



## Creative Intervention

# Performing *Nanay* in Winnipeg: Filipino Labour Migration to Canada

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*Nanay* is a testimonial play that we (Johnston and Pratt) co-created in 2007-2009 in collaboration with the Philippine Women Centre of BC and Alex Ferguson, a Vancouver theatre artist. Our script is composed as scenes – mostly monologues – edited verbatim from interview transcripts with Filipino domestic workers, their children, nanny agents, government officials and Canadian employers. Much of this research material was gathered during a decade-long research collaboration with the Philippine Women Centre. We designed *Nanay* in such a way that small audiences of 15 move from room to room to hear actors speak real-life testimony in intimate spaces, and the intention has been to bring audiences close to the experiences of domestic workers, their children, and Canadian families in need of care. The preoccupations of the first productions – presented at the Vancouver PuSh Festival and the Hebbel am Ufer Theatre in Berlin in 2009 – were with gender, race, class and geographies of uneven development, and with how these intersecting relations produced the exploitation and deskilling of Filipina workers, deep trauma among separated Filipino migrant families, and a crisis of care for Canadian families (for this script see Pratt & Johnston, 2014).

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The play has travelled since 2009, to the Philippines twice and to two other cities in Canada: Whitehorse and Winnipeg. It is now a site-responsive script. As it moves and is performed, we do more research, typically in collaboration with local migrant organisations, to gather new local stories of Filipino migration, and these experiences are built into the script. Filipino migration to different cities and provinces in Canada takes place under different temporary worker and province-specific migration programs, and different relations of intersectionality, power, marginalisation and solidarity have emerged at each site. That is, there are specific geographies of the intersectionalities of Filipino migration to Canada. This process of working has deepened our understanding of the complexity of relations of privilege and disadvantage lived by Filipino migrants in Canada, in particular by bringing layers of colonialism and settler colonialism more fully into view (for details see Johnston & Pratt, 2019).

We share here three new scenes developed from interview transcripts for a script reading in Winnipeg at the Prairie Theatre Exchange Festival of New Works, presented May 31<sup>st</sup> 2019, in collaboration with Sarah Zell (Migrant Worker Solidarity Network), Diwa Marcelino (Migrante Manitoba), and Hazel Venzon (Director). As was the case in Whitehorse, much Filipino labour migration to Manitoba in recent years has taken place through a Provincial Nominee program that has allowed many professional migrants to bring their children with them at the time of migrating (rather than years later as is the case for domestic workers). Nonetheless, the familiar story of family separation is once again replayed, in a new way. Echoing the experiences in Whitehorse, the intersections of colonialism and settler colonialism came to the fore in Winnipeg, inviting a deeper engagement between migration and Indigenous studies. We include a scene that presents the perspectives of three state representatives, which offers a window into the complicities across federal and provincial Canadian state policies and the Philippine government's vast infrastructure of migration policy and programs. The scripts are edited verbatim from interviews, with additions marked by square brackets.



*Figure 1.* Reading in Winnipeg, May 2019. Names of actors (above, left to right): Les Sediles, Glen Otero, Primrose Magdayag Knazan, Hera Nalam  
Photos courtesy of Diwa Marcelino (Migrante Manitoba).

#### **SCENE 4: NEEDING LABOUR**

**GUIDE:** I'd like to introduce you to Judy, an employer in the hotel and fast food industry.

**JUDY:** Okay. I'm the Human Resources Manager here. [This is a smaller community in Manitoba, but] we are one of the largest employers in town. 50 percent of the people [in our town] are retired. Young people don't stay here. They graduate and they leave. Your typical high school student that would have worked part-time or on the weekends doesn't need a job. Needing somewhere between 300 and 400 workers annually – some seasonally, some year-round – is sort of a challenge. Staffing is an issue all the time.

So, temporary foreign workers, um, sort of came into the radar, and we started recruiting [them] in 2007.

The first approvals that we got, one was a plumber and one was a cook, both from Germany. And their applications went through faster because they're skilled professions.

Both of those turned out badly. These particular people wanted to be in Winnipeg. Not here. And they thought that we were in a conspiracy to, um, not be fair. And, I mean, we had done everything for these people. Like we had rented them a house and furnished the house and tried to find their stuff when it got stuck overseas. And there was endless amounts of what we did for these people, and they just, yeah, they just left us [high and dry].

And then one of our shareholders knew [some girls from the Ukraine] and put me in contact with them. And they had a cousin in the Ukraine that wanted to come to Canada. At this time we had government approvals to hire foreign workers for housekeepers and cooks. He ended up here working as a cook. After he pretty much begged me and said he would do anything. He hated it. He didn't want to integrate into the community.

And then we had a cook from India here who also did not work out. About two months in he took off.

Like I don't know how much money we've poured into this: \$4000 per worker at least. It's crazy.

[And then we started hiring from] the Philippines. The first two girls that we brought are single girls. Both very good. The third girl is very good as well. The difference with her is she is married with a small child in the Philippines. And I questioned it at the beginning, that that would be an issue. Just yesterday, she phoned me and told me that she wants to leave, because her

husband is promising her all these things if she goes home. It's her dream to stay here, but it's not his. He doesn't want to go through the work and the wait of becoming a Canadian citizen.

Like one of the biggest lessons we've learned is that you have to match your source country to what is good for your business. Our first recruiters were recruiting out of Germany because it was the easiest place to get people out of. But for the hospitality and tourism industry, recruiting out of Germany is just about ridiculous because they're not service-oriented people.

We've figured out that the Philippines is where we need to draw people from.

*[Listing off the virtues – even on their fingers – with periodic explanatory asides]*

They're service people.  
They work hard.  
They have a good work ethic.  
They're nice.  
They're eager to learn.  
They fit in well with the community.

They don't expect to come here and get paid \$20 an hour to do nothing. \$10.50 for someone from Mexico is not the same as \$10.50 to someone from the Philippines. Yeah, Filipinos are wonderful. Our best English has been from the Philippines.

I never thought we'd hire somebody [from the Philippines] for the Front Desk because your English has to be really good. Like you have to be able to spell and type and understand. Your comprehension has to be high. And we have one at the Front Desk and we've recruited two more.

I've offered to sponsor them and do whatever they need. We've offered to give their families jobs. The one with a child, we're letting her fly home in December to see her family for a visit. Because we realize she's so far away from them. I mean, there's nothing we won't do for something successful. Our company [even] pays the rent. (And then it's deducted from their paycheck.)

I think if you can get any message out there it's that there needs to be a protection for employers. We need a longer working contract, for one. There should be a clause that if they do not complete their contract that you do not have to pay for them to fly home. There should be some kind of [clause that]

if they don't fulfil their contract they should owe you something. Like there should be some kind of reimbursement on that.

## SCENE 5 STORIES OF EMPLOYMENT

**GUIDE:** We now invite you to listen to Vanessa's story of coming to Manitoba, where she is working as a teacher on a First Nation reserve about two hours outside of Winnipeg.

**VANESSA:** I have two daughters – one is 20 years old and my youngest is in grade 9: 14 turning 15. We landed here in November 1<sup>st</sup> in 2015. I came through the points system, the Nominee program. And my kids came with me.

I came to Winnipeg because I have cousins here. Originally my ex-husband was part of the plan but something happened in the States and he wasn't able to join us here. And so I was a solo parent when I landed here. It was a struggle for the three of us because I was only earning a minimum wage and I had to pay the rent. I had to pay for everything. It's a good thing that there's – what's it called? – social assistance for the kids. It helped. It helped us a lot.

I was a teacher back home in the Philippines. I was a public school teacher for 10 years. [But] I wasn't certified to teach in Manitoba. I had to work in a call center and I was only earning a minimum wage.

So I was doing a double job. I was a call center agent at night and then I was [subbing as] an Education Assistant in the morning. I don't have any benefits because I was doing part-time jobs. And so I decided to get myself certified as a teacher in 2017 and I applied for jobs.

I got a job in a reserve. It's about a two-hour drive from Winnipeg. And so I had to leave my daughters in the city. Just to get a decent pay. If I can say it's decent.

Working in the reserve, working with uh, First Nations is [... *searching for words*] You are all familiar with how it is, right? We are underfunded. You know the usual stuff. I'm [required to] teach everything, even if it's not my specialization. I majored in biochem[istry] in the Philippines. But when I came here I teach everything: [science, social science, two electives]. The stressor really is the workload. Because I feel like I'm being overloaded. Plus the fact that I do lots of extra work that's unpaid.

It's three Filipinos who work in that school. Three plus one: our principal is also a Filipino. He has been working there for 11 years already. The guidance

counselor [only] visits the school, like, twice a month. Because 50 or 60 percent of our students are at risk, it's really taking a toll on my... on our mental health.

The students in the environment that I teach have been affected by colonialism. Of course I relate, because I myself am a victim. And so, I was trying to tell my students. The cycle continues. The system does not end. [But] they are very disconnected. Because of their environment, they are still impressed with white people. They have a high regard for white people.

And I feel like they treat me differently because I'm an outsider. I experience that. How will I say it? Because I'm brown, they think of me differently compared to the white people. Feeling *nila* superior.

The teachers teaching them right now are Filipinos, are brown. There's not a lot of white teachers accepting jobs in the reserves. I was a bit prepared [to teach on the reserve]. But it's different if you are just reading about it and when you are there, actually experiencing the result. These kids, every day they are really very rude. Not to me. Some of my students are violent with each other. I have students who bully each other.

In the classroom, I feel like a nanny.

Some Filipinas, some Filipina teachers are working in other reserves, even farther away from Winnipeg. The pay is higher but I wouldn't want to go there because I want to go home every week and see my kids.

I leave my kids on their own [in Winnipeg]. It's really a struggle: the fact that we have to leave our kids just to get a decent pay. It really took a toll on us. My 14-year-old has been distressed. When was that? March? I guess it was March when she .... [*trails off*] But anyway, we're going through therapy. And she was saying that the counsellor at the school was saying that some of the pain she was feeling is because she was longing for her dad. All of those stuff.

But anyway, I'm also thankful that I was given the opportunity to migrate here in Canada. Because my kids are... like my eldest daughter is getting into a nursing program. I hope she'll get in the program this year. It's easy for my kids. But for a 50-year-old it's not so easy. My hope is that my daughters be able to establish themselves here. And raise their kids. I mean as a family. That there's no separation anymore. And they won't undergo this anymore. They won't undergo the same trauma we had.

**GUIDE:** Vanessa continues to live in Winnipeg, commuting each weekend back from the reserve where she works.



*Figure 2. Reading in Winnipeg, May 2019. Photos courtesy of Diwa Marcelino (Migrante Manitoba).*

## **SCENE 6: GOVERNMENT PERSPECTIVES**

**IMMIGRATION, REFUGEES AND CITIZENSHIP CANADA AGENT (IRCC):** Hi everyone. My name is Ari Gunnarson and I am here to say a few words on behalf of the Canadian federal government, along with my colleagues, Aileene Gayabos from the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs (*Aileene nods / waves*) and Brenda Armstrong from Manitoba Labour and Immigration (*Brenda nods / waves*). We know it's easy to criticize the government. Activists and academics love to hate temporary foreign worker and even Provincial Nominee programs. But before you judge us or the programs, we'd like to present you with some basic facts.

The temporary foreign worker and Provincial Nominee programs are designed to help Canadian employers and families. Whether we're talking about the care of our elders or children or servers at Tim Horton's, there's a great need in our country. And loving, caring, compassionate, well-trained Filipinas deliver.

The Canadian government recognizes that there were difficulties associated with some of the programs and continually improves them. It's also important to recognize the benefits of these programs to Filipinos. Consider how much money is remitted to the Philippines each year from Filipinos working overseas. Canada is the fourth largest source of remittances to the Philippines, after the United States, United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. About \$2.3 billion dollars were remitted from Canada to the Philippines in 2017, about a tenth of all remittances received in the Philippines. These remittances to the Philippines surpass all other forms of development aid combined. The World Bank and many academics now believe that the money sent home as remittances is a more effective means of stimulating the Philippines economy than more traditional forms of development aid.

**PHILIPPINE FOREIGN AFFAIRS REP (PR):** If I may... Hello, my name is Aileene Gayabos I am the Philippine Foreign Affairs Representative, it is a privilege to be here with you today. (*pauses and continues*) I would like to clarify something. It has never been the policy of the Philippine government to send workers abroad. It is perhaps a consequence of the fact that they would like to look for so-called greener pastures. What we have always been trying to do is to keep people home where they belong. Now if they choose to go out of the country to work we need to cope with this. So institutions have been put in place to protect the interests of migrant workers. Of course the Philippines doesn't have all the resources to cover everything and attend to all the needs of these people. But if we compare the Philippines' performance with its neighbours, we are doing a lot more. In migration circles, our government is a model for other labour-sending countries.

But it is not the policy to send workers abroad. It is a personal choice to leave the country.

**IRCC:** Exactly! In 2018, just last year, about 13 Filipinos came to Canada each and every day as temporary foreign workers. Lots more would come if they could. Shouldn't individual Filipinos have the opportunity to decide for themselves whether these are good or bad programs?

**PR:** If I may add, it just shows that people are free to leave if they want to leave. The official migration policy started roughly in the 70s. It was the brainchild of the late secretary Blas Ople. Before that we never heard of Filipinos going abroad *en masse* to work. It was just a temporary measure at the time when there was an oil crisis. Somehow it seemed to gain some roots.

But for the past 15 years it has not been the official policy of the Philippines to send labour abroad. Because the social costs far outweigh the remittances. We know that the separation of parents from their children and spouses from each other bring up drug abuse, early teenage pregnancy, and other social problems. These problems far outweigh the monetary benefits that we get from the remittances abroad.

I would also like to add that compared to other countries, conditions in Canada appear to be good. Listening to the stories in this play, you can really feel for these women, but they are in programs that after a few years they can bring their families and they can immigrate. If they work in other countries – in Korea, in Taiwan, Japan – they never have this opportunity to be reunited with their families one day. So they are really better off in Canada.

**IRCC:** Agreed! Our temporary foreign worker programs are not perfect but they are the most generous programs of their sort in the entire world. Canada is the *only* country in the world to offer citizenship after a short period of time.

**MANITOBA REPRESENTATIVE:** Perhaps I could add a few words about the Manitoba Provincial Nominee Program. Or the PNP as we call it. It has undoubtedly been one of the most successful public policy decisions in decades!

The biggest issue we have here is the culture of Canadians not wanting to take jobs that they see as beneath them. The PNP is a tool to get workers to consider Manitoba.

We created the first Nominee Program in the country, and arguably the most successful. It has recruited more than 130,000 nominees to the province – 65 percent of immigrants coming here come through the PNP.

Thousands of Filipinos arrive each year through the program. Many settle in rural communities. They come to fill labour market needs, and then they bring their families, who fill secondary needs. I would say that, beside Mennonites, Filipinos integrate really well into our communities.

The biggest criticism of the program is that nominees may be accepted through the PNP here in Manitoba only to move elsewhere. We want them to settle *here*. And they seem to be staying. Filipinos are a source of pride for all in the province. Filipino nurses are one of our biggest successes! Their success rate at getting accredited through testing is very high. Of course, in the Philippines they teach to that level, with the expectation that they will go abroad.

**PR:** If I may interject, at the same time, we in the Philippines need to think carefully about the benefits and costs of permanent migration to Canada. We educate our people using Philippine government money. For what? For them to go abroad? That is a loss of capital even if you count all of the remittances coming in. So from the point of view of the Philippine state we spend money to raise children to make them doctors. And then they are de-skilled. They apply as nurses and become nannies [or servers at Tim Horton's]. They will be doing a very good job because they are highly qualified – over qualified – in Canada. But it will be a loss to the Philippines. We have a very low doctor to patient ratio. How many percent of the population can see a doctor before they die? This is a massive loss of capital.

But these are things we are already working towards solving. It is unfortunate that countries like ours still have nationals who leave to work abroad. But our government is working towards making their protection the most important thing in their agenda.

As for the specific problems raised in this play about temporary foreign worker programs, this seems to be a Canadian problem.

**IRCC:** Well! We won't take any more of your time. Thank you once again for allowing me to explain some essential facts about Canada's migration programs and lay out some of their important benefits.

[End of Excerpt]

## References

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