder of a domestic worker and the framing for murder of another domestic worker, could remain largely invisible and unscrutinized. In contrast, surveillance and control of the worker herself, both inside and outside the household, can result in her becoming a virtual prisoner (Yeoh & Huang, 1998) with few pathways for resistance. Moreover, in Singapore, as in other parts of Southeast Asia, women’s strategies or styles of resistance are seldom confrontational, and domestic workers frequently respond with noncompliance and mutedness rather than public resistance (Yeoh & Huang, 1998). Like other women in Southeast Asia, they offer silence in contrast to public protest and withdrawal in contrast to affirmative action (Karim, 1995). Gender-based violence against workers in the home remains outside the purview of state regulation because the state has abdicated responsibility to employers who arguably do its work in surveillance and control of foreign domestic workers. As Yeoh and Huang (1998) argued,
the public sphere with social and legal rights under the jurisdiction of the state, nor a member of the familial where relations are governed by non-market affinities. (p. 588)

Contemplacion’s attorney, Capulong, explained further abnormalities in the Contemplacion case that throw doubt on the decisions made within the criminal justice system:

She was tortured, forced to give that confession, which she later withdrew, but they convicted her solely on the basis of it. . . . If Flor committed the double murder, where were the fingerprints at the murder scene? On staircase railings and doors, on the struggling victims or their clothes, at the sink where she reportedly vomited? Not a single print! Why? The Singapore police, reportedly one of the most efficient in the world, trained by Scotland Yard, were at the scene of the crime within 2 hours, and because there was no eyewitness, it is basic to resort to physical evidence. (R. T. Capulong, personal communication, June 27, 1996)

No motive for the alleged murders was revealed as Maga and Contemplacion were good friends. After arrest, Contemplacion was reportedly tortured with electric shocks and made to lie in a coffin of ice to force her to confess to the murders (Gancayco, 1995; R. Contemplacion, personal communication, June 25, 1996; A. Pamurog, personal communication, June 27, 1996). She was also heavily sedated during her trial, apparently forced to take tranquillizers, and subsequently was unable to recognize other inmates on her return to her cell (Gancayco, 1995; A. Pamurog, personal communication, June 27, 1996). A prison inmate apparently overheard the Philippine consul in Singapore persuading Contemplacion to admit her guilt to get a light sentence. When she followed the advice, she was convicted of murder and sentenced to death.

Challenges to the verdict, sentence, and execution of Contemplacion have been officially dismissed by the Singapore government, yet institutional practices leading to such decisions have arguably been informed by racialized and gendered national narratives discussed above, which marginalize diasporic populations. As in other nation-states, racial and sexual fantasies about what the other is capable of doing become embedded in Singapore institutional practice, fueling fears of moral and social pollution (Yeoh & Huang, 1998). Furthermore, orientalizing
discourses have been internalized, so that the Wong family may well have been considered to exemplify the retraditionalized Chinese Confucian family endorsed by the state, while Contemplacion and Maga, as foreign Filipinas, epitomized a culture “soft” and “inferior” to the “unrelieved patriarchy” represented in film when men as jailers, employers and members of the household treated women as subordinates (Guillermo, 2000).

CONCLUSION

I have used media representations of the Contemplacion case to show how violence against overseas domestic workers is understood transnationally. Three Singapore press articles provided the starting point of a semiotic analysis, which broadened into a cultural critique of the violence by mapping the relationship between women, citizenship, and the state. In each step of analysis, gender, ethnicity, and class were found to be intertwined.

The first article defends the Singapore government’s verdict and execution of Contemplacion as a murderer. Here and in the Philippine press counter claims, Contemplacion is attributed murderer status to the degree to which she is thought to resemble a man. From this limited patriarchal argument that preserves aggression as masculine, the gender aspects of the story are deferred by a focus in both presses on issues considered more significant: For Singapore, these comprise sovereignty and defense of institutional legitimacy including the criminal justice system and in the Philippines the plight of overseas contract workers have been bestowed a greater legitimacy.

Through the press, the Singapore government defends its expedient criminal justice system as a necessary prerequisite to continued economic success. This attempts to obscure the national narratives which indicate that Singapore’s representation is much broader and deeper than economic success. National identity is multiethnic, unified through a denial of hybridity and a focus on the hard values of Chinese (patriarchal) Confucianism, which marginalizes local and foreign others, particularly women. Such narratives, I argue, influence institutional practice, including that of the criminal justice system, thus offering the potential for partial treatment of individuals.
In the Philippines press, Contemplacion is racialized, like other overseas contract workers, as a hero and martyr. In its gendered form, articulated more thoroughly through film and feminist writings, hero/martyr imagery represents Contemplacion as one of a new majority of women overseas contract workers. She is victimized as a subject of abuse by employers and governments but also exercises power by economically challenging male privilege through working abroad. Intensifying national grief about contract workers’ lives is linked to their ascribed status and the strength of counter claims of Contemplacion’s innocence.

In the second article, the necessity of employer surveillance and control of domestic workers as foreign others is stressed, revealing a master-slave relationship that internalizes orientalist discourses originating in the West. Although the development of the “maid trade” has historical precedence, offers a solution to the demands of reproductive work, and fills contemporary desires for status, the live-in component creates a potentially dangerous situation for domestic workers who live and work in the private sphere where conditions remain unregulated by the state. Rather, state policy puts pressure on employers to exercise excessive control of domestic workers.

The above discussion indicates partiality in the treatment of domestic workers by media, government, and employers. In the final article discussed, however, the Singapore government claims impartiality in the treatment of Contemplacion in the criminal justice system. Abnormalities in the conduct of the case in the criminal justice and family systems that led to the arrest, trial, and execution of Contemplacion have been attributed to the embodiment of national narratives, partial with respect to gender, ethnicity, and class by key institutional actors. Impartiality as a government principle is revealed as rhetoric, and the widely held claims of Contemplacion’s innocence, long ago dismissed by the Singapore and Philippine governments, we can again hold to the light.

As Tolentino (1996) explained, domestic workers, like other overseas contract workers, undertake their odyssey from a nation space that has yet to provide a transition from economic subsistence to material affluence. Propelled by the promise of social mobility, they do menial domestic work abroad for higher salaries than they receive for professional jobs in the Philippines. Their odyssey is tempered only by the degree of suffering and anguish
they and their families can withstand. In the case of Contemplacion, this was considerable.

NOTES

1. In contrast, American writers (Erdman, 1995; Kozol, 1995; Rhode, 1995) argue that popular representations of U.S. domestic violence in the media either demonize the male perpetrator or blame the victim, which also denies normalcy of violence against women.

2. Hero/martyr imagery in the Philippines resonates with that of liberation heroes subjected to torture, abuse, and killing in a long tradition of armed and militant resistance for national liberation during and after martial law (see Hilsdon, 1995).

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