

Modern Heroes, Modern Slaves? Listening to migrant domestic workers' everyday temporalities

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Abstract

This essay draws on multi-sited, performance art-led research with Filipinx migrant domestic workers in the UK and Lebanon. It explores a dichotomy at work in the portrayal of some workers as *bagong bayani* or ‘modern heroes’—a phrase coined by then Philippine president Corazon Aquino—and as ‘modern slaves’, a term more recently associated with the humanitarian and state processing of survivors of human trafficking and labour abuse. Simultaneously victimising and venerating workers, I argue that both terms spectacularise experiences of migrant domestic work, untethering it from lived, material conditions. In so doing, the everyday nature of exploitation and abuse encountered by many migrant domestic workers is obscured, as well as the everyday expertise that enables them to evade, de-escalate, and survive it. Through making collaborative soundwalks with migrant domestic workers—a creative form similar to site-specific audio guides—my research identifies ways in which performance methodologies can be attentive to the specific temporalities of their lived experiences and to their decisions about self-representation.

Keywords: modern slavery, domestic workers, Philippines, participatory research, performance

Please cite this article as: E Parry-Davies, ‘Modern Heroes, Modern Slaves? Listening to migrant domestic workers’ everyday temporalities’, *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 15, 2020, pp. 63-81, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201220154>.

‘This song is for OFWs!’ Bess cries, over the opening chords of *Kabit Konting Ana*, a ballad made popular by Nora Aunor in the 1995 film *The Flor Contemplacion Story*.¹ It is a noisy Sunday in a Beirut karaoke bar frequented by Filipinx domestic workers.² Cast in blue by the neon striplights overhead, Bess’s friends raise their bottles of Almaza beer ‘to OFWs’—Overseas Filipino Workers—and pass on the microphone.

This particular karaoke performance of *Kabit Konting Ana*, and Bess’s identification with the state-deployed acronym ‘OFW’, reveal how migrant subjectivities can coalesce in relation to the discursive, administrative, and economic practices of nation states, even as they are enacted in specific ways by individuals and communities.³ The ballad’s poignant refrain ‘*bagong bayani*’, commonly translated as ‘modern hero’,⁴ reflects the now-dominant narrativisation of Flor Contemplacion, a Filipina domestic worker who was controversially convicted and hanged in Singapore in 1995 for the murder of a fellow domestic worker and their young ward. Since her death, Contemplacion has become a ‘martyr’ for the Philippine nation state,⁵ and (following consultation between education authorities and the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration) appears in school textbooks as a national hero.⁶ *Bagong bayani*, used in a 1988 address to workers by then president Corazon Aquino, glorifies overseas labour, providing a framework of identification for workers like Bess in one of the top remittance receiving nations in the world,

¹ Joel Lamangan (Dir.), *The Flor Contemplacion Story*, Viva Films, 1995.

² I use the term Filipinx to reflect the multiplicity of gender expressions I encountered in my research, and forthwith Filipina/o when citing others or to reflect individuals’ self-identifications.

³ Though space is too limited to discuss this scene in detail, we might think of it as an example of the ‘serious work of karaoke’, one that has prompted me to ‘listen against’ reductions of popular karaoke to hollow mimicry and instead explore what else is performed in (or by) this rendition; see C Bacarezza Balance, *Tropical Renditions: Making musical scenes in Filipino America*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2016, pp. 56–86.

⁴ The translations ‘modern-day heroes’, ‘new heroes’ and ‘national heroes’ have been variously used elsewhere.

⁵ N X M Tadiar, ‘Domestic Bodies of the Philippines’, in F V Aguilar Jr. (ed.), *Filipinos in Global Migration: At home in the world?*, Philippine Social Science Council, Quezon City, 2002, p. 284.

⁶ A R Guevarra, *Marketing Dreams, Manufacturing Heroes: The transnational labor brokering of Filipino workers*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick and London, 2010, p. 62.

with 5,000 Filipinos currently leaving to find work abroad each day.⁷

This essay draws on multi-sited, performance art-led research with Filipino domestic workers conducted between 2018 and 2020 in the United Kingdom and Lebanon, two destination countries with comparable ‘tied visa’ systems for migrant domestic workers.⁸ I explore how Aquino’s term ‘modern heroes’ operates today in relation to other dominant identifications available to migrant workers in these contexts, in particular those associated with modern slavery. The rubrics of modern heroism and modern slavery hold significant sway over public opinion and policy-making, with consequences that can be life-transforming. Together, they form a binary that both victimises and venerates migrant workers. Although distinctive in provenance, I argue that the terms perform a mirrored rhetorical device that dehistoricises and spectacularises workers’ experiences, prompting certain ‘bureaucratic performances’ within the context of labour migration.⁹ For theatre scholar Alison Jeffers, bureaucratic performances ‘interpellate’ migrant and asylum seeker subjects *as such*, prompting them to take on these categories for legal, administrative, and humanitarian authorities rather than describing or reflecting their chosen identifications.¹⁰ In this sense, migration discourses (and their material effects) are performative, setting the stage for migrants’ own enactments and identifications in specific historical contexts. Following Butler’s succinct definition, such discourses have the power to ‘produce that which [they] name’, conditioning how subjects live through and embody processes of migration as ‘a manner of doing, dramatizing

⁷ World Bank, ‘Data Release: Remittances to low- and middle-income countries on track to reach \$551 billion in 2019 and \$597 billion by 2021’, World Bank, 16 October 2019, retrieved 3 March 2020, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/peoplemove/data-release-remittances-low-and-middle-income-countries-track-reach-551-billion-2019>; Commission on Filipinos Overseas, ‘Stock Estimates of Filipinos Overseas’, Experts Group Meeting ‘Strengthening the demographic evidence base for the post-2015 development agenda’, United Nations Headquarters, New York, 5–6 October 2015.

⁸ The *kafala* (sponsorship) system is in place in Lebanon, meaning that migrant domestic workers’ visas are tied to specific employers, and domestic workers are not included in national labour laws. In the UK, a tied visa system was introduced in 2012 and was partially relaxed in 2016, meaning that domestic workers can now only move employers during an initial six-month visa period. Neither the UK nor Lebanon have ratified the International Labour Organization’s Convention 189 on domestic work.

⁹ A Jeffers, *Refugees, Theatre and Crisis: Performing global identities*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2012.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

and *reproducing* a historical situation.¹¹

This article looks beneath the pervasive binary of modern heroes/modern slaves, and seeks to learn from migrant workers who have struggled against its reproduction, and sought to ‘dramatize’ or perform migration against its grain. Through making collaborative soundwalks with migrant domestic workers (a creative form similar to site-specific audio guides), my research suggests ways in which performance-led methods can be attentive to the lived experiences and interventions masked by the binary. Specifically, I seek to shift the focus from spectacular temporalities to the everyday exploitation that many domestic workers face. Building on this issue’s theme, I further emphasise the everyday *expertise* that enables them to evade, defy, and survive it.

Methodology

The research method of soundwalk-making on which this article is based aims to generate a mode of listening that is attentive to participants’ experiences and their decision-making about how to represent them to a wider public: I herewith refer to the co-producers of the soundwalks as collaborators. Making a soundwalk involves going for a walk and recording a conversation in a place a collaborator has chosen for its personal significance, an activity that usually takes place in the context of spending time together on several informal or community-based occasions. The recording is then co-edited with the collaborator, who learns how to use sound editing software and whose time and creative labour is appropriately remunerated.¹² The finished soundwalk is uploaded to the project website (homemakersounds.org) along with instructions and a map so that listeners can return to the place in question, playing the edited soundwalk through headphones as they re-trace our walk.

¹¹ J Butler, ‘Critically Queer’, *GLQ*, vol. 1, issue 1, 1993, pp. 17–32, p. 17, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-1-1-17>; J Butler, ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory’, *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, issue 4, 1988, pp. 519–531, p. 521, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893> (emphasis in original).

¹² In the UK, this was calculated at GBP 12.50/hour (approx. USD 15) in line with fair pay rates promoted by the Independent Theatre Council and the performing arts’ trade union Equity. In Lebanon, the honorarium was calculated at USD 10/hour plus travel expenses, in consultation with members of the Alliance of Migrant Domestic Workers, as well as current local rates for sound and video editors. These calculations were intended to remunerate collaborators fairly, without placing pressure on them to participate. Remuneration could only be granted for the time collaborators spent on editing, since institutional ethics guidelines prohibit paying research subjects for interviews or other forms of participation.

The website was made public in October 2019 and at the time of writing is still growing, with more soundwalks to be uploaded in the coming months as collaborations continue (with an anticipated total of around twenty). While the soundwalks are designed to be site-specific, customisable options are offered so as to ensure inclusivity for listeners with varied mobility, and as online artefacts they can be downloaded around the world—for example by collaborators’ activist colleagues, friends, and family in countries of origin. Prior to commencing the research, I co-facilitated a workshop on research ethics with students and members of the Filipinx community in London in order to integrate their perspectives into the design of the project. In addition to the importance of co-editing the soundwalks, workshop participants emphasised prioritising collaborators’ agency in guiding the structure, pace, and focus of conversations, especially when these involved painful experiences that may have already been interrogated (for example by immigration officials).¹³ The walking conversations begin with my question ‘Why this place?’, but are then directed by collaborators. As a result, they are markedly diverse, focussing on topics such as activism, gender and sexual orientation, music, faith and family relationships, in addition to migration and domestic labour itself. While the majority of collaborators were Filipinx, I took up their invitations to colleagues and friends from other countries of origin, including Madagascar and Côte d’Ivoire, to participate. The soundwalks therefore include speech in English, French, and Tagalog, with Arabic terms interspersed in the case of Lebanon-based walks, reflecting the mixed vernacular of many migrant workers (and the scope of my own language proficiencies).

Although soundwalks are a well-established art genre, they have much less commonly been used as a collaborative research method for the purposes of gathering empirical findings.¹⁴ One collaborator remarked on her discovery of

¹³ The workshop took place at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama in March 2015. My co-facilitator was John Lumapay, a Filipina community theatre-maker and palliative care nurse. A full consideration of research ethics is beyond the scope of this article; for more information, see <https://homemakersounds.org/about>.

¹⁴ By comparison, the research project *Walking Interconnections: Researching the lived experiences of disabled people for a sustainable society* used walking and sound as method, although in this case the raw recordings were edited and made into an audio play by one individual (Heddon): see D Heddon and S Porter, ‘Walking Interconnections’, *CSPA Quarterly*, issue 18, 2017, pp. 18–21. The site-responsive play *Nanay* was based on interviews including with Filipinos in Canada under the Live-In Caregiver Program, but subsequently dramatised and performed as a testimonial play by professional actors; see G Pratt, C Johnston, and V Banta, ‘A Traveling Script: Labor migration, precarity, and performance’, *TDR*, vol. 61, issue 2, 2017, pp. 48–70, https://doi.org/10.1162/DRAM_a_00647.

how editing could alter a story in ‘systematic’ ways.¹⁵ Comparing the method to other researchers she had had contact with, she noted: ‘I see the difference in the transparency and the honesty. You say “this is your voice”, and first of all we work together. I feel I am inside and I am involved, really inside that story.’¹⁶ Soundwalk-making demands sustained relationships with a small number of collaborators, which I supplemented by spending time in less formalised ways with a greater number of migrant domestic workers in social, community, activist, and one-on-one settings. At the time of writing, ten collaborators had spent between two and fourteen hours each editing, and all individuals mentioned in this article decided on the pseudonyms used. Soundwalk-making thus aims to frame time together in a way that prioritises close listening at a location and pace chosen by collaborators, as well as their considered, creative decision-making about how to share this with other audiences through co-editing. One key insight afforded by this research concerns the temporalities at stake in the conditions of migrant domestic work; notably, the routines, rhythms, and continuities of the everyday. In the following section, I explore how such temporalities become masked by the spectacular modern heroes/modern slaves binary.

The Spectacular ‘Modern’

While the qualifier ‘modern’ may seem to refer to a specific form of periodisation, it is my argument that it operates in both ‘modern hero’ and ‘modern slave’ to de-historicise and spectacularise the figures it refers to. As performance scholar Diana Taylor has shown, these ‘universal and unifying’ spectacles eclipse lived temporalities and material conditions. In this particular case, the hyper-visible, transhistorical figure of the modern hero/slave erases specific (and diverse) realities of migrant labour.¹⁷ Spectacles are constructed to ‘essentialize [...] even as they “disappear” the traces of the performativity of that construction.’¹⁸ The spectacular modern hero/slave script thereby polarises experiences of migrant labour into a reductive binary, and at the same time presents this binary as a given. Yet exposing the performative construction of the spectacle points us towards its limitations.

¹⁵ Reflection on process with Sara and Rose, 5 October 2019.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ D Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing cultural memory in the Americas*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2003, p. 145. An important reference for Taylor is G Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*, Zone Books, New York, 1995 [1967].

¹⁸ D Taylor, *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of gender and nationalism in Argentina’s ‘Dirty War’*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1997, pp. 24–25.

For Guevarra, the term *bagong bayani* maps onto a landscape of national heroes that rhetorically positions overseas Filipino workers alongside celebrated figures such as the nineteenth-century author José Rizal.¹⁹ As Encinas-Franco adds, Cory Aquino's own presidency was predicated on heroic and sacrificial rhetorics (not least the martyr-like death of her husband), reinforcing the spectacular trope into which overseas workers would be now included.²⁰ *Modern* heroes (like the more literal translation 'new') therefore implies 'unifying and universal' commensurability, rather than historical specificity. Originally addressed to an audience of domestic workers in Hong Kong, Aquino's term and the heroism and sacrifice it indexes are today woven into the everyday language and self-perceptions of many migrant domestic workers in Lebanon and the UK.

Current president Rodrigo Duterte notably gave special mention to OFWs as 'everyday heroes' on National Heroes Day 2018.²¹ The protection of 10 million OFW 'modern-day heroes' was more recently reiterated in the House of Representatives in relation to the proposed creation of a special Department of Filipinos Overseas and Foreign Employment.²² Even activists I worked with who vehemently criticised Duterte and the Philippine state's labour export policies found it a conscious challenge to break with traditions such as giving plentiful gifts from abroad (*pasalubong*), which (re-)enact the overseas worker's performance of success and generosity. Through the affectively-charged normalisation of performances such as this, the *bagong bayani* trope both recasts specific experiences of migration in a transhistorical mould of heroism, and—as Rodriguez argues—concurrently emphasises individual self-sacrifice to disguise the material role of the state in brokering out-migration.²³ As Gibson, Law, and McKay have noted of Philippine class processes, coupling rhetorics of heroism with those of victimisation further serve to obscure specific material

¹⁹ Guevarra, p. 54.

²⁰ J Encinas-Franco, 'Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) as Heroes: Discursive origins of the "bagong bayani" in the era of labor export', *Humanities Diliman*, vol. 12, issue 2, 2015, pp. 56–78.

²¹ Staff Report, 'Duterte Salutes OFWs on National Heroes Day', *The Filipino Times*, 27 August 2018, retrieved 3 March 2020, <https://filipinotimes.net/news/2018/08/27/duterte-salutes-ofws-national-heroes-day>.

²² Too complex to be sufficiently explored in this article, the proposed creation of the Department (House Bill No. 5832) is a key instrument in the shaping of state-OFW relations under Duterte. C Luci-Atienza, 'House approves on 2nd reading the bill creating a department for OFWs', *Manila Bulletin*, 5 March 2020, <http://news.mb.com.ph/2020/03/05/house-approves-on-2nd-reading-the-bill-creating-a-department-for-ofws>.

²³ R Magalit Rodriguez, *Migrants for Export: How the Philippine state brokers labor to the world*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 2010, p. 84.

histories at stake.²⁴

It is important to interrogate the paradigm of modern slavery alongside that of modern heroism. Taken at face value, the former can merely exacerbate the narrative of victimhood and self-sacrifice already present in the latter.²⁵ Modern slavery has been forcefully criticised as the chosen headline of a ‘deep-pocketed, high profile and increasingly glamorous [anti-]“modern slavery” club’,²⁶ which strategically brands forced labour as an issue pertaining to ‘deviant individuals’ and their ‘victims’, concealing its relation to the same structural labour exploitation that enabled ‘philanthrocapitalists’ invested in the movement to amass their wealth in the first place.²⁷ Modern slavery rhetoric has specific consequences when it comes to gender, which are arguably a residue of the focus on trafficking for sexual exploitation within early anti-trafficking movements.²⁸ A majority of Filipinx domestic workers identify as female, and their profiling as victims intersects with racist, misogynistic narratives of passive Asian women.

In Lebanon, the term ‘modern slavery’ has provided leverage in the critique of the *kafala* (sponsorship) system, which has consistently been denounced as exploitative and violent by organisations and migrant domestic workers

²⁴ K Gibson, L Law, and D McKay, ‘Beyond Heroes and Victims: Filipina contract migrants, economic activism and class transformations’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, vol. 3, issue 3, 2001, pp. 365–386, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616740110078185>. The authors forecast some of the same problematics in the heroism/slavery binary that I analyse in this article; while my intention is to explore what this masks about the texture of domestic workers’ everyday experiences, theirs is to theorise class processes and ‘economic activism’ in histories of Philippine out-migration.

²⁵ The Canadian documentary film *Modern Heroes, Modern Slaves*, for example, presents a critique of Philippine labour export via stories of OFWs’ plight (centring on interviews with Flor Contemplacion’s daughter), yet does not contextualise ‘modern slavery’ as a humanitarian paradigm or challenge representations of victimhood and passivity. It instead presents Filipino women as trapped in an almost inevitable cycle of exploitation orchestrated by the state. Marie Boti (Dir.), *Modern Heroes, Modern Slaves*, Productions Multi-Monde, 1997.

²⁶ A T Gallagher, ‘What’s Wrong With the Global Slavery Index?’, *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 8, 2017, pp. 90–112, p. 92, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.20121786>.

²⁷ J A Chuang, ‘Giving as Governance? Philanthrocapitalism and modern-day slavery abolitionism’, *UCLA Law Review*, vol. 62, issue 6, 2015, pp. 1516–1556, p. 1525, p. 1520.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1522.

themselves.²⁹ In May 2019, incoming labour minister Camille Abousleiman admitted problems with the *kafala* system, describing it as ‘modern slavery in its extreme.’³⁰ In the UK, former home secretary and prime minister Theresa May has been particularly vocal in committing to abolish the ‘barbaric evil’ of modern slavery.³¹ In this rhetoric, ‘modern’ similarly works to create historical commensurability rather than particularity, positioning Britain as a moral crusader in the footprints of nineteenth-century abolitionism. Not coincidentally, however, May was also responsible for the anti-immigration ‘hostile environment’ policy, the implementation of a tied visa system for domestic workers, and the removal of permanent settlement for domestic workers.³² These contradictions are captured in Fudge and Mantouvalou’s

²⁹ See, for example: Amnesty International, *Their House is My Prison: Exploitation of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon*, 2019, retrieved 24 June 2020, <http://amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE1800222019ENGLISH.pdf>; Insan Association, *Trapped: Migrant domestic workers in Lebanon*, 2016, <http://insanassociation.org/en/images/Trapped.Compressed.pdf>; KAFA (Enough) Violence and Exploitation, *Policy Paper on Reforming the ‘Sponsorship System’ for Migrant Domestic Workers: Towards an alternative governance scheme in Lebanon*, 2012, http://kafa.org.lb/sites/default/files/2019-02/Reforming_JKafalaSystemLeb_0.pdf; Human Rights Watch, *Without Protection: How the Lebanese justice system fails migrant domestic workers*, 2010, <http://hrw.org/node/93006>.

³⁰ Cited in R Hall, ‘How migrant workers have become victims of “modern slavery” in Lebanon’, *The Independent*, 2 May 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/lebanon-kafala-migrant-workers-labour-minister-camille-abousleiman-a8894056.html>. Activist groups in Lebanon have responded to criticisms of modern slavery and anti-trafficking paradigms; for example, a recent collaboration between the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) and the Lebanon-based Anti-Racism Movement instead focussed on ‘safe and fair migration’, noting problematic (if unintended) associations between anti-trafficking and anti-immigration programmes. See Anti-Racism Movement and GAATW, *Migrant Domestic Workers’ Community Organizing within the Lebanese Socio-Legal Context: A feminist participatory action research*, GAATW, Bangkok, 2019, http://gaatw.org/publications/Safe_and_Fair_FPAR/FPAR_Report_ARM.pdf.

³¹ T May, ‘My Government will lead the way in defeating modern slavery’, *The Telegraph*, 30 July 2016, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/07/30/we-will-lead-the-way-in-defeating-modern-slavery>

³² J Kirkup and R Winnett, ‘Theresa May interview: “We’re going to give illegal migrants a really hostile reception”’, *The Telegraph*, 25 May 2012, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/immigration/9291483/Theresa-May-interview-Were-going-to-give-illegal-migrants-a-really-hostile-reception.html>; A Travis, ‘New visa rules for domestic workers “will turn the clock back 15 years”’, *The Guardian*, 29 February 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2012/feb/29/new-visa-rules-domestic-workers>; House of Commons Debate, 29 February 2012, Co. 34–36WS, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201212/cmhansrd/cm120229/debindx/120229-x.htm>.

analyses of the UK's *Modern Slavery Act* of 2015.³³

Caught in the crosshairs of these paradigms, the double interpellation of some Filipinx migrant domestic workers as modern heroes and modern slaves has powerful correlates in legal and administrative systems in the Philippines and destination countries. Yet rhetorically—and through its material effects—this binary masks migrant workers' own accounts of the temporalities of everyday abuse and survival.

Temporalities of Everyday Abuse

We are in Holland Park. I choose this place because this is my memorable place when I decided to run away from my employer[s]. And my employer[s], now I know that they are here again. They come here again for vacation, for holiday. I know that they are here. I decided to go here because I want to see them now. I want to see them. I want to see their face, if they see me what their reaction. I want to prove to them now that I'm not nothing. I can do anything, for me and for my family.³⁴

So opens the soundwalk *not nothing*, recorded and co-edited with Ann, who migrated as a domestic worker from the Philippines to Qatar in 2015, and then escaped in London when she was brought there on her employers' family holiday in 2017. At the time of writing she is undergoing assessment through the UK National Referral Mechanism, set up in 2009 for the purposes of 'identifying and referring potential victims of modern slavery.'³⁵ Though I had invited Ann to show me a place that was memorable or meaningful to her, she surprised me by using the occasion of our walk to inscribe the space with a new significance. Ann's employers had frequently brought her to Holland Park, and it was a site

³³ J Fudge, 'Modern Slavery, Unfree Labour and the Labour Market: The social dynamics of legal characterization', *Social and Legal Studies*, vol. 27, issue 4, 2018, pp. 414–434, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0964663917746736>; V Mantouvalou, 'The UK Modern Slavery Act 2015 Three Years On', *Modern Law Review*, vol. 81, issue 6, 2018, pp. 1017–1045.

³⁴ Ann, *not nothing*, 2019, retrieved 14 November 2019, <https://homemakersounds.org/not-nothing>.

³⁵ UK Government, 'What the National Referral Mechanism is' in 'National referral mechanism guidance: adult (England and Wales)', retrieved 14 November 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/human-trafficking-victims-referral-and-assessment-forms/guidance-on-the-national-referral-mechanism-for-potential-adult-victims-of-modern-slavery-england-and-wales>.

associated with memories of routine overwork, and physical and mental abuse. Though we did not encounter her employers that day, Ann's intention was to demonstrate her growing sense of self-worth to them, to herself, and perhaps also to me and the audience the soundwalk implied—the potential 'earwitnesses' to her act.

At first glance, in choosing Holland Park, Ann seems to emphasise a pivotal event: one associated with the most severe incident of physical abuse at the hands of her employer and her consequent decision to escape. On a closer reading, however, the visit to Holland Park foregrounds other temporalities of everyday abuse characterising Ann's experience. As the passage cited above suggests, the decision to return there in the hope of seeing her employers was more about attesting to her continuing survival and growing sense of agency than it was about commemorating a particular incident of abuse. Additionally, our walk was punctuated with embodied recollections of routine trips to the park stimulated by Ann's return to the space, layers of memory which the listener would later add to in their own journey through the park's sonic landscape. The slow, comfortable pace of walking side-by-side also allowed for other repetitions to emerge. Ann began to discuss how the feeling that she was 'nothing' had started in childhood following her parents' separation. It was later consolidated by the violence her employers perpetrated, which extended not only to specific incidents but also to everyday abuse and humiliation that can be harder to describe. Ann survived on leftovers from her employers' plates, and weighed just 37 kg when she arrived in London. As a nanny in a house of eight children, also tasked with cleaning, ironing and cooking, she frequently mentioned 'not having time' to sleep, take a shower or even go to the toilet. The imperative to get back to work was paramount, as evident in her description of the seven-year-old child she cared for: 'He called me *kaka* [shit] every day. "Go away kaka." [...] What can I do? Just cry, go to the toilet, cry, and after crying wash the face, stand up again and go work again. That's my life.'³⁶

Creating the soundwalk was intended to make time for Ann to share her experience during the walk and in the process of editing. Unlike an ethnographic interview or observation, the notoriously slow and time-consuming practice of sound editing allowed her to make considered decisions about how she wanted to represent her experiences. In addition to the initial walk, Ann spent more than seven hours over multiple days editing a soundwalk that ended up shorter than fourteen minutes. Notably, she chose to remove many of the more legible markers of abuse (such as the extent of her weight loss, which I refer to above) in favour of attending carefully to the repetitions, routines, and continuities of the everyday. These are reflected, as I describe above, in her attention to the attritional exhaustion of work and the ways in which labour abuse recalled

³⁶ Audio-recorded conversation with Ann, 13 July 2019.

difficult family relationships from her childhood. Understanding violence as an everyday practice—whose effects intersect with other life experiences and self-perceptions—allows us to recognise forms of abuse that are less legible within the spectacular terms outlined by the modern hero/modern slave paradigm, yet which for Ann were crucial to convey to listeners. Moreover, reflecting on her decision to take up my invitation to collaborate on a soundwalk, Ann stressed her motivation to expose the ongoing and little-known nature of abuse in the UK: ‘To show to the people of London, especially in the government, to let them know that there is happening abuse, like me, maybe not only me, maybe there’s a lot like me but we don’t know. That’s my intention.’³⁷ The soundwalk, then, began by recalling a pivotal moment, but ultimately offered a way for Ann to make time to attend to everyday temporal frames and ongoing, invisible practices of normalised abuse.

Ann’s experiences recall the everyday temporalities narrated by other participants, some of whom also chose to highlight the long-term effects of their work. Helen, who is 52 years old, has a comparatively consensual and stable employment relationship. Yet she works a 60-hour week supplemented by part-time work on evenings and weekends because she is not paid the UK minimum wage. Moreover, she cannot effectively negotiate her salary or change employers because of the UK’s tied visa system. In her soundwalk *let the people know, let them feel*, Helen states:

In cleaning we always use chemical stuff, and we are not really protected by the health insurance. But our health is suffering. Not in one year, not in two years. But as we grow older. For example, in our lungs. As the years pass by, using chemicals every day, it will affect our health. And then you’re thinking too much that if you’re sick, you will be terminated by your employer; they don’t need you anymore. So the worries are there. There’s no security for the migrant domestic worker.³⁸

³⁷ Reflection on process with Ann, 27 August 2019. The aspirations of collaborators were diverse. While not all sought the high-level visibility that Ann suggests here, the soundwalks have been disseminated for advocacy purposes by groups campaigning for migrant domestic workers’ rights, such as the Alliance of Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon, and Kanlungan and the Filipino Domestic Workers’ Association in the UK: see <http://homemakersounds.org/press>. In approaching collaborators, I was careful not to over-promise the reach of the soundwalks or their influence on policy-making.

³⁸ Helen, *let the people know, let them feel*, 2019, <https://homemakersounds.org/let-the-people-know>.

The long-term damage to physical and mental health brought about by precarious, uninsured domestic labour is not visible as spectacular violence or enslavement. Nor does the image of the ageing and unwell female body fit within the persona of the heroic OFW, whose desirability in part arises from her economic productivity and consumer power. While examining this would fall within the scope of a different research project, it is also worth noting that the effects of long-term illness and employment ‘termination’ extend not only to domestic workers themselves, but frequently to their families and economic dependents, and thus intersect with other structures of ‘slow violence,’ poverty and ecological damage in countries of origin and elsewhere.³⁹

Everyday Expertise

The spectacular temporalities associated with the terms modern slavery and modern heroes also obscure migrant domestic workers’ everyday *expertise*. While the Philippine state is keen to impress the value of their skills on overseas domestic workers through pre-departure orientation seminars and other pedagogic apparatuses, critics have noted that this can be couched in a nationalist or racialising framework that, likewise, simultaneously lionises workers and conceals entrenched structures of exploitation and abuse. The expertise I am referring to is distinct, for example, from the ‘three Ms’ scrutinised by Guevarra (*masipag*, hardworking; *matalino*, intelligent; and *may abilidad*, highly skilled), since I am not only describing the skills workers demonstrate within the bounds of domestic labour.⁴⁰ Instead, I am interested in an embodied expertise developed around how to live with the conditions of migration and undervalued labour, in particular for live-in domestic workers for whom ‘home’ is the site of exploitation.

³⁹ The term ‘slow violence’ is associated with Rob Nixon and emphasises the attritional and anonymous disasters hidden behind ‘spectacular’ catastrophic events. R Nixon, *Slow Violence and Environmentalism of the Poor*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2012. In scholarship on the Philippines, Nixon’s concept has been effectively engaged in a 2018 collection of articles on Typhoon Haiyan, see: N Curato, ‘Beyond the Spectacle of Mega-Disasters: The Philippines five years after Haiyan’, *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 50, issue 1, 2018, pp. 58–66, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2017.1407249>.

⁴⁰ Guevarra, p. 64. For an analysis of how Filipina domestic workers understand being ‘racially distinguished from other domestic workers’, see R S Parreñas, *Servants of Globalization: Women, migration and domestic work*, Ateneo de Manila University Press, Manila, 2001, pp. 174–179.

Lina's soundwalk *kaya natin ito* (a Tagalog expression similar to 'we can do it'), describes being undocumented in Beirut following her escape from an employer. Those who are *walang papel*—without papers—risk being detained, deported, and fined by the Lebanese authorities. The Philippine government, meanwhile, considers all domestic workers who have arrived in Lebanon since 2006, when it banned them from going there to work, as victims of human trafficking or illegal recruitment.⁴¹ Yet neither of these legal-bureaucratic categories—criminal or victim—correspond to Lina's self-identification. Instead, with confidence and even humour, she stressed her *expertise* evading both exploitation and detention. Hiding her mobile phone and charger in her underwear, she escaped after being told she would have no day off and be paid just USD 150 per month. After contacting friends and finding undeclared work in a hotel, she purchased an all-white hospital uniform that she wore when travelling around the city, so that she would be assumed to be a documented employee. She learnt to predict exactly where and when police checkpoints would be set up, and how to stay alert when travelling on buses. In this way, Lina successfully avoided being caught for three years, until she found an employer who legalised her stay in Lebanon. She has now lived in Beirut for twenty-five years. She speaks Arabic fluently and describes herself as 'adventurous' in the city. She stressed her determination to survive and stay in Beirut, and refusal to be scared by the threat of detention: 'I said no, I'm here! And I know which areas I'm safe.'⁴² While it is important not to downplay the violence perpetrated by abuse, trafficking, and detention, Lina's account suggests that we should not allow narratives of victimisation to stop us recognising migrant workers' expertise.

Just as Lina's expertise is embedded into her daily practices, for many domestic workers I engaged with struggles around abuse and labour rights operated through daily, weekly, or monthly routines rather than one-off events. My research with Lina and others in Lebanon reflects recent scholarship noting that such struggles take place at both everyday and organised collective levels, though I found fluid relationships across these, enacted by people who may or may not self-identify as activists, rather than the more rigid categorisations noted

⁴¹ The ban was initially imposed due to security issues around the 2006 war, along with inadequate legal protection of workers' rights. More recently, see Embassy of the Philippines in Beirut, 'PH Embassy Boosts Advocacy Against Human Trafficking and Illegal Recruitment to Lebanon', 6 November 2018, <https://beirutpe.dfa.gov.ph/newsroom/embassy-news/326-ph-embassy-boosts-advocacy-against-human-trafficking-illegal-recruitment-to-lebanon>; also K Hamill, *Trafficking of Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon: A legal analysis*, KAFA (Enough) Violence and Exploitation, Beirut, 2011, pp. 35–36.

⁴² Lina, *kaya natin ito*, 2019, https://homemakersounds.org/kaya_natin_ito.

by scholars such as Mansour-Ille and Hendow.⁴³ As scholarship on domestic work more broadly has documented, its ‘intimate labour’ can be conducive both to pernicious everyday abuse and to resourceful everyday negotiation on the part of the worker.⁴⁴ As Parreñas describes, employers’ perceptions of domestic workers as ‘one of the family’, for example, can exacerbate exploitation, but can also be used by workers to ‘manipulate employers and resist the inequalities that this myth perpetuates.’⁴⁵

In the soundwalk *one day the kafala system will change*, Sara describes confrontations with her first employer in Lebanon, who would add hours to her work by bringing extra piles of clothes to iron for members of the extended family, or would make excuses to withhold Sara’s salary at the end of each month. Sara described the exhaustion of demanding respect and rights, both through negotiations with her employers and through ten years of activism on a national scale. Her account points out how, as the temporal frame of feminist and anti-racist struggle, the everyday can bring about a feeling of being ‘worn out or worn down’ (to use Sara Ahmed’s terms) by routine confrontations, even alongside the hope of incremental change.⁴⁶ Her soundwalk re-traces the route of the migrant worker Labour Day marches of 2018 and 2019 from Sodeco Square. As Sara reflects, ‘It’s difficult to fight for ten years and nothing’s changed. Really, sometimes we can say *kehalas*—finished—I don’t want to do it anymore. But, as activists we have that hope: one day it will be changed. [...] So I keep that in my mind, so like this time I feel strong again. To face all the problems and to continue again and again and again, every year and every day.’⁴⁷ While Sara and Rose, her collaborator, made the decision to open their soundwalk with a statement about domestic worker fatalities—which have been reported at

⁴³ D Mansour-Ille and M Hendow, ‘From Exclusion to Resistance: Migrant domestic workers and the evolution of agency in Lebanon’, *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, vol. 16, issue 4, 2018, pp. 449–469, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2017.1400631>. See also A Pande, ‘From “Balcony talk” and “Practical Prayers” to Illegal Collectives: Migrant domestic workers and meso-level resistances in Lebanon’, *Gender and Society*, vol. 26, issue 3, 2012, pp. 382–405, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243212439247>; F Kobaissy, ‘Organizing the Unorganized: Migrant domestic workers in Lebanon’, *Cairo Papers in Social Science*, vol. 34, issue 3, 2016.

⁴⁴ E Boris and R S Parreñas, *Intimate Labors: Cultures, technologies, and the politics of care*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2010; B Anderson, *Doing the Dirty Work?: The global politics of domestic labour*, Zed Books, London, 2000.

⁴⁵ Parreñas, p. 180.

⁴⁶ S Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2017, p. 162.

⁴⁷ Sara and Rose, *one day the kafala system will change*, 2019, <https://homemakersounds.org/one-day>.

a shocking average of two instances per week in Lebanon⁴⁸—the soundwalk also spent time listening to the everyday rights infringements encountered by its makers. Their descriptions impress on listeners that daily gestures perform and normalise subordination through practices that can also serve to rationalise more spectacular forms of abuse and humiliation. Sara described defying this through the daily routine of fetching her employers' breakfast:

Every morning also, when she say, “Go buy croissants”: two, for them only. Me? No. I’m not have right to eat croissants. When I have my salary I keep little money with me. When she told me to go buy croissants, I go bought for them, I go bought for me also. In my money! [...]. “And for who these two croissants?” she told me. I say, “For me. Me too I have right to eat croissants!” So I eat my croissant in front of her. Really, I eat it well, well, well!⁴⁹

While the example was narrated with animated laughter, the performance of relishing the croissant in full view of her employer stretched beyond breakfast itself. It had wider implications for redressing her employer's lack of respect and presaged other negotiations around hours of work and punctual payment. As Rose reiterates at the close of the soundwalk, “They have to learn how to respect that we are here as workers, and we are not here like we are a threat for them. We are here to help them, and respect them, and also in return that they will respect us also.”⁵⁰ It is worth noting that expert, everyday negotiations around employment situations and migratory conditions by domestic workers like Sara and Rose often result in respectful relationships as well as financial gain. Despite its understandable prominence within popular and media narratives of domestic work, abuse is not the only story told by domestic workers nor by the collection of soundwalks I co-produced.

We Are Workers

The statement ‘we are workers’ was powerfully asserted in several of the soundwalks produced for this project. It holds particular resonance in the context of legal-administrative systems couched in the modern heroes/modern slaves dichotomy. In particular, the latter insists on portraying survivors of abuse as ‘victims’. In the UK, these ‘victims’ are identified and processed through the

⁴⁸ R Hall, ‘Suspicious death of domestic worker in Lebanon sparks debate over racism’, *The National*, 24 September 2018, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/suspicious-death-of-domestic-worker-in-lebanon-sparks-debate-over-racism-1.773588>.

⁴⁹ Sara and Rose, *one day the kafala system will change*.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

National Referral Mechanism (NRM). Yet the assessment process—which can involve interviews as well as medical and police reports—can last months, if not years.⁵¹ Despite this time frame, those referred to the NRM after their initial six-month visa expires do not have the right to work. From then on, they must make do on the GBP 5 (approx. USD 6) per day that they receive for subsistence. As one domestic worker told me bitterly, this is spent every fortnight on transport to a compulsory check at an immigration reporting centre. Amara, who also escaped from her employers while they were on holiday in the UK, vehemently criticised the NRM towards the end of our initial recorded conversation. She later decided to use parts of the following passage at the beginning and end of her soundwalk in a way that would frame her autobiographical narration with a forceful critical message.

And I just want that the world knows, or the government if this reaches the government, that this National Referral Mechanism is really not for domestic workers. [...] We don't want to be treated like victims because, though we experienced to be abused, to be exploited, still we are not like in other sectors. We want to be recognised as workers. Workers who can contribute to the economy here in UK. That's what we want: to be recognised as workers, and not to be recognised as victims who can be supported for five pounds [GBP] a day. Because no one can survive for five pounds a day. To the listeners, I will ask them if they can survive for five pounds a day.⁵²

The assessment process coordinated by the NRM demands that survivors of abuse present themselves to immigration officials as victims by definition, spectacularising their experiences in the context of interviews and reports through markers such as emotive narration and physical signs of abuse. The language of performance I use in this article by no means suggests that these markers are inauthentic or that the abuse is not real. On the contrary, understanding how 'modern slavery' pre-empts or demands certain bureaucratic performances from potential 'victims' allows us to attend to the conditions under which such performances are produced. Likewise, it helps us recognise that experiences of everyday abuse are more complex and less legible than spectacular paradigms can capture. As Amara explains, 'it's so hard for us to

⁵¹ On average, potential victims referred to the NRM by the NGO Kalayaan in 2018 waited twenty-four months for a decision as to whether they were deemed a victim of trafficking or modern slavery. The longest wait was thirty-seven months. See A Sharp and N Sedacca, *Dignity Not Destitution: The impact of differential rights of work for migrant domestic workers referred to the National Referral Mechanism*, Kalayaan, London, October 2019, p. 7, retrieved 24 June 2020, http://www.kalayaan.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Kalayaan_report_October2019.pdf.

⁵² Audio-recorded conversation with Amara, 6 July 2019.

prove that we were abused, that we were trafficked, that we were... Because no one knows. No one knows what happens inside closed doors.⁵³ For her, the consequences of the inadequacy of the system—that is, of its failure to listen attentively to the needs of its supposed beneficiaries—are grave. Forbidden from working and travelling out of the UK, at the time of our collaboration she had been stuck in ‘limbo’ in the NRM for almost three years, while her three children in the Philippines (and other loved ones and economic dependents) moved through key life events such as graduation and illness at what seemed like an entirely asynchronous pace.

Amara was one of the most computer-literate and autonomous collaborators, spending more than thirteen hours editing her soundwalk and developing a range of technical skills in audio software. Her reflections on the process of making her soundwalk revealed effects that I had not clearly foreseen in devising the method. Calibrating the volume levels between different parts of the recording (to account for her forceful critique of the NRM, versus the more pensive autobiographical sections) prompted her to reflect on how she had shaped the listener’s experience through the editing. She noted:

While I’m hearing this story, I put myself to the shoes of the listener, and not the one who’s really telling the story. So I find out how effective it is; how it will affect the listeners. I find ah ok, this tone, this loudness, it also affects the listener. [...] I’m proud of myself! If I would be the listener and I can meet this person, I can tell her that “you made it, I’m proud of you, you made it, you’re so strong.” I’m proud of myself.⁵⁴

The finished soundwalk reflects Amara’s expertise and the complexity of her self-identification. To reiterate, at the time Amara was awaiting a decision from the National Referral Mechanism about whether she had been determined a victim of modern slavery. Simultaneously, the expectations that her family (and she herself) had of her as a breadwinner evoked the ‘modern hero’ Overseas Filipino Worker. Paradoxically then, the rhetorical tropes that set the stage for her migration placed her in the double-bind of performing as a modern hero *and* a modern slave. Yet Amara’s pride and self-admiration in this instance came from the dramatic distance that making the soundwalk affords, and a nuanced recognition of her expertise as a domestic worker, as a survivor of abuse, and as a skilled storyteller and sound editor.

⁵³ Amara, *we are workers*, <https://homemakersounds.org/we-are-workers>.

⁵⁴ Reflection on process with Amara, 26 August 2019.

Conclusion

The binary scripts of modern heroism and modern slavery dissociate migrant domestic work from material conditions of exploitation, and risk making workers' realities into essentialised spectacles of hyper-visible abuse and sacrifice. In so doing, they conceal or ignore other lived experiences and temporalities. In particular, the unspectacular, routine exploitation to which migrant workers can be subjected, and the everyday practices of expertise through which they survive them, can go unnoticed. The modern heroes/modern slave binary—the discursive framework of policies surrounding both labour export in the Philippines and humanitarian and state action in Lebanon and the UK—is limited in its capacity to understand and respond sensitively to such lived experiences. As a creative, collaborative practice, soundwalk-making conversely seeks to listen to migrant domestic workers on their own terms, and to prioritise their agency in deciding how to articulate their experiences, reflections, and demands. In my research, the soundwalk method has in turn revealed a contrast between the lived temporal experiences of participants, and the scripts through which they are portrayed and regulated. Exposing the performative construction of the spectacular modern heroes/modern slaves binary makes visible (or audible) that which it conceals, allowing us to listen carefully to migrant domestic workers' own accounts of everyday exploitation, survival, and expertise.

Acknowledgements: My thanks go first to the generous migrant domestic workers whom I met and collaborated with in the course of this project. I am grateful to Alli Finn at Anti-Racism Movement, Lebanon for her encouragement to develop this article, to the British Academy and the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London for funding the research, and to Mohamad Hafeda for his invitation to present an earlier version at the Leeds School of Architecture.

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