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Chaotic Waters and Well-Tempered Specters: The Philippines as Source of Overseas Labor

Abstract

The precolonial territory that became the Philippines was a participant in maritime Asian politics and warfare that made the Southeast Asian region appear unstable and undefined to newly arrived Western observers. In truth, regional network-building amid labor shortages was a constant concern of the various peoples, with their interdependent arrangements occasionally readjusted because of piratical raids conducted by more capable or determined centers in order to increase their working populations. The Western occupation forces (themselves also subject to limitations in their number) sought to stabilize the communities they subjugated in order to more effectively bankroll their colonial projects, an arrangement that persisted into the Philippine postcolonial administrations' attempts at national industrialization. The near-total economic shutdown that resulted from national and global objections to the excesses of the authoritarian regime of Ferdinand E. Marcos led to labor export as a stop-gap policy. The success of this specific measure turned it into the equivalent of a singularly permanent national industry, with the overseas presence of Filipino workers showing up in foreign popular culture products. This article will look at film samples in various periods, from the (often anonymous) appearances of Filipinos in Hollywood movies, through their inscription in the cinemas of neighboring Asian countries, to their occasional representation in contemporary Western films, with a focus on two European releases from 2022, *Triangle of Sadness* and *Nocebo*. It will inspect correspondences between the so-far persistent labor-export policy and the population's precolonial disposition to thrive in the face of the vicissitudes wrought by unpredictable shifts in geopolitical circumstances.

Keywords

Overseas Filipino Workers; indentured servitude; transnational imaginary; island cinema; piracy; allegorical function

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The year 2022 was regarded as historically significant for Filipino film observers, as a Filipina performer, Dolly de Leon, made waves in annual foreign-film competitions, even winning a prize from the Los Angeles Film Critics Association. To be sure, several predecessors had also won major prizes before her, including the Cannes Film Festival best actress award in 2016 (for the late Jaclyn Jose in Brillante Mendoza's *Ma' Rosa*) and the Venice Film Festival's Volpi Cup for best actor in 2021 (for John Arcilla in Erik Matti's *On the Job 2: The Missing 8*), not to mention several other foreign film-festival prizes during the past millennium for National Artist Nora Aunor.

What made the 2022 contender special was twofold: first, the vehicle she appeared in, Ruben Östlund's *Triangle of Sadness*, won the top prize at Cannes; and second, she was virtually unknown even in her home country, since she appeared in mostly theater productions and supplemented her income by accepting minor roles in film and television. Less well-known, except to the most ardent film buffs, is the fact that another Filipina performer, the slightly better-known Chai Fonacier, appeared in another European movie, Lorcan Finnegan's *Nocebo*. Although *Triangle of Sadness* was a generously budgeted production for a prestige entry, in contrast with *Nocebo*'s smaller cast and circumscribed locales, their Pinay performers both portrayed overseas migrant workers. More serendipitously, the places where their characters exert enough influence to intervene in their narratives resemble the places they grew up in and left in pursuit of work: i.e., islands—an apparently deserted one in *Triangle* and Britain in *Nocebo*.[1] Toward this end, this article will commence with the practice of migration, forced or otherwise, during the precolonial period in the territories of what became the Philippines and its neighbors in archipelagic Southeast Asia. It will seek to make a connection between this readiness to relocate—prevented by the exigencies of Euro-American colonial interests and reinforced by the interests of post-independence presidential regimes—with the labor-export policy initiated by the martial-law dictatorship of Ferdinand E. Marcos. It will also provide a speculation on how labor export succeeded (for better or worse) for the Philippine population because of a cultural predisposition toward nurture. The 2022 releases may be seen then as an acknowledgment by the West of the presence and, in fact, the indispensability of Philippine migrant labor within their respective national contexts.

Philippine Migrant Workers

The phenomenon of Philippine migrant workers, officially termed Overseas Filipino Workers or OFWs, began as a stop-gap economic measure (National Economic and Development Authority) that eventually proved too beneficial for its own good. Unlike, say, the case of South Korea, which had deployed workers to then more-advanced states like Germany under its own overseas development program during the 1960s with the express purpose of raising funds to upgrade the country's infrastructure and initiate industrialization projects (thereby terminating the program when these goals had been met), the Philippines operated under the more amorphous goal of maintaining the local economy's ability to service its increasingly onerous foreign debt. The even graver crisis that resulted from the international and local business officials' response to the assassination of opposition leader Benigno S. Aquino Jr. made the deployment of OFWs a more urgent priority.

The collapse of the dictatorship installed by the first Ferdinand Marcos presidency counted the fact that Filipinos had to travel overseas in order to find productive employment, as one of the regime's many failures, one of several corroborations of the country's regression to less-developed status. For this reason, all the post-Marcos Sr. presidents included the discontinuance of labor export as one of their campaign promises. Benigno Aquino III, son of the woman who ousted Marcos and served as the first post-martial law president, claimed that the Philippines's rise as a major business process outsourcing (BPO) center was his contribution to stanching the outflow of Filipino workers. The reality that the one million call-center employees (in contrast with the documented number of OFWs approaching twice that number—see Mapa) comprise largely top-university graduates fluent in English, relieved from having to relocate abroad but still working for foreign companies, merely affirms the fact that BPO companies are essentially overseas employers who were persuaded to relocate their work centers in the country of their prospective and relatively privileged hirees. In fact, the success (so to speak) of the Philippines's OFW system has made it a model for other countries that are considering setting up their own labor-export programs.

A significant feature of the OFW phenomenon is the fact that the majority has always comprised women (over 60 percent as of latest count, per Mapa). The figure contrasts with those of other labor-exporting countries: the overall global trend is in fact in reverse, with 60 percent of international migrant workers comprising men (ILO Department of Statistics 21). This has led to a number of complications for Philippine domestic arrangements, not to mention several cases of abuse stemming from the gender vulnerability of the typical OFW. Nevertheless the persistence of labor export, with the willingness of Philippine citizens to migrate

to foreign countries for work, would not succeed as well as it did if it were not complemented by the generally appreciative welcome of the participating host countries. A glance at historical developments in the Philippine nation-state will help provide some insights into the receptiveness of native culture to the prospect of relocating for the sake of enhancing, maximizing, and/or instrumentalizing one's personal productivity.

Historical Incipience of Nurturance

The relatively recent history volume by Patricio N. Abinales and the late Donna J. Amoroso, titled *State and Society in the Philippines*, opted to depart from previous accounts by challenging the conventional wisdom that the country, while still a long way from nationhood, was a nonentity prior to the arrival of Western colonization. In looking more closely at pre-Hispanic records, they determined that social organizations, administrative functions, and collective objectives were all already in place in the archipelagic region that was subsequently—and arbitrarily—parceled out among European colonial powers, starting with Spain and its territorial claim to the Philippines.

What gave Western observers the impression that the island group had no unifying identity, thereby making the people "ready" for colonial tutelage, was the fact that community arrangements seemed unstable, with population groups constantly ready to be uprooted depending on the larger interests of ruling powers and their constant need for manpower. In fact, labor constantly remained in short supply throughout the region, necessitating occasional exchanges of subjects, whether forced or negotiated. Chieftains of fairly stable areas would ensure their share of committed toilers by arranging for indentured servitude (also misperceived by Westerners as similar to their practice of enslavement), usually as a means for the subject to repay significant material or political assistance extended by the prospective master (Abinales and Amoroso, "The Philippines in Maritime Asia to the Fourteenth Century").

Hispanic colonization sought to provide order and stability to the islands claimed for (and named after) King Philip II, but only wound up perpetrating a different type of precarity. Governing authority was wielded by religious orders, competing with the colonial state's tax-collection program. Understandably the citizens wound up devising various means of evading or renegotiating these impositions (including banditry, and later, insurrection)—unless they happened to be selected

for conscript labor (Abinales and Amoroso, "New States and Reorientations, 1368–1764"). Further instabilities wrought by the US's violent usurpation of colonization prerogatives after the Philippine anticolonial revolution managed to oust the Spaniards, followed by the Japanese occupation and a neocolonial dictatorship still beholden to American patronage, made any possibility of working for more affluent employers alluring, if not the only available realistic option.

Abinales and Amoroso use the term "patchwork" in describing the postcolonial era's development pattern, essentially a continuation of Western economic policies but with the occupying forces replaced by the national bourgeoisie. The extreme concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the landed and manufacturing classes induced a continuous migration of rural folk to urban capitals "to escape poverty and oppressive tenancy arrangements," most intensively to the constantly expanding area formerly known as "Manila and suburbs" and formally declared as Metro Manila in 1975: "The migration of more than a million people by 1960 was largely spontaneous and had little government support, but was surprisingly wellorganized ... utilizing family and village networks" (Abinales and Amoroso, "All Politics Is Local, 1946–1964"). The earlier waves may have encouraged later batches because of the initial success of import substitution industrialization, but the limits of this strategy (dependence on imported capital inputs and a reliance on "light industry"—Abinales and Amoroso ibid.) led to industrial underemployment and a concentration of the proletarian underclass in domestic service and informal/illegal labor. In effect, the stage was set for the Marcos presidency's labor-export strategy.

It may be more frustrating to track how Philippine culture managed to maintain an orientation toward the valuation of care, but the historical instabilities wrought by colonial trauma, migratory necessity, and shortage of employment prospects can be reasonably assumed as partial (if not full) contributory factors. The profession of nursing, for example, has been ascribed in the practice of care that precolonial women, priests, and herbalists provided, foregrounded during periods of crisis as in the anticolonial resistances against Spain and the US, enabling the claim that "They had always been full-fledged nurses, even though they had not yet had the opportunity to formally study in higher schools" (del Mundo and Jerrick Josue David). The resultant ironic shortage within the Philippines itself impacted the country so immensely during the 2020s global pandemic that the Philippine government had to temporarily forbid the foreign migration of Filipino nurses.

The dominance of Filipinos in the service and health professions (SEI-DOEST 10–11) may be ascribed to the significant number of women applying to overseas positions; the trend may be tracked directly to the failure of the country's final major authoritarian experiment—i.e., the military dictatorship of Marcos Sr. Signs

of resistance could be observed in Philippine popular culture even before the assassination of Aquino galvanized an antidictatorship protest movement. When the country opened up, so to speak, to personalities and observers in global cinema via the government's high-profile international film festival in the early 1980s, Philippine movie artists provided a series of antiauthoritarian material, usually depicting women resisting patriarchal figures. (Marcos himself attempted to contain the discourse by casting his bid for re-election against Aquino's widow as an instance of his putting a female challenger in her supposedly rightful domestic place.) Hence while recognizing that no single cause can be determined for the population's predisposition to empathy and nurturance, we may also be able to speculate how such an orientation became a cultural necessity in the face of the constant possibility of living under threat of abuse or displacement, with the prospect of relocation often turning out to be the best among limited, unsatisfactory options.[2]

Out-landishnesses

The first point to raise about the appearance of OFW characters in Western cinema is that these were not the first instances of Filipinos showing up in overseas samples, even in Western films (see Appendix A). As an American colony, the Philippines was effectively (though unofficially) treated as the backwater extension of Hollywood. American film practitioners realized, early enough, that the expense and trouble of traversing the Pacific could yield a wealth of locales and talent at shoestring production budgets. Understandably, though more rarely, Filipino film actors would cross in the opposite direction in a hopeful (though almost never realized) bid for mid-level stardom.[3]

With Classical Hollywood recovering from World War II and under threat from more innovative and censorship-free trends from Europe (notably the French New Wave), more practitioners turned to overseas themes and locales for more projects that were both exotic and budget-friendlier. At least two B-movie trends, Blood Island films and women in prison projects, became associated with the Philippines; a major blaxploitation star, Pam Grier, made her name from the latter genre, while an Oscar-winning filmmaker, Jonathan Demme, openly acknowledged his on-the-job training in Roger Corman's Philippine-set projects. The Blood Island series (actually variations on and takeoffs from H.G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, 1896) was read by historian Robert S. Sklar as an allegorical means of critiquing

American participation in the Vietnam War; with the pullout of US forces "after the Communist victory [in 1975], it became possible to look back" (335–37).[4]

The Hollywood Vietnam War films then could not be filmed (yet) in the actual setting, so other tropical-set countries were made to stand in, with the most expensive film of all time up to that point, Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), shot in the Philippines. The influx of American film personalities nearly destabilized the presidency of Marcos, when he conducted an affair with the leading lady of the project that was meant to commemorate his since-debunked World War II heroism (Figure 1); when the actress, Dovie Beams, feared for her life after Imelda Marcos got wind of the dalliance, she played surreptitiously recorded audiotapes of her bedroom sessions in order to prove that her claims were true. As a result, Mrs. Marcos was able to demand for extravagant projects and positions from her husband, including an appointment as his successor as well as the staging of the Manila International Film Festival during the early 1980s, from loans secured from the World Bank.

Figure 1. *Maharlika* layout, prominently featuring Dovie Beams as Isabella, fictional lover of the character who represented a bemedaled World War II Philippine hero. (Roadshow Films International and Solar Films publicity layout)

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Islandic Survivors

The association of the OFW diaspora with the failed authoritarian gambit of the Marcoses, as well as the couple's enthusiastic patronage of Philippine cinema, provides a logical means of tracking how overseas Filipinos began appearing, with gradually increasing frequency, in overseas film projects, with its consequences reflected in Philippine film products (see Appendix B). The characterizations were understandably empathetic and, in certain cases, melodramatic even, starting within the immediate Southeast Asian region (Hong Kong then Singapore), expanding through East Asia (Japan but more extensively Korea), before extending to non-Asian centers. The ideological implications of these positive-image approaches still have to be fully teased out by foreign and Filipino scholars, with the previously mentioned releases of 2022, *Triangle of Sadness* (hereafter *ToS*) and *Nocebo*, suggesting ways of working through the stasis while at the same time demonstrating some possible pitfalls.

ToS drew a certain amount of backlash, inasmuch as it was its director's second time to win the Cannes Palme d'Or (after *The Square* in 2017). The Swedish-born Östlund is regarded as a specialist in satirical thrillers, on the basis of the two films. In fact, his film preceding *The Square*, titled *Force Majeure* (2014), is described as a black comedy even though its only suspenseful incident arrives nearly in the beginning, in order to pursue a critique focused on masculinity. It would be more accurate to view Östlund then as a deconstructor of identity, specifically of class, gender, and race. In *ToS*, he commences with the concerns of an internet influencer couple, Carl and Yaya, who embark on a cruise aboard a luxury ship, unpaid in exchange for social-media exposure. The satire is embodied in the other people on board, from the Marxist captain to a cynical capitalist and his wife, a prima-donna matron who insists on her idea of fun for the crew at the expense of their job performance.

Abigail, the OFW character, comes into her own when a storm damages the ship and a pirate attack finally capsizes it. Among the survivors who reach an apparently deserted island, Abigail turns out to be the only one who has the essential survival skills that she presumably acquired from living hand-to-mouth on a tropical island. She realizes that everyone else depends on her and asserts her dominance over the party, including exercising her *droit du seigneuresse* over Carl. Ironically, Yaya supports her out of gender solidarity, but when Yaya discovers that the island is actually an exclusive resort with hidden facilities and promises to continue supporting her upon their return to Europe, Abigail proceeds to approach her with a deadly weapon (Figure 2)—upon which the narrative ends. In this respect, *ToS* is the least open-ended among Östlund's recent work, or contains what nearly amounts to a narrative closure.

Figure 2. Crazed by the prospect of losing her privileged status, Abigail creeps up behind Yaya. (*Triangle of Sadness*, Imperative Entertainment, Plattform Produktion, Film i Väst; screenshot by the author)

The filmmaker's political intent remains front and center throughout the presentation, to the extent where Östlund overrides the expected positive-image depiction of the most Other among the film's characters. *ToS* may also be his most ideologically explicit narrative, even if the foregrounding's verbalization (mainly by the ship captain) is not entirely developed beyond the simplistic observation that, given the opportunity to assume her masters' position, Abigail winds up no different from them. An even more serious critique can be raised regarding the OFW character, which requires a crucial measure of cultural privilege: her response to the sudden (and, we may add, righteous) endowment of power is more recognizably white male than working-class Filipina. In fact, feminists might also be able to bring up the issue of the womanly masquerade (Riviere 35–44), where a woman who constantly contends with patriarchy might perform acts proscribed for her gender but immediately, and by her own initiative, seek ways to compensate for her transgressions in order to preempt any forthcoming retaliation. The more culturally sanctioned way of acquiring and maintaining power would be recognizable to neocolonial strategists: ensure that a dominant but manipulable (male) figure nominally assumes leadership function, so that any dissatisfaction on the part of the followers will not endanger the actual source of power.

Blood(y) Island

The title *Nocebo* (understood to be the negative counterpart of placebo) may be taken to refer, at least in part, to the fact that the originating trauma in the narrative begins in Cebu, a city that also happens to be the name of the main island that comprises the eponymous province. The back story unfolds via flashbacks, but the earliest point in the chronology begins on another island, where as a child, Diana acquires supernatural healing knowledge and powers after a dying *umu* or witch passes her animus, a featherless black chick, from her mouth to Diana's (Figure 3). Queried by her future employer, Diana calls this island "*kilumkilom*" or evening; upon growing up, Diana flees the island, along with her husband and daughter, because of terrorist attacks instigated by a landgrabbing mining company. Settling in Cebu, she works for a garment factory where Christine, an English designer, enforces her production contract by ordering the manager to increase productivity by slave-driving the workers and locking all exits to prevent thefts. Unable to afford daycare, Diana brings her daughter to work; when she steps out to buy the child some refreshment, a fire razes the place, killing everyone including her daughter.

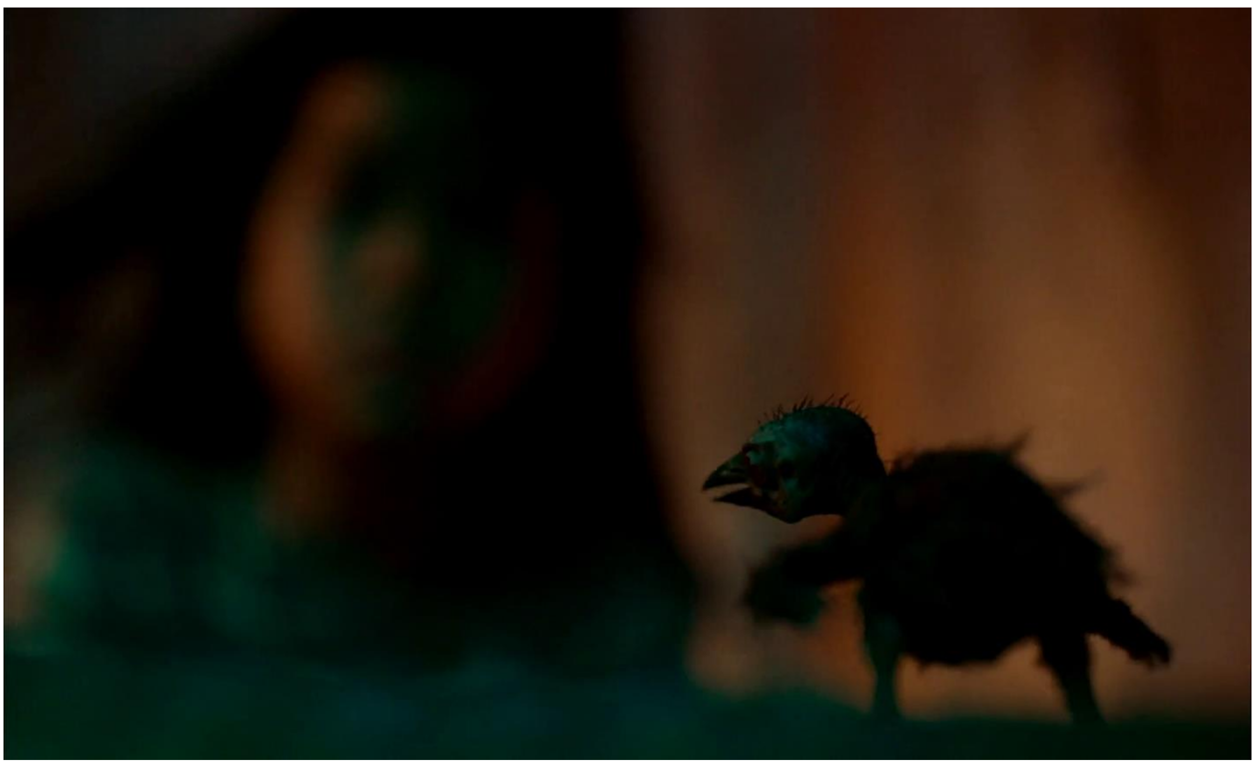

Figure 3. In the form of a chick, the animus of a dying *umu* transfers from her mouth to Diana's. (*Nocebo*, Epicmedia Productions, Fís Éireann/Screen Ireland, Lovely Productions, screenshot by the author)

Around this time (whence the film plot commences), Christine learns what happened and is haunted by the spectacle of an angry, tick-infested dog, causing her inexplicable, presumably karmic debilitation. Diana meanwhile turns to the

OFW option and bids her husband a no-return farewell. She arrives in the third and final island in her trajectory, England; the audience shares Christine's bafflement at her condition and accepts Diana's explanation that Christine does not remember hiring her because of her ailment. Christine's husband and daughter are initially suspicious of Diana's presence, but their daughter (obviously a replacement for the child Diana lost) comes around and even eventually connives with the new arrival. Christine experiences a series of potentially incapacitating illnesses which Diana always manages to cure, explaining how she acquired her magical ability. When Diana returns after being dismissed by her employers for getting rid of Christine's medication, she reveals to Christine her trauma caused by her witnessing the sweatshop fire and casts a spell that causes Christine to burn up. Diana then takes her own life by leaping from the top of her employer's residence, and her animus proceeds to transfer to Christine's daughter.

What can be immediately gleaned from *Nocebo*'s tale is how it sets itself apart from *ToS*, by providing a careful numeration of the processes entailed in *pananambal*, one of the several versions of witchcraft in the Philippines, associated with the Visayan islands where Diana came from. (Chai Fonacier, the actor cast for the role, also embodies a credible physical representation of the Austronesian native, and was instructed to inflect her English-language line readings with the Cebuano accent—see Figure 4.) The *barang* and the rest of Philippine witchcraft practitioners, as well as the precolonial shamans (called *babaylan*), were nearly entirely female, so Euro-American cultural policy included the unmitigated demonization of these groups and their practices, in order to induce the population to convert to the patriarchally compliant Christian religions.

Figure 4. Chai Fonaicer, as Diana, runs to the burning factory where her young daughter is trapped inside. (*Nocebo*, Epicmedia Productions, Fís Éireann/Screen Ireland, Lovely Productions, screenshot by the author)

Still in further contrast with *ToS*, *Nocebo* dispenses with several opportunities to harness the coigns of vantage of identity politics. Collateral blame is imputed to the sweatshop manager, who perishes in the fire along with the rest of the workers (the film itself calls for "Justice for all Kentex [slipper factory] fire victims," a horrific real-life disaster that occurred in 2015, in its closing credits). An even more crucial issue of responsibility may be raised regarding Diana's husband, an able-bodied fellow who initially allows Diana to practice her healing abilities, but who persists in his passive role when she flounders, her flow of patients dissipates, and she has to seek factory employment—even bringing their child with her to work. The figure of Christine is even more problematic, since she also seems compelled to earn more than her husband, and immediately accepts Diana's presence even when her other family members declare their disapproval. After having physically suffered from a number of Diana's spells and turning to Diana for help in each instance, one would not be surprised when she demonstrates remorse upon learning of her role in the tragedy that befell Diana's daughter and coworkers.

Reconnoiterings

Further and more in-depth inspections of these two films reveal more complex configurations in each one. The tripartite structure of *Triangle of Sadness* makes its narrative divisions immediately apparent, with the middle section actually extending the expository portion's crisis to the point where the story's resolution becomes logical but unpredictable. Here the staff and crew of a luxury yacht commit themselves to indulging even the smallest whims of their passengers, since the more experienced among them know that they'll be rewarded with generous tips at the end of the voyage. Unfortunately, one of the loaded matrons goes overboard figuratively, and the staff and workers go overboard for her literally (Figure 5). The matron's husband, a Russian oligarch whose wealth comes from a monopoly on fertilizer, remarks that he wants to buy the yacht, and gets wasted with the captain from a card betting game. Meanwhile the crew are unable to prepare the guests' raw seafood dinner properly because of the intrusions, so what ensues are scenes of excessive hurling, with the crew too busy coping with a storm to attend to the guests' troubles. Meanwhile, the captain recollects his earlier years as a committed Marxist while teasing the oligarch as a citizen of a former Communist state.[5]

Figure 5. Top: eccentric matron fancies a reversal of roles of masters and servants and orders all the crew members of a cruise ship to go for a swim. Bottom: as a result, the seafood dinner has spoiled and the passengers experience food poisoning. (*Triangle of Sadness*, Imperative Entertainment, Plattform Produktion, Film i Väst, screenshots by the author)

With this multiplicity of events marking the point where the narrative shifts from the continent of Europe to the movable island of the yacht, to finally an island mistaken as uninhabited, we can also regard it as a linking device between the opening scene and the final scene. The first part is called "Carl and Yaya" but Yaya gets introduced later. We see Carl being objectified, along with the other applicant models, by a queer host who stands in for male-desiring audiences, just as Abigail, during her power ascendancy, forces Carl into bed with her, and he submits without a word of protest. The final scene, where Abigail, the OFW who takes over the figures of authority—meaning all the other survivors on the island, since she's the lowest in rank—depicts only her with Yaya, whom she regards threateningly, with Carl running desperately for some unspecified reason (Figure 6). We are given the impression that Yaya, who supported Abigail's takeover and even yielded (albeit reluctantly) Carl to her, wishes to continue being supportive of Abigail once they

return to so-called civilization. But in the opening, we see how Yaya implements her idea of benevolence toward Carl, by admitting that she's only using him because they became viral *YouTube* influencers together, and that she expects him to support her even if she earns more than he does. From this perspective, Abigail would be doing Carl a favor by getting rid of Yaya, morally repulsive as that may sound. So Carl's panic may be seen as wanting to save Yaya from Abigail's fury, but it also could be an expression of concern for Abigail, who would definitely face severe punishment when the world order is reimposed on them.

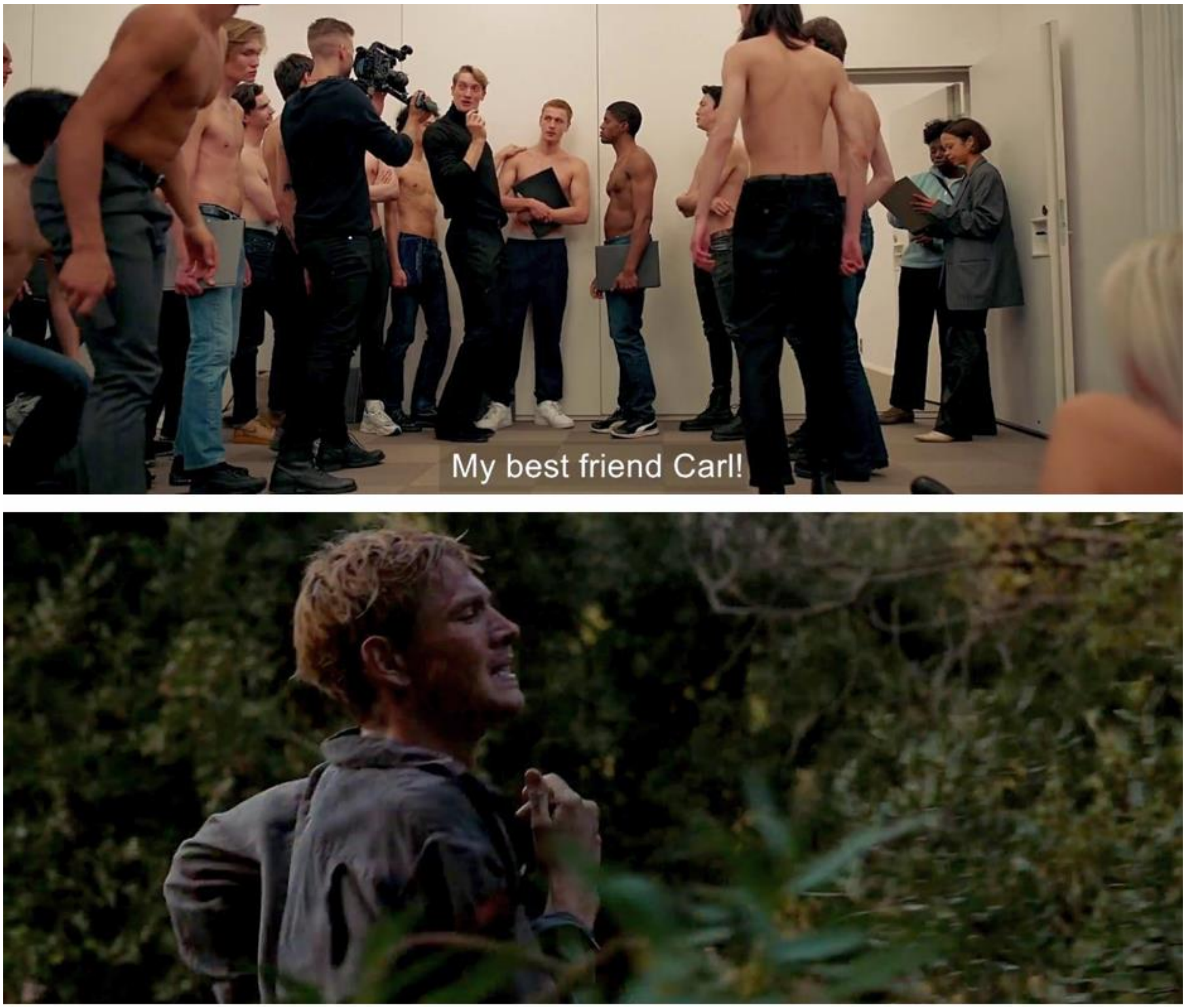

Figure 6. Top: a prelude, where aspiring model Carl is objectified by a gay interviewer, just as he would later be by Abigail, suggesting a parallel between the two personalities. Bottom: the director's standard open ending, with Carl hurrying through the bushes, presumably in the direction of Yaya and Abigail. (*Triangle of Sadness*, Imperative Entertainment, Plattform Produktion, Film i Väst, screenshots by the author)

Nocebo, on the other hand, reveals its responsiveness toward Filipino culture more assiduously than what can be casually assumed. The question of why the film wasted the potential of the possibility of feminist solidarity between the two mothers can still incite hesitancy because of the Christianly insistence on blind

forgiveness on the part of the dispossessed. But an even larger issue would be the incredible ability of Diana to pick out not just the country of her deployment as an OFW, but also the family of the woman against whom she held an understandably deep-seated grudge. We can extend the movie's premise that she had supernatural powers, but these were qualified as limited to either heal or harm the people she targeted. Part of the performative instability is the strong affect with which Eva Green, who plays Christine, delineates her guilt and suffering even before Diana reveals her identity and intention (Figure 7). Like Abigail in *Triangle of Sadness*, Diana's benevolence conceals a steely and focused interior; in contrast to Abigail, she is shown successfully carrying out her lethal intent, motivated in this case by revenge.

Figure 7. Left: an initially skeptical Christine samples Diana's suggested cure. Right: convinced that Diana's claim to healing is authentic, Christine literally embraces her and gives her the run of her household. (*Nocebo*, Epicmedia Productions, Fís Éireann/Screen Ireland, Lovely Productions, screenshots by the author)

The agency that the film-text extends toward Diana is not just marvelous, but also potentially reckless. The country's women, virtually without exception, have not much choice about being marketed (exported, in fact), for overseas labor. The only conclusion that may be drawn, again a provisional one, in the film's favor is that Diana and Christine's interaction stems from the understandable intensity of each woman's response to the tragedy at the factory. The judgment that Diana carries out after insinuating herself into Christine's family and even conscripting Christine's daughter into the legacy of witchcraft that should have been passed on to her own daughter, as well as Christine being consumed by guilt, literally and horrifically in the end, may be seen as each woman's immersion in their respective inner worlds, from which their own male partners could not prevent or save them.

Resolvents

> *A country that manufactures things has power. A service country don't have no power. Why did we let that happen? Greed?*

Anonymous interviewee in *Detropia*, a documentary on Detroit
(dir. Heidi Ewing & Rachel Grady, 2012)

The so-far successful cessation of the Covid-19 global pandemic of the early 2020s made possible the resumption of labor export; the electoral triumph of the son of the very same authoritarian leader who initiated labor export as an economic strategy further guaranteed the continuance of the policy, despite the new President's claim (echoing all his democratic predecessors) that he intends to end the practice. Even the emergent global threat to labor, comprising significant and rapid qualitative boosts to artificial intelligence, will generally be unable to affect the demand for jobs which "need a very deep understanding of people ... [and that] require lots of mobility and dexterity and problem-solving ability in unpredictable environments" (Martin Ford, qtd. in Morgan).

This kind of scenario will serve to intensify the deeply entrenched quandary of the OFW situation, a predicament whose permanence has been constantly disavowed in visions for the future proffered by Philippine development-process discourse. Aside from the assistance that foreign remittances provide not just to large or extended families but occasionally also to entire neighborhoods and villages, labor export effectively relieves the members of the Philippine business class from resuming the long-abandoned and always-risky challenge to undertake globally competitive industrialization, allowing them to profit from safer and surer ventures in retail trade and real estate; it also guarantees a steady stream of automatically taxable income readily available to Philippine politicians, who no longer need to anticipate the anxiety experienced by the Marcos dictatorship in its confrontation with the business sector's call for civil disobedience, operationalized via boycotts, shutdowns, and non-payment of taxes. In this qualified sense, the labor-export policy ensures Philippine economist Walden Bello's prediction that the country will remain, per his book title, an "anti-development state."

With no possible definitive measure being undertaken to dismantle the Philippines's labor-export apparatus, the two 2022 releases bring up not solutions, but ways of looking at the phenomenon of Filipino diasporic workers. What Abigail and Diana have in common is their function as interlopers in their respective narratives. They succeed to a significant extent, but are also ultimately contained, overwhelmed by what we may describe as the overweening and inescapable Westernness of their contexts. The one obvious Philippine historical intertext is

the practice of piratic raids, once accepted and expected as inevitable precolonial occurrences, with modern instances configured as terrorist attacks that call for retaliatory measures. In one instance, the US's International Intellectual Property Alliance used the term to refer to the producers and distributors of unauthorized videodisc copies of American audiovisual material, an early-millennium phenomenon that generated expressions of support among the local intelligentsia and even from foreign celebrities (Joel David 119). At least one historical study of 18th-century high-seas piracy has postulated that bountiful raids and great distance from European control centers enabled the founding of an egalitarian settlement (see Graeber).

Similarly, the practice of care will require a reconfiguration among Philippine scholars of culture, in light of the reality that the widest sector of OFWs (in domestic labor and the even more diffuse categories that may be grouped under "entertainment") is regularly devalued in relation to professionals, notwithstanding some overlap with health practitioners. Boris Groys, a philosopher of care, draws a parallel between museums and hospitals, more specifically between artworks and patients, maintaining that both are regarded as vulnerable and therefore deserving of institutional ministration (Kelly). With successful modern societies requiring their citizens to indulge in risk-taking even in their leisure activities, the provision of care will persist as a corollary feature. For all the differences between them, what the 2022 films affirm (with their respective artists' carefully considered critical regard) is that the West, at this stage in millennial history, has unofficially sanctioned what the Philippines has long offered up: the availability of a well-trained, compliant, island-crossing population willing to slave for what their own country cannot provide.

Kritika Kultura 43: 241.

Appendix A:
Filipinas in Western Films Prior to 2022 (A Preliminary Listing)

Films per performer are listed by year of release, followed by director and title. To minimize the proliferation of titles followed by descriptions of "credited" or "uncredited," actors with both types of films are listed twice. The first listing of a name is followed by year of birth (and death, when applicable). Roles that are lead or secondary are indicated accordingly, as are non-Hollywood movies. The primary—and, it must be added, not entirely reliable—source for most entries is the *Internet Movie Database*. In addition to these names, mention may be made of Zorro David (1923–2008), whose sole credit, John Huston's *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, cast him as the "maid" (as actually referenced in the film and Carson McCullers's source novel) of one of the two pairs of married characters. Another actor, Dovie Beams (1932–2017), may be arguably Filipina by virtue of her romantic association with Ferdinand E. Marcos (denied in 2022 by his widow, in the face of overwhelming evidence and testimonies); Beams's credits range from a lead role in Jerry Hopper's *Maharlika* (1970) to a credited bit role in her Hollywood "comeback" project (see Joel David, "Mystique of the Past," *Amauteurish*, 11 May 2023). Another matter of incidental interest is that the director of Tetchie Agbayani's 1986 film had earlier made *My Favorite Year* (1982), which featured a prominent supporting role for Ramon Sison, the brother of Jose Ma. Sison.

Anonymous Performer (identified as Filipina in fake snuff footage)
    1999 Joel Schumacher's *8MM*

Corazon Adams (data unavailable)
    1985 Bruce Beresford's *Her Alibi* (with Tagalog lines)

Tetchie Agbayani (1961–), uncredited
    1989 Antonio Margheriti's *Indio* (Italian production)
Tetchie Agbayani, credited
    1984 Hubert Frank's *The Story of the Dolls* (West German production; lead)
    1985 Robert Clouse's *Gymkata* (second lead)
    1985 John Boorman's *The Emerald Forest*
    1986 Richard Benjamin's *The Money Pit*
    1991 Antonio Margheriti's *Indio 2—La rivolta* (Italian production)

Dimples Cooper (1914?–60), uncredited

1943 Mark Sandrich's *So Proudly We Hail!*
1944 Lewis Milestone's *The Purple Heart*
1944 Cecil B. DeMille's *The Story of Dr. Wassell*
1946 John Cromwell's *Anna and the King of Siam*

1947 Elia Kazan's *Boomerang!*
1947 John Brahm's *Singapore*
1947 Cecil B. DeMille's *Unconquered*
1948 William Beaudine's *Shanghai Chest*
1950 Peter Godfrey's *The Great Jewel Robber*
1951 Jacques Tourneur's *Anne of the Indies*
Dimples Cooper, credited
1947 William Beaudine's *The Chinese Ring*
1950 Lawrence Raimond's *The Art of Burlesque*
1951 Lesley Selander's *I Was an American Spy*

Julia Cortez (identified as Australian, 1956–)
1994 Stephan Elliott's *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Australian production; with Tagalog lines)
1995 Bryan Spicer's *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers: The Movie*

Andi Eigenmann (1990–)
2023 Paris Zarcilla's *Raging Grace* (Philippines & UK coproduction; with Tagalog lines)—mentioned in endnote 1

Fely Franquelli (1916–2002), uncredited
1943 Jacques Tourneur's *The Leopard Man*
1943 Richard Wallace's *The Fallen Sparrow*
Fely Franquelli, credited
1943 Richard Thorpe's *Cry "Havoc"*
1945 Edward Dmytryk's *Back to Bataan*

Elena Jurado (1901–74), uncredited
1928 Howard Hawks's *A Girl in Every Port*
1928 Erich von Stroheim's *The Wedding March*
Elena Jurado, credited
1926 Raoul Walsh's *What Price Glory*

Marife Necesito (1980–)
2009 Lukas Moodysson's *Mammoth* (Swedish, Danish, & German coproduction; with Tagalog lines)

Didem Onar (data unavailable)

1997 Ferzan Ozpetek's *Steam: The Turkish Bath* (Italian & Turkish coproduction; with Tagalog lines)

Appendix B: Overseas Filipino Workers in Philippine Cinema

Taken as a description, "overseas Filipino workers" arguably appeared with regularity in mostly Hollywood productions, most intensively those depicting US troops engaged in combat during the mid-20th century in the Pacific, ostensibly against the fascist axis represented by Japan and the Communist-bloc's expansion during the Korean War. Curiously, Filipino characters were lesser seen in films set during the Vietnam conflict, possibly because of its resonance with the US war of colonization during the turn of the century. Philippine studios would also occasionally produce foreign-set films, with characters in white-collar jobs, possibly to lessen expenses in shooting at touristic locales as well as preempt criticism that the project could be nothing more than a travelogue that documented a junket enjoyed by cast and crew.

The OFW policy was initiated during the period regarded as the Second Golden Age, roughly coexistent and coterminous with the martial-law era of Ferdinand Marcos Sr. Among the active filmmakers of this time, Gil Portes had the most number of US-set narratives, owing to his having been partly US-based. His first OFW film, *Miss X* (1980), however, was set in the red-light district of Amsterdam, regarding a victim of human trafficking (later the same year was Elwood Perez's *Waikiki*, about a migrant mother's family difficulties in Hawaii). Subsequent films such as *Bukas ... May Pangarap* (1984) and *Homecoming* (2003) inspected the consequences of foreign migrants returning to the Philippines, with the first one detailing the real-life impact of illegal recruitment on a victim and his family (reminiscent of one of the narrative strands in Ishmael Bernal's 1980 release *Manila by Night*). His North America-based projects—notably *Birds of Prey* (1988) and *Minsan May Pangarap* (1995)—focused on migrant families' activist activities in response to their home countries' oppressive policies. Considered the most definitive among his OFW narratives was *'Merika* (1984), about a caregiver enticed to marry a suitor who turned out to be motivated by his desperation in legalizing his illicit-migrant status.

The emergence of romantic comedies as the dominant local genre during the turn of the millennium resulted in a number of mainstream-produced Europe-set projects where the OFW characters' respective occupations took a backseat to their romantic preoccupations. A departure from this norm would be Chito S. Roño's *Caregiver* (1980), which tracked the several predicaments of a Filipina preparing to abandon her professionally fulfilling though financially unrewarding job as an English teacher in order to become a better-paid service worker in London, resulting in strengthened links but also frayed relations among members of her family and community. The significance of both *'Merika* and *Caregiver* is that they featured the country's biggest multimedia stars, Nora Aunor and Sharon Cuneta respectively, whose still-active personas are influential enough to impact a significant cross-section of Philippine society (see Lim, “Sharon’s Noranian Turn”). Another mainstream production in the same vein is John-D J. Lazatin’s *A Mother’s Story* (2011), this time set in the US.

Because of the expense of shooting overseas, so-called independent producers rarely venture beyond Metro Manila or one of the Philippine provinces; three exceptions are multicharacter entries: Hannah Espia’s *Transit* (2013), set in Tel Aviv, during the moment when the Israeli government announced that it was deporting the children of migrant workers; Julius Sotomayor Cena’s *Mga Dayo* (2012), about three women from disparate positions preparing for Thanksgiving in Guam; and Lawrence Fajardo’s *Imbisibol* (2015), set in Fukuoka, Japan, where a small OFW network copes with dwindling income and mounting expenses alongside a government crackdown on illegal migrant activity.

A little-seen coproduction among the US, Singapore, and the Philippines would be Patrick Daly and Joel Fendelman’s *Remittance* (2015), although the issues of leaving and/or returning from foreign migrant labor became one of local cinema’s standard serious topics: Marilou Diaz-Abaya’s *May Nagmamahal sa Iyo* (1996) confronted the issue of the disruption of familial relations because of the migrant-labor trend; Remton Siega Zuasola’s *Ang Damgo ni Eleuteria* (2010) dealt with the hesitation of a mail-order bride (a variant form of domestic labor); Rory B. Quintos’s *Anak* (2000) and Lawrence Fajardo’s *Prinsesa* (2007) are about the impact of a parent’s absence on her offspring (Fajardo’s subsequent *Kintsugi*, from 2020, concerns a male worker falling for his Japanese employer), while Zig Madamba Dulay’s *Bagahe* (2017) is about a mother arrested under suspicion of throwing her newborn baby in a plane toilet’s trash bin; and Joel Lamangan’s *Migrante* (2012) is about the travails of native citizens forced to turn to foreign work as a means of coping with insurmountable problems in the country.

Kritika Kultura 43: 245.

Notes

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1 As evidence that 2022 may be more of an onset year than a culmination, the two titles under study are not the only OFW texts currently available in global pop culture. A Romanian co-production, Mihai Mincan’s *To the North* (De Film Production,

Backgroundfilm Prague, Remora Films, 2022), features veteran stage and screen character actor Soliman Cruz playing a boatswain on a transatlantic cargo vessel, while Paris Zarcilla's *Raging Grace* (Last Conker, 2023), supposedly based on Roald Dahl's *Matilda* (1988), is a less ambivalently anti-imperialist reworking of the *Nocebo* narrative, trading the latter's native shamanism for Christian triumphalism. In a different type of audiovisual spectacle, the Philippines failed to place a finalist in the 2022 Miss Universe competition—its first poor showing in many years; the winner, however, was the Miss America candidate, whose father happened to have been originally a migrant working scholar from the Philippines. A more recent development also upended the gendered impression that sports victories could be claimed only by Filipino men, when the country's women's soccer team started scoring successes in the 2023 World Cup; significantly, once more, 18 of the 23 members were US-born (Kassouf). The Philippine OFW diaspora, positioned in virtually all the world's countries, will ensure that Filipinos or their descendants will be making their mark for generations to come. They will have to contend in their host countries with the usual barriers of class, race, and gender; they will also be increasingly influential in Philippine politics because of their crucial function as income-earners.

2 Catherine Ceniza Choy, in *Empire of Care*, argues in effect that the overseas migration enabled by the Philippine government's labor-export policy had already been set up and encouraged on a specialized scale by the American colonial government, in its active recruitment of qualified nurses from the Philippines

("The Contours of a Filipino American History"). Choy points out how the US medical establishment was able to preclude the demand of American nurses for grants and subsidies as well as employment for people of color among US citizens, while hiring lower-paid and more compliant colonial subjects as well as tempering the global impression of colonial repression in the Philippines. In *Things Fall Away*, Neferti X. M. Tadiar connects the sexualized labor of migrant Filipina workers to the legacy of authoritarianism of Ferdinand E. Marcos ("Prostituted Filipinas and the Crisis of Philippine Culture"). I would like to acknowledge one of the article's anonymous peer reviewers for this vital insight.

3 The first film images Americans may have seen of Filipinos were actually misrepresentations of the resistance to US colonization. In what has become the most intensively discussed sample, Billy Bitzer's *The American Soldier in Love and War* (Biograph, 1903), made up of three disparate short entries, scene settings shift from outdoors through then-contemporary domestic spaces to an artificial woodland with an unidentifiable hut and half-naked African Americans standing in for native peoples (Kaplan 1070–74). Film historian Agustin Sotto also acknowledged how, in keeping with the US industry's pre-Code orientation, American film producers in the Philippines subsequently fell afoul of their own colonizing government's censorship policies (8).

4 In fact the very first Blood Island-titled film was neither American nor Filipino, was about a war but not the one in Viet Nam, and had horror elements that were only incidental to the narrative proper: Val Guest's *The Camp on Blood Island*, made in 1958, was set during World War II on an islandic Japanese POW camp in British Malaya. It was produced by Hammer Film Productions, associated with the British horror genre, and became successful enough to warrant a sequel during the height of the popularity of the Philippines's Blood Island films. The first Fil-Am Blood Island production was in fact titled *Terror Is a Man* (dir. Gerardo de Leon, Lynn-Romero & Premiere, 1959) and only renamed *Creature from Blood Island* when it was released in the US, apparently to capitalize on the commercial success of the Hammer release. (For a more detailed account of the Filipino Blood Island films, see Lim, "'American Pictures Made by Filipinos'.")

5 After the American captain and the Russian capitalist, both heavily intoxicated, succeed in locking themselves in the former's cabin, the captain reads an excerpt from his writing over the intercom while being occasionally interrupted by his companion as well as by the head of staff; a brownout caused by an ongoing storm ends the account: "And I recall, I was seven years old walking into the kitchen to find my mother crying inconsolably. Martin Luther King had been shot. Two months later, she was crying again. Bobby Kennedy was killed. I couldn't know then what I know now, that the invisible thread connecting Martin Luther King, the Kennedy brothers, and Malcolm X, was that in each case, my government had their finger on the trigger.... My government murdered Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Bobby Kennedy, and John F. Kennedy. My government overthrew good, honest, democratic leaders of the people in Chile, Venezuela, Argentina, Peru, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Panama, and Bolivia. Along with Britain, we carved up the Middle East, creating artificial geographical boundaries and installing

puppet dictators. War itself became our most lucrative industry. Every bomb that's dropped, somebody makes a million dollars. You don't have to know where those bombs are exploding. You don't have to see the grieving mothers and the mangled bodies of their children. Eugene Debs gave this speech in Canton, Ohio, in 1918: 'Throughout history wars have been waged for conquest and plunder. The master class has always declared the wars. The subject class has always fought... They've taught you to believe it to be your patriotic duty to go to war and to have yourselves slaughtered at their command. When Wall Street says war, the press says war.'..." The person quoted in this monologue was American socialist and trade unionist Eugene Victor Debs (1855–1926).

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