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Sunday Cinderellas
Dress and the Self-Transformation of Filipina Domestic Workers in Singapore, 1990s–2017

Mina Roces

Abstract

Singaporean female employers subject their Filipina domestic workers to strict rules governing their dress and behaviour, in the name of de-sexualising them and maintaining their status as invisible servants at the employers' beck and call. This paper suggests that the fashionable attire that Filipina domestic workers don for their day off is also a symbol of rebellion and a rejection of their employers' desires to render them plain and unattractive. In this sense, fashion is more than just a coping strategy: it is a way of expressing a sexual self, a beautiful and feminine self that is not allowed to be exhibited during workdays. Although these fashion makeovers only last less than 24 hours, in their leisure time Filipina domestic workers transgress the weekday restrictions of their employers while marking their own personal self-transformation as ultra-modern, independent women with consumer power and cosmopolitan tastes.

Keywords: Singapore, Philippines, migration, domestic workers, cultural capital, beauty contests, dress, self-transformation

I spent July and August of 2017 working on an ethnographic mapping of the stores in Lucky Plaza mall in Singapore as part of a research project investigating the impact of Filipino migrant consumer power (Roces 2021b). What surprised me was that while most Singaporean store owners were not disturbed by a woman walking around observing their outlets and writing things down in a notepad, the Filipino retail owners were anxious about my presence. Even though I introduced myself as a Filipina scholar, Filipinos did not believe me until I spoke in Tagalog. When I asked why, their explanation had nothing to do with my skin colour (my father is Spanish Filipino) or my almond eyes (my mother is Chinese Filipino). Instead, the judgement of my race was based on my sartorial style. Both Filipino and Chinese Singaporean store owners (who assumed I was Singaporean Chinese and spoke to me in Mandarin) told me:

Mina Roces, School of Humanities and Languages, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia; m.roces@unsw.edu.au.

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> You do not dress like a Filipina. Filipinas dress fashionably and sexy. Singaporeans dress simply and elegantly. We thought you were from the Ministry of Manpower checking up on us. (field notes, Lucky Plaza, 17 July 2017)

After I recovered from the realisation that I was no longer fashionable (or sexy), this comment clarified why none of the Singaporean owners complained about my presence. They thought I was from the Singaporean bureaucracy. It also alerted me to the perception that the Filipinas who visit Lucky Plaza mall – and by this I refer to the literally thousands of Filipina domestic workers who spend their Sunday day off there – have the reputation of being not just fashionable but also "sexy". Since Singaporean female employers forbid their "house maids" to wear clothes that sexualise them, and because hegemonic cultural constructions of the Filipina deny her sexuality (as most Filipinos think women are incapable of sexual desire) (Roces 2012, Estrada-Claudio 2002: 20), this comment provoked me to think about how Filipina domestic workers in Singapore rebel against their employers' attempts to keep them from expressing their femininity, and to analyse the way they use beauty makeovers and fashion to express their new identities as cosmopolitan women.

There is a critical mass of scholarship on the topic of Filipino overseas domestic workers that focuses mostly on their working lives and/or activism or resistance in advocating for improved wages, working conditions or the right to a day off.[1] There has been pioneering work also from the point of view of the Philippine state, which is represented by scholars as a "labour brokerage state" that transforms Filipinos into "migrants for export", to quote the title of Robyn Rodriguez' book (Guevarra 2010, Rodriguez 2010).

More recently Beatriz Lorente's major study on the way the state and maid agencies or transnational labour brokers promote the image of Filipina domestic workers as a hardworking, skilled and docile labour force presents us with a convincing account of how a labour-sending state and maid employment agencies have attempted to mould Filipina domestic workers to perform "the scripts of servitude" (Lorente 2017: 3). The activities of Filipina domestic workers on their Sundays off in Hong Kong, particularly the ubiquitous beauty contest, have been featured in a documentary and discussed by anthropologist Ju-chen Chen (Villarama 2016, Chen 2015). The documentary, aptly entitled "Sunday Beauty Queen", and Ju-Chen's work suggest that these contests and performances by domestic workers are not just about status for the winners and participants, but are also about creating a community of friendship and support overseas (Villarama 2016, Chen 2015). While Anna Guevarra and Beatriz Lorente briefly refer to the dress requirements associated with the ideal "supermaid" touted by labour brokers, there is to date no detailed study that concentrates on Filipina migrant domestic worker dress practices from the post-1970s migration wave.

1 Cf. Parreñas 2003, Lan 2006, Constable 1997, Lindio-McGovern 2012, Leibelt 2011, Zontini 2010.

This article therefore sets out to analyse the dress practices of Filipina domestic workers in Singapore on their day off, from the perspective of a dress and gender historian. I take a semiotics of dress perspective, in which dress is considered a form of "text" and therefore can have several meanings attributed to it, often meanings different from the wearer's agenda. The wearer may imbue a particular attire with meaning, but the public that views the ensemble of clothing and accoutrements interprets "the text" from their own ideological positions. For example, Emma Tarlo showed how Mahatma Gandhi wore a loincloth made of white *khadi* – coarse, homespun cloth – to send the message that India's poverty could be solved by handspinning and freedom from British rule (Tarlo 1996). But for the Indian people the loincloth contained another message, too: that he was a holy man, a saint, an ascetic (ibid.: 78). Dress is therefore also intrinsic to an individual's public and visual performance of ethnic, class and gender identities. In addition, as the example of Gandhi illustrates, dress is also one way to display resistance and can become intrinsic to strategies for empowerment by a marginalised group.

I take my theoretical inspiration from the historical scholarship on the zoot suit and pachuca/o identity in the 1940s USA.[2] Historians of the zoot suit have analysed the way dandiacal dress was used as a strategy for rejecting working class identities.[3] The zoot suit was bright in colour with exaggerated shoulders, an extra-long jacket, and pleated slacks that billowed from the waist but were tight at the ankle (Howard 2010: 113). African Americans and Mexican Americans quickly popularised this fashion style and created a whole new subculture associated with it that included a new unique pachuca/o slang called *caló* that was incomprehensible to outsiders (Macías 2008: 84). The politicisation of the zoot suit and its connections with ethnicity – epitomised by its link with the identity of the pachuco/a – fashioned a distinctly Mexican American subculture and celebrated the dignity of the wearer's ethnicity amidst racial, economic and social discrimination (Macías 2008, Escobedo 2013: 2, Alvarez 2008: 115–16). Mexicans who wore the zoot suit, set off by a ducktail hairdo and a gold watch and chain, were called pachucos/as, and were associated with radicalised youth who rejected traditional Mexican values as well as the mainstream United States conceptions of race, sexuality and labour (Alvarez 2008: 116, Escobedo 2013, Kelley 1994).

Like the patrons of the zoot suit, Filipina domestic workers in Singapore since about the 1990s have found dignity, confidence, femininity and sexuality through fashionable dress, refusing – to quote from Alvarez – "to allow wage labour to be the primary signifier of their working-class identity" (Alvarez 2008: 98).

2 Pachuca/o identity refers to the fashioning of the new subculture that was neither Mexican or American but was Mexican American. Wearing a zoot suit was a visual message that proclaimed this new identity.

3 Cf. Alvarez 2008, Kelley 1994, Macías 2008, Escobedo 2013, Ramírez 2009, Howard 2010, Alfrod 2004, White 1998.

I argue that fashion here is used by a marginal class /ethnic group – Filipina domestic workers – on their day off not just to resist the host country's attempts to mould them into invisible, unfeminine and dowdy servants, but also as an important rite of passage in their migration project of self-transformation into middle-class cosmopolitan subjects. My time frame (from the 1990s to 2017) coincides with the increase of Filipino stores at Lucky Plaza, the tenure of the "She's My Girl" Beauty contest (from 2001–2017) and the timing of my research visit.

Sources for this article include archival work, interviews and ethnographic methods of study. I was in Singapore for a week in July 2011, and for three weeks in July–August 2017. During that time, I visited Lucky Plaza every day for three weeks to do a mapping of the stores that catered to Filipino domestic workers there (Roces 2021b). Lucky Plaza mall sits in the heart of Singapore's affluent shopping district, surrounded by high-end couture malls with international brand names such as Cartier, Miu Miu, Balenciaga, Prada and Hermes, as well as upmarket malls like Paragon and Tangs. The presence of a thriving shopping mall that primarily catered to Filipina domestic workers has been described as "out of place" or an anomaly (Juan 2005: 93). The sheer number of Filipino stores indicates that it caters to this lower-class temporary migrant group. On weekdays, the mall is very quiet, and you will be able to spot some locals from the dominant middle-class shopping there, but on Sundays it is crowded with almost solely Filipino clientele (Roces 2021b).

Interviews were conducted with owners of Lucky Plaza shops such as the Belisse Beauty Salon, the Maganda-Sexy Beauty Salon, the Cez Services Official photography store, Filipino courier stores such as LBC and A Freight, the owner of Filipino-owned food outlet Barrio Fiesta, and three Filipino domestic workers who volunteered for the Humanitarian Organization for Migrant Economics (HOME), a non-governmental organisation that provides assistance to migrant workers in Singapore. Furthermore, I interviewed Filipino domestic workers who frequented Lucky Plaza, the two publishers of the *OFW [Overseas Filipino Worker] Pinoy Star Magazine*, the manager of the Philippine National Bank and workers at the real estate company Camilla Homes. I participated at one graduation ceremony for Filipino domestic workers who took courses from HOME and took part in a financial literacy seminar for Filipino migrants in Singapore in July 2017 and another in Malolos, Bulacan province, Philippines in March 2019 (for the families left behind). All interviewees were given pseudonyms. This paper builds on memoirs written by Filipino domestic workers in Singapore, as well as on my own intense research on Filipino migration (Roces 2021a). Another rich source was the *OFW Pinoy Star Magazine* (published between 2001 until 2017), a magazine directed at a Filipino domestic worker readership and the sponsor of the "She's My Girl" beauty contests.

Photographs of the beauty contestants also comprise an important archival source. The theoretical perspective on the semiotics of dress regards official photographs or posed photographs taken at a studio and "selfies", because they are destined for a public audience, as staged events. As staged events, they are excellent sites for analysing self-representations for public consumption. The corpus of photographs that Filipino domestic workers present as beauty contestants to promote said contests, posted on Facebook, comprise the migrants' own curated performance of the narrative of success in the host country. They are carefully staged to avoid references to their working life (I have not encountered photographs of them doing domestic chores or child-caring duties in their Facebook posts of personal scrapbooks).[4] The photographs are silent about the working lives and experiences of abuse, discrimination or loneliness, and even about the impact of migration on the marriage, children and family life of the smiling subjects. But these carefully choreographed snapshots are a rich source for analysing the self-representation of Filipino domestic workers, revealing how they fashion themselves into confident, cosmopolitan, fashion-savvy and sexy subjects.

This is where the interviews and the memoirs become important, because it is here that Filipino domestic workers are candid about the work situation and the impact of long distances on their personal lives. In the middle of my three-hour interview with Melita for example, her adult son, who was already in his forties, continued to text her asking for money. It was then that she confided to me that her adult children and grandchildren constantly demand money from her so that she has not been able to save much for her retirement. It was only after she attended financial literacy seminars run by the Atikha Overseas Workers and Communities Initiative that she learned how to say no (and indeed in the seminar I attended in Singapore in 2017 there was an entire module on "How to say no to family requests for financial assistance") (interview with Melita, Lucky Plaza, 15 July 2017). Hence, while the women I discuss here have empowered themselves as consumers of fashion and beauty products, thus rejecting the cultural ideal of self-sacrificing mothers, many of them faithfully send remittances home to support their families.

Filipina domestic workers in Singapore

At the time of research there were about 70,000 Filipino domestic workers in Singapore (as of June 2014; Wessels 2015: 10). In Singapore about one in five households employs or is dependent on overseas foreign workers for housekeeping and care for the young and elderly (Wessels 2015: 10).[5] The total number

4 See also Margold on photographs sent home by Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong (Margold 2004).

5 Lin / Sun 2010: 183 suggest the estimate is 1 in 6 households.

of all foreign domestic workers in Singapore was 218,300 in 2010 (or 16 per cent of the total foreign workforce) with Filipinos comprising more than a third of this niche group. Domestic workers earned an average monthly salary of SGD515 in 2015 (Wessels 2015: 27). My own interviews with Filipina domestic workers in 2017 reveal a slightly higher average wage of about SGD600, with the highest paid person (working for a foreign embassy) receiving SGD2000 a month.

Almost 30 per cent of people living in Singapore (in 2015) are "non-residents". But this is not a homogenous group (Amrith 2017: 35). A hierarchy of three visa categories exists: 1) those with an Employment Pass, who are eligible for permanent residency (for professionals such as doctors and bankers), 2) those with an S-Pass, who are mid-level skilled staff and are also eligible for permanent residence, and finally 3) those classified as performing unskilled or semi-skilled work (such as domestic work and construction), who are granted a work permit but are not eligible for permanent residency (ibid.: 37).

Domestic workers belong to the third category. By law, they cannot be accompanied by dependents and are forbidden to marry Singaporean citizens or permanent residents (ibid.). Their work permit is governed by strict rules that ensure that they remain a transient work force: they receive short-term contracts up to a maximum of two years, there are the restrictions on marriage alluded to above, and they are forbidden to give birth to children in Singapore (which is enforced through regular pregnancy tests; ibid.). Migrant domestic workers are also excluded from the Employment Act, which regulates working hours, access to leave and general work conditions, and can be repatriated at will by their employers (Koh et al. 2017: 93). A study commissioned by HOME reveals that foreign domestic workers experienced "structurally hostile work conditions" that included long working hours (13–19 hours a day), a lack of rest days, inadequate sleeping accommodation, food deprivation and psychological abuse (Wessels 2015).

Since most domestic workers live with their employers, they are also subject to a gamut of rules that govern their dress, deportment, behaviour and communication with the world outside the house (through rules about using the mobile phone, for example). Scholars have labelled these constraints on mobility, living status and social activities as a "total institution" (Lin / Sun 2010: 183–184). Since they encounter constant and daily surveillance in the private sphere, domestic workers feel that they can only express themselves in the public sphere on their days off, when they can be free from the prying and judging eyes of their employers (Amrith 2017: 143, Yeoh / Huang 1998: 585). But their presence in public places is not welcome either.

The common perception of locals is that their "maids" (the word used by locals to refer to their domestic workers) are only temporary workers and therefore have "no part to play in public life and therefore no place in the public arena belonging to the citizenry" (Yeoh / Huang 1998: 588). Employers

experience the anxiety that, away from their watchful eyes, their domestic workers might find boyfriends, get pregnant and have to be repatriated – which means that the employer would lose the security bond of SGD5000 paid to the Singaporean government (Yeoh / Huang 1998: 583–602). Thus, it was only in 2013 that a law was passed giving domestic workers one day off per week. The law itself remains unenforceable and employers are allowed to have an opt-out compensation-in-lieu of the day off paid to their staff (Koh et al. 2017: 197). At the time of writing in autumn 2021, NGOs such as HOME are still advocating for a true 24-hour day off since many employers interpret the day off as an 8-hour day requiring their domestic workers to complete their chores before 9 a.m. and expecting them to return home before 7 p.m. to cook dinner.[6] Nevertheless, since the implementation of the day-off policy, surveys have shown an increasing access to days off – from 12 per cent of domestic workers given a day off in 2011 to 41 per cent in 2015 (Koh et al. 2017: 191).

Singapore's civil society is considered a "closed" system, meaning that it is difficult for domestic workers (perceived to be outsiders) to lobby for migrant rights (Koh et al. 2017: 89). Thus, it is usually NGOs such as HOME and Transient Workers Count Two who advocate on their behalf (ibid.: 89–104). Taking the "day off" campaign as a case study is illuminating in this regard. In an excellent article on the topic, scholars Chiu Yee Koh, Kellynn Week, Charmian Goh and Brenda S.A. Yeoh explain that the reason why the aims of the campaign were achieved was because of the "vernacularization" of the claims discourse, which deliberately framed the need for a day off not in terms of rights, but in terms of maintaining Singapore's competitive edge in attracting the migrant workers needed for economic development, and by focusing on the benefits the day off can have on the maid's productivity for the employers (which included using the day off to learn new skills such as cooking and sewing, courses offered by NGOs such as HOME; Koh et al. 2017: 89–104). This political situation underscores the marginal status of foreign domestic workers who depend on NGOs to advocate on their behalf and/or as a refuge when they become victims of abuse, including emotional abuse and non-payment of salaries. The NGOs themselves are acutely aware that a rights discourse approach to their legal advocacy would not be popular in the Singaporean political and cultural environment.

The rules of dress

In the movie "Remittance" – an independent feature film about Filipino domestic workers in Singapore based on true stories – there is a scene where the

6 See Jolovan Wham, HOME consultant, speech at the graduate exercises for HOME, Singapore, 23 July 2017.

white male employer undresses and changes clothes in his bedroom, leaving the door open. As he goes about his private everyday habit, the Filipina maid enters the room, tidies up and then leaves. During the entire time she is in the same room with him, her presence is not acknowledged. It is as if she was not there at all (Daly / Fendeleman 2015). This scene captures very well the way these women are expected to be there, but not there – they are needed to perform the everyday tasks that maintain the household while remaining quietly and unobtrusively in the background. During their working days they are expected to be obedient, silent and modestly dressed.

Another scene in that same film shows a woman submit tearfully to having her long, beautiful locks cut short because her female employer demanded it (Daly / Fendelman 2015). The emotional moment captures the trauma experienced by the domestic worker at being compelled to surrender her femininity and beauty. The rules of dress are aimed not only at ensuring that a maid remains invisible, but are there also to downplay if not erase the symbols of her femininity and sexuality. Labour brokers that include the Philippine government and maid agencies instruct applicants on dress, deportment, behaviour and speech – what Beatriz Lorente has labelled the "scripts of servitude" – traits considered desirable by employers and necessary (according to the Philippine government) for protecting the domestic worker from unwanted attention and possible sexual harassment (Lorente 2017).

Although Lorente focuses on the use of language, primarily English, in the promotion of Filipinos as "supermaids" and quality workers, she also briefly describes how these labour brokers alter the physical appearances of these workers to assure employers that they are "professional, and modest women". When applicants turn up for official photographs or videos of themselves that will be sent to prospective employers, they are asked to cut their hair short or wear it swept away from their face in a ponytail, and to refrain from wearing make-up, jewellery or painted fingernails because "domestic workers are not supposed to present themselves as sexually attractive women" (Lorente 2017: 81–87).

Anna Guevarra's analysis of the training video produced by the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration for Taiwan-bound domestic workers produces a list of what domestic workers must not do that includes not wearing perfume, tight fitting jeans or "transparent clothes" in the presence of their employers (Guevara 2010: 82). This advice from the government side is presented as a way of self-protection, as the session on "be friendly, not familiar" warns them not to appear sexually available to male employers and trains them to be assertive if they experience inappropriate behaviour towards them (Guevarra 2010: 82–83). According to Guevarra, labour brokers believe that physical appearance is an important quality particularly "because of wives' fears about their husbands getting seduced by [the domestic worker]" (Guevarra 2003: 367, quoted in Lorente 2017: 83). Hence, the dress code is to ensure that "they are

de-sexualised, they perform gendered labor as workers and servants and not as women" (Lorente 2017: 81).

Domestic workers are prohibited from wearing revealing clothing such as sleeveless blouses, spaghetti straps, plunging necklines or short skirts. They must not wear make-up, jewellery, nail-polish or high heels. Pei-Chia Lan notes similar rules imposed on Filipino domestic workers by Taiwanese employers, noting that "female employers would raise their eyebrows if workers wore V-collar shirts, skirts, or mini-shorts" (Lan 2006: 7) because "the 'simple and covered' rule aims to suppress the femininity of workers and reinforce their class subordination" (ibid.: 167). Breaking these dress codes and/or any hint of entertaining boyfriends at the employer's home may result in instant dismissal.

One memoir from Cherry, a domestic worker in Singapore, reveals the serious repercussions of breaking the rules. Cherry's female employer returned home early one morning and was surprised to see her domestic worker attired in "a sexy spaghetti top and tight shorts" handing food over to her Filipino boyfriend in the lobby of the apartment (Banados 2011: 80). The action provoked her angry boss to fire her on the spot. It was unclear from the memoir whether the employer's ire was because of Cherry's immodest attire or because she was entertaining a strange man, or even because she was handing out food from the employer's kitchen. This instant dismissal also surprised Cherry, who had been working there for three years and had been assured that her employer was satisfied with her work.

Yeoh and Huang have alerted us to the way "the off-day provides the maids with an opportunity to shed their dowdy 'workday uniforms'" and put on their best clothes:

> [...] dressing up on off-days in a manner contrary to what is deemed appropriate for domestic servants thus provides the opportunity for maids to use material markers not only to assert their identity as urbane women, but also to close the gap if not invert (albeit temporarily) the positions of "ma'am" and "maid". (Yeoh / Huang 1998: 597)

Writing about Filipino domestic workers in Taiwan, Pei-chan Lan makes a similar point that the domestic workers' weekend dress attire has the potential to blur the visual difference between "madam" (the term used by the domestic workers to refer to their female employer) and "maid", with domestic workers complimenting each other with the exclamation "Wow, you look like our madams!" (Lan 2006: 167–168). Since most Singaporean employers do not require their domestic workers to wear a uniform, the standard dress that has now come to be considered the visual representation of "foreign maid" is "a garb of over-sized T-shirts, long shorts or bermudas and a short and simple (almost tomboyish) hairstyle distinguishing the 'maid' as the sexual inferior 'other'" (Yeoh / Soco 2014: 177). The everyday attire of denim jeans and T-shirt has become so closely associated with the identity of "Filipino maid" that if a female who does not look Chinese is spotted in that attire, local Singaporeans

assume that she is a Filipino domestic worker (online interview with *OFW Pinoy Star* publisher and founder Luz Campos-Mesenas, 11 January 2021). According to scholar Megha Amrith, Filipino nurses want to distance themselves from Filipino domestic workers and underscore their identity as health professionals with careers on a par with the host country's citizens (Amrith 2017). They accomplish this distancing by avoiding Lucky Plaza mall, by dressing modestly and simply on their days off and by living quiet lives (Amrith 2017).

In this context, the day off has become important as the one day domestic workers can break free from the strict rules of dress they are required to observe during the long working days. However, the domestic workers sartorial transformation on Sundays is only tolerated if the employer does not witness it. Luisa, another one of Lan's informants, recalls that when she left the apartment on her day off wearing make-up, high heels, a silk blouse and dyed hair:

> My neighbors in the elevator saw me [and] smelled my perfume. And there were rumors in the whole building! They told my employer: "Luisa goes out, like a movie star!" My boss didn't believe it. So, the security guard rewound the videotape – they have a video camera in the elevator – and showed it to my employer. (Lan 2006: 229)

The fact that any sighting of a domestic worker breaking the dress code requires a police detective-style investigation complete with examination of video security tapes underscores the importance of dress in maintaining social hierarchies. Hence, Filipina domestic workers in Singapore can only wear what they like during their day off at Lucky Plaza away from the gaze of their employers. In fact, some of them leave home carrying a change of clothes, which they don once they arrive at the mall. The fact that this rejection of their working-class identity can only be performed outside their employer's gaze might suggest that this resistance is only subtle and ephemeral. However, photographs of these women in their best clothes, accessories, hair and cosmetics document for posterity these physical transformations. After all, the employers are not the audience for these self-representations. The fashionable dress and the photographs are primarily directed at their fellow Filipinos, whom they meet on their day off, including at Sunday mass, as well as the classmates and teachers of their short courses and their families in the homeland.

While the weekday dress of domestic workers is designed to make them invisible, their Sunday sartorial transformations place them on display at Lucky Plaza. Singapore locals avoid Lucky Plaza on Sundays because they feel like a minority there. As Shanti, a local put it: "The Filipino crowd alone is enough to scare me out of Lucky Plaza. I feel so much like an outsider in what is supposedly 'ours'" (Yen 1998/99: 57). Like the zoot suiters whose flamboyant presence reclaimed public spaces for their ethnic group in racially segregated America and declared that African Americans and Mexican Americans were "here to stay", Filipina domestic workers have claimed Lucky Plaza as "their

space", albeit only on Sundays (see Roces 2021b), defying the host nation's desire that they remain invisible and restricted to the private sphere of the home. In this sense, the large numbers of Filipina domestic workers – these "Sunday Cinderellas" – proclaim their group's visibility, with their loud voices (the cacophony of voices in the mall on Sunday is deafening) announcing their presence. With the "uniform" of jeans and t-shirt now replaced with fashionable clothing, these women call attention to themselves not as domestic workers but as women.

While the body of work on Filipino/a overseas workers has given us an excellent picture of the everyday lives of these women and of the impact of their migration on the families left behind, as well as on their own identities as mothers and as financial providers, my study shifts the analytical lens to the way they use fashion as resistance and as a rite of passage that marks their new identities. I argue that the women who join beauty contests are participating in the project of transforming themselves into fashionable, cosmopolitan women who reject not only their employers' rules of dress, but also their own working-class identities.

Brenda Yeoh and Maria Andrea Soco have used the term "working class cosmopolitanism" to distinguish this from elite cosmopolitanism, because "it is not so much based on the prior cultural or economic capital of the privileged, but rooted in a process of learning that takes place quite intensively in the course of migration as contact zones and cultural exchanges multiply" (Yeah / Soco 2014: 175). Yeah and Soco argue that the experience of living and working in Singapore has made domestic workers more "modern" as they embrace the consumption practices that prior to their migration they had associated only with the middle classes in the Philippines. In addition, the volunteer work and short courses, such as book-keeping, finance, entrepreneurship and computer courses, not only equip them with new skills, but also give them the opportunity to embrace leadership roles, as they might evolve from students to trainers in the various NGOs (Yeah / Soco 2014). My research builds on this scholarship by underscoring the link between these sartorial transformations and the women's new identities as working women (breadwinners) in an affluent country, who have become cosmopolitan subjects. This physical, cultural and personal transformation is marked when they return home looking like fashion models – sending the message that they are no longer *provincianas* (from the rural areas), as their new look marks them as sophisticated urban dwellers rather than locals of the rural village or town from which they hailed.

Sunday Cinderellas: Fashioning a beautiful self

Many of the Filipino domestic workers in Singapore do not come from urban areas. Most of the women whose life stories can be found in the book of memoirs of Filipino domestic workers in Singapore, *Path to Remittances* (Banados 2011), and in the promotional biographies of beauty contestants for the "She's My Girl" beauty contest published in the *OFW Pinoy Star* come from the rural provinces, many of them from Iloilo in Central Philippines. Their deployment to Singapore is the first time they have lived overseas in an affluent country using technology such as washing machines, electric ovens, vacuum cleaners, dishwashers and other modern appliances. Many of them have never worn high heels or make-up, or coloured their hair before (online interview with Campos Mesenas, 11 January 2021). The long hours of domestic work in Singapore take a toll on their physical health and endurance. That they only have one day off a week also means they have little time to rest and revive from the tiring working week. Pampering themselves with beauty treatments is a logical way to restore energy, confidence and happiness (online interview with Campos Mesenas, 11 January 2021).

The process of "making oneself beautiful" (*pampaganda*) has become a rite of passage for many Filipino migrant workers. When I asked the Filipina owner of the Belisse Beauty Salon why there are so many beauty salons in Lucky Plaza, her response was that there are three things that were most important to all Filipinos: *pagkain* (Filipino food), *padala* (shipping of gifts/goods to the Philippines) and *pampaganda* (to make oneself beautiful). At Lucky Plaza in 2017 there were 23 beauty salons that clearly targeted a Filipina clientele, with The Iloilo Hair Salon running four franchises – probably a reflection of the fact that a lot of Filipina domestic workers hail from Iloilo. On Sundays, these salons are crowded with clients, almost all of them Filipinas. The owners of Belisse Beauty Sanctuary and the Maganda Sexy Beauty salon disclosed that 90 per cent of their clients are Filipinas (interviews Lucky Plaza, 17 and 27 July 2017). One of my interviewees, Portia, admits that she goes to the beauty parlour once a month and spends SGD35 for a pedicure, 50 for a foot spa, and 90 for hair dye and blow drying. The most popular treatment is "rebonding" or straightening of the hair; a procedure that costs SGD130. Considering that their salaries are SGD600 on average, this is a significant investment. Portia herself confided that the monthly beauty makeovers use up one-sixth of her salary (interview with Portia, Lucky Plaza, 21 July 2017).

Why would women spend one-sixth of their monthly salary on hair treatment? Cultural constructions of the feminine in the Philippines conflate beauty with women's virtue. The definition of *maganda* refers not just to physical beauty, but also to socially pleasing conduct. A woman who is "beautiful" extols the

virtues of her gender. While *maganda* is the adjective used to refer to socially accepted behaviour, its antonym *pangit* ("ugly") is used to connote what is evil or bad, or what is socially unacceptable behaviour (Roces 1998: 17, 168). Beauty queens in the Philippines are highly admired and many are approached to run for political office, capitalising on their cultural capital as virtuous women and translating it into power (Roces 1998: 168–178). This partially explains the huge popularity (some would say "obsession") with beauty contests in the Philippines and in the diaspora. Some of the Filipino beauty contests run in Singapore include the "She's My Girl" competition, which is run by *OFW Pinoy Star* magazine, the "Miss Fashionista" sponsored by one of the retail outlets in Lucky Plaza, Miss Filipinas Singapore and the OFW Supermodel contest (see *Pinoy Star* August / September 2016: 18, and March 2017: 11).

The "She's My Girl" beauty contest run by *OFW Pinoy Star* magazine is the brainchild of Luz Campos Mesenas, a Filipina married to a third-generation Filipino Singaporean. Since running the contest was her idea, she was responsible for organising the major event. Her involvement spanned from finding sponsors, to hiring/ bringing in a choreographer, a make-up artist, a professional photographer and a coach to give tips about answering questions in public, and even to scouting for contestants at Lucky Plaza. Given her role in the beauty contest and in publishing the photographs and biodata of these women in *OFW Pinoy Star* magazine for almost two decades, she knows a lot about how participation in beauty contests has changed the lives of the contestants.

The contest, which was first held in 2001, was conceived to promote the magazine and to give the Filipina domestic workers something to do and to look forward to on their day off. The first ten contestants in 2001 received lessons on make-up, deportment, beauty and fashion from a professional beauty consultant, a dance choreographer, a make-up artist and a professional catwalk model. In the promotional advertisement inviting contestants to participate in the "She's My Girl", "Mr. Pinoy Star" and "Singapore Filipino Idol" (a singing and talent show), candidates were promised that: "Contestants will be groomed by our beauty and catwalk experts to acquire beauty, confidence, intelligence, teamwork, positive attitude, great personality, talent" *(Pinoy Star* July/August 2014: 14–15). Rehearsals for the event lasted about 5 months, guaranteeing that whether they won or not, the contestants would emerge from the experience with the knowledge of how to present a better-groomed, catwalk-model image of themselves. These lessons in grooming are in direct contrast to the instructions and training given to them by labour brokers, designed by the Philippine government to make them model domestic workers. Participation in beauty contests is one way these women, many of whom hail from the rural provinces in the Philippines, learn how to wear fashionable cosmetics, trendy clothes and new ways of walking, talking and presenting more confident versions of themselves in front of an audience.

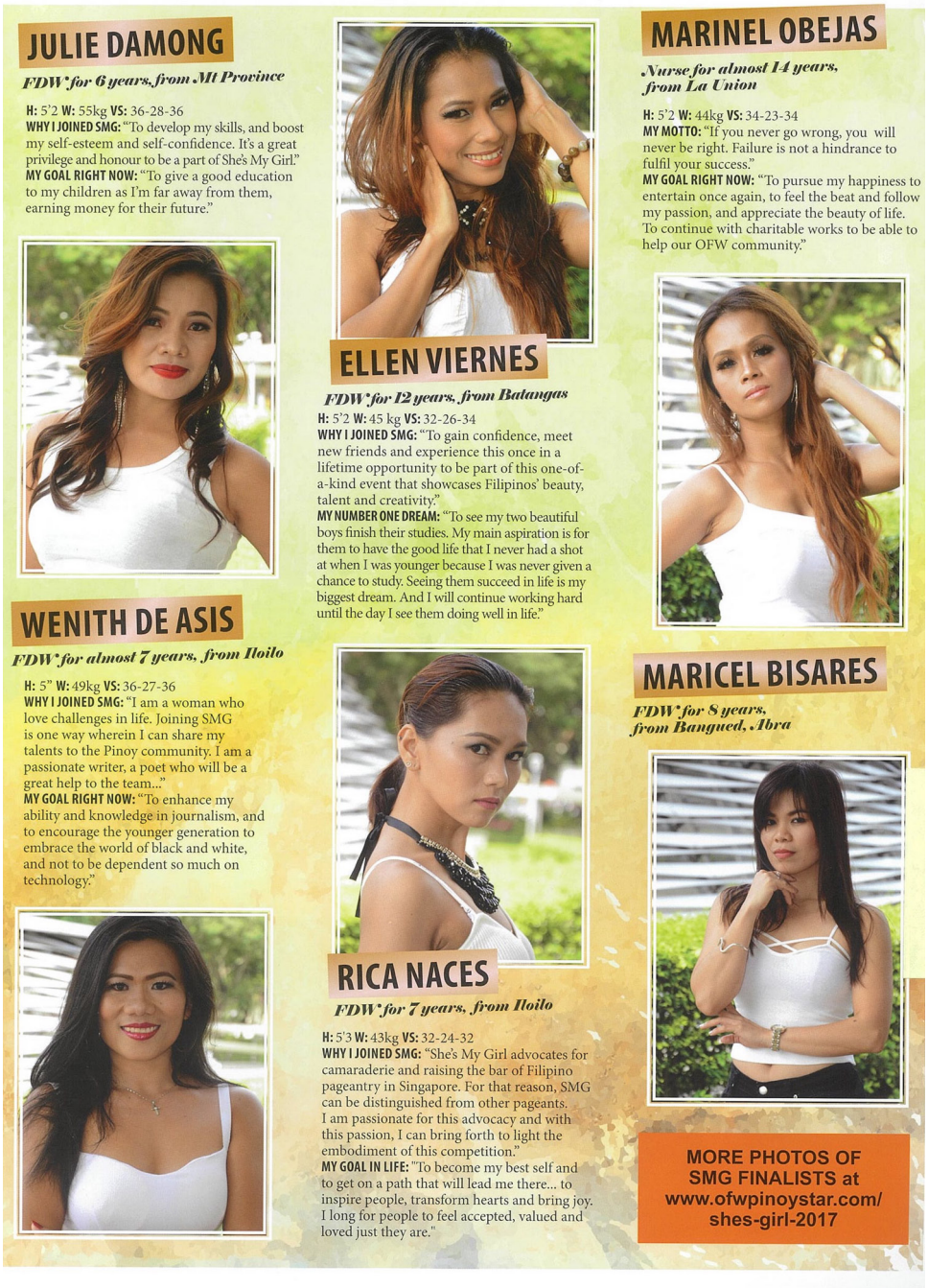
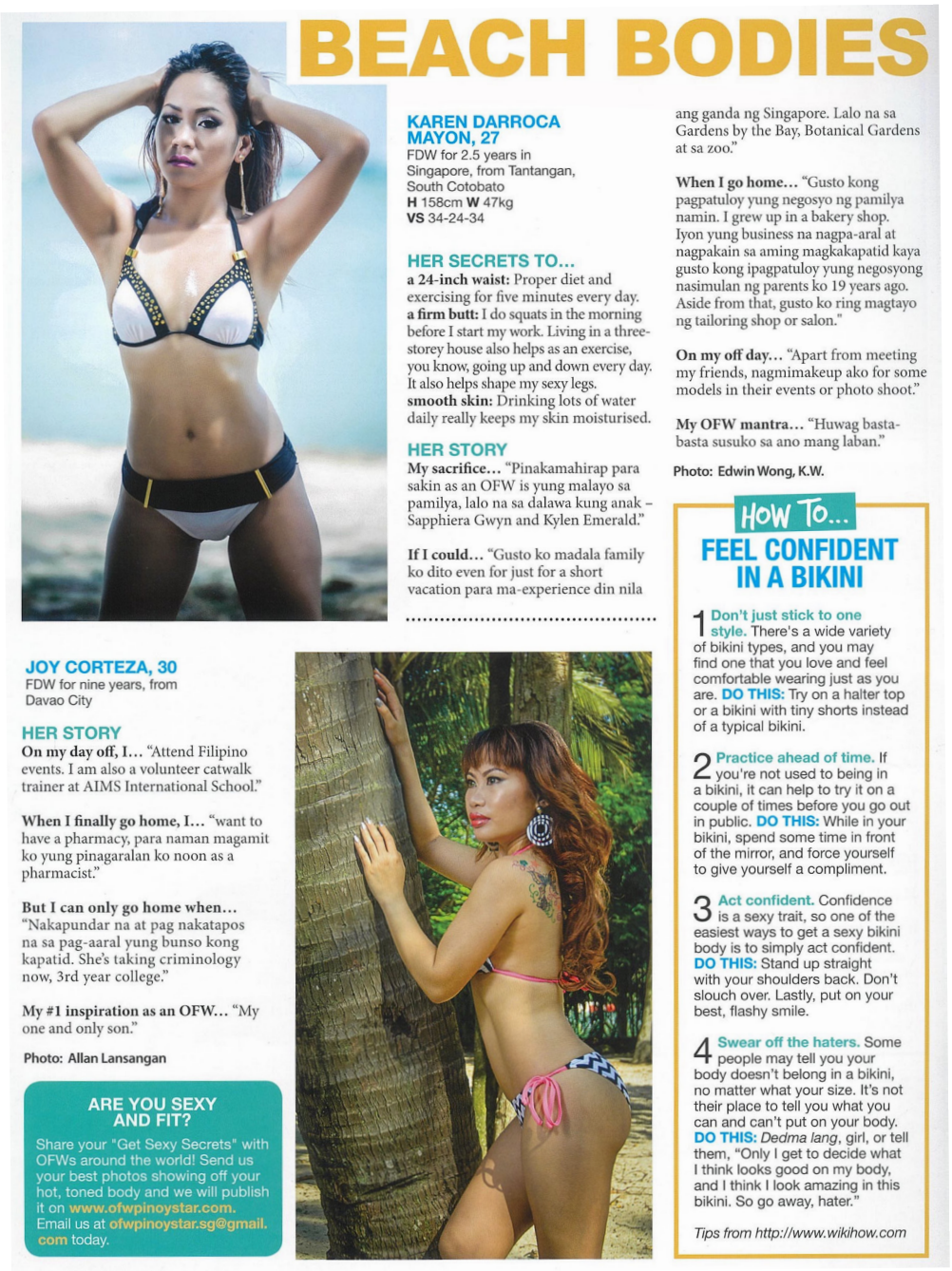


Figure 1: Contestants for the Pinoy Talent Festival 2017. Photos taken by and courtesy of *OFW Pinoy Star* magazine, March / June 2017, p. 11.



BEACH BODIES

KAREN DARROCA MAYON, 27
FDW for 2.5 years in Singapore, from Tantangan, South Cotobato
H 158cm **W** 47kg
VS 34-24-34

HER SECRETS TO...

a 24-inch waist: Proper diet and exercising for five minutes every day.
a firm butt: I do squats in the morning before I start my work. Living in a three-storey house also helps as an exercise, you know, going up and down every day. It also helps shape my sexy legs.
smooth skin: Drinking lots of water daily really keeps my skin moisturised.

HER STORY

My sacrifice... "Pinakamahirap para sakin as an OFW is yung malayo sa pamilya, lalo na sa dalawa kung anak – Sapphiera Gwyn and Kylen Emerald."

If I could... "Gusto ko madala family ko dito even for just for a short vacation para ma-experience din nila ang ganda ng Singapore. Lalo na sa Gardens by the Bay, Botanical Gardens at sa zoo."

When I go home... "Gusto kong pagpatuloy yung negosyo ng pamilya namin. I grew up in a bakery shop. Iyon yung business na nagpa-aral at nagpakain sa aming magkakapatid kaya gusto kong ipagpatuloy yung negosyong nasimulan ng parents ko 19 years ago. Aside from that, gusto ko ring magtayo ng tailoring shop or salon."

On my off day... "Apart from meeting my friends, nagmimakeup ako for some models in their events or photo shoot."

My OFW mantra... "Huwag basta-basta susuko sa ano mang laban."

Photo: Edwin Wong, K.W.

JOY CORTEZA, 30
FDW for nine years, from Davao City

HER STORY

On my day off, I... "Attend Filipino events. I am also a volunteer catwalk trainer at AIMS International School."

When I finally go home, I... "want to have a pharmacy, para naman magamit ko yung pinagaralan ko noon as a pharmacist."

But I can only go home when... "Nakapundar na at pag nakatapos na sa pag-aaral yung bunso kong kapatid. She's taking criminology now, 3rd year college."

My #1 inspiration as an OFW... "My one and only son."

Photo: Allan Lansangan

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HOW TO...
FEEL CONFIDENT IN A BIKINI

1 **Don't just stick to one style.** There's a wide variety of bikini types, and you may find one that you love and feel comfortable wearing just as you are. **DO THIS:** Try on a halter top or a bikini with tiny shorts instead of a typical bikini.

2 **Practice ahead of time.** If you're not used to being in a bikini, it can help to try it on a couple of times before you go out in public. **DO THIS:** While in your bikini, spend some time in front of the mirror, and force yourself to give yourself a compliment.

3 **Act confident.** Confidence is a sexy trait, so one of the easiest ways to get a sexy bikini body is to simply act confident. **DO THIS:** Stand up straight with your shoulders back. Don't slouch over. Lastly, put on your best, flashy smile.

4 **Swear off the haters.** Some people may tell you your body doesn't belong in a bikini, no matter what your size. It's not their place to tell you what you can and can't put on your body. **DO THIS:** *Dedma lang*, girl, or tell them, "Only I get to decide what I think looks good on my body, and I think I look amazing in this bikini. So go away, hater."

Tips from http://www.wikihow.com

Figure 2: "How to feel confident in a bikini." Page taken from and courtesy of *OFW Pinoy Star* magazine, March / June 2017, p. 18.

The 2017 list of contestants included Filipina domestic workers from the provinces of Iloilo, Maycauawayan Bulacan, the Mountain province, Batangas, La Union and Bangued Abra, most of them mothers with children left behind in the Philippines. When asked why she joined the contest, Julie Damong from the Mountain province wrote "to develop my skills, and boost my self-esteem and confidence" and Ellen Viernes from Batangas confided having a similar motive "to gain confidence, meet new friends and experience this once in lifetime opportunity to be part of this one-of-a-kind event that showcases Filipinos' beauty, talent and creativity" (*Pinoy Star* March/June 2017: 11). Leizheyll Pesino from Bicol confessed that:

> [...] joining a pageant was just a dream for me until one day, I saw the Pinoy Star ad online and emailed my application immediately. [...] I admit I don't have a beautiful face and a sexy body but I am still excited to join [...] coz I am excited to see myself in the limelight (ibid.: 10–11).

The published photographs of these contestants in the pages of the *OFW Pinoy Star* magazine display them – in full make-up, with newly coiffured, coloured or straightened hair and wearing skin-tight spaghetti strap blouses – looking confidently at the camera in the manner of fashion models in clearly studied poses (see Figure 1). The magazine encouraged readers to send their "most stylish pix, or most gorgeous and stylish photos" (*Pinoy Star* January/February 2017: 12 and August/September 2016: 22). And these photos were showcased, regularly accompanied by the subjects' beauty tips. Merly Emperador, a domestic worker who was the Dream Top Model 2016 from Naguilayan, Binmaley Pangasinan, sent photographs of herself in skimpy bikinis posing like a swimsuit model (*Pinoy Star* August/September 2016: 22) while Karen Darroca Mayon from Tantangan, South Cotobato and Joy Corteza from Davao City were featured in *OFW Pinoy Star* in a segment on "How to Feel Confident in a Bikini" (see Figure 2). A "Sunday Style" section of the magazine allows domestic workers the opportunity to dole out advice about fashion and style along with photographs of themselves (cf. *Pinoy Star*, August/September 2016: 20, 22). In these photos they are presented as true fashion influencers.

Janeth Alvarez Deza, 30 years old, from Cagayan Valley and mother to a 12-year old boy, confided: "I love to wear long sleeves but off-shoulder because it feels so sexy!" (*Pinoy Star* August/September 2016: 22). Two domestic workers, 27-year-old Jenny Correa from La Union province in the Philippines and 26-year-old Mary Rose Joy Sampiano, shared photos of themselves in skin-tight shorts, high heels and midriffs that exposed their navels and advised readers on how to achieve a "sexy butt" or look sexy. Jenny wrote: "Want to be sexy? Eat lots of fruits, exercise regularly and lastly stop drinking cold, carbonated drinks" (*Pinoy Star* February/March 2017: 14), while Mary Rose claimed "Dancing will give you a sexy butt, I swear" (ibid.). In a special feature on "Day Off Comfort", revealing how "these lovely ladies show us how

they dress for relaxation", the majority of the women in the photo montage were attired in short shorts or very short mini-skirts, which they identified as their preferred attire on their day off. For example, 31 year-old Mar Wenith de Asis from Iloilo and mother of one, confessed that her favourite outfit was "short shorts, or skirts that show off my shapely legs, with flat shoes or sandals" (*Pinoy Star* September/October 2016: 20). One feature entitled "Babes in Black" claimed that the women photographed were examples of how "You can be sexy and comfy at the same time". The photograph of Maria Dolores "Dolly" Pascual showed her in black body-hugging pants, full make-up, styled hair, red nail polish and black tank top with spaghetti straps and her midriff exposed. A 32-year old, who had been working as a domestic worker for 8 years in Singapore, she narrated her poignant personal story:

> For two years, I didn't get a day off. I was so homesick. […] I usually spent Sundays joining OFW [Overseas Filipino Worker] pageants with my friends. As of this writing, I'm competing at the biggest modelling pageant for OFW's here. I'm also happy to be part of the Dreamcatcher family, an NGO here. Before these, I went to Sunday School [Sunday classes], taking up basic hotel management. (*Pinoy Star* January/February 2017: 13)

As her statement reveals, Dolly coped with homesickness with several strategies that included joining beauty pageants, volunteering for an NGO and enrolling in short courses that might one day allow her to move away from domestic work. Hence, in these photographs and magazine features, these domestic workers are presented as role models for readers.

The only traces of their provincial background are the biographical notes that indicates their place of birth. The look that they aspire to communicate is that of "trendy, beautiful and sexy". The clothing they wear is not expensive and probably purchased in the flea market at Lucky Plaza (online interview with Campos Mesenas, 11 January 2021). But the price tag is not the point; it is the women's representation as beautiful role models that takes centre stage in these photographs.

The prizes of the "She's My Girl" beauty contests have been very lucrative – both in cash and in kind (SGD1500–2000 for the winner, SGD1500 for second place and SGD700 for third place). The winner also receives return tickets to the Philippines provided by Philippine Airlines. Sponsors included Singtel (the Singaporean telecommunications company), which has donated products including smart phones and phone cards, and also restaurants that donate vouchers, as well as companies that provide beauty products and food hampers (Campos Mesenas, 11 January 2021). Some of the winners use the prize money to start a new business in the Philippines, to build a house or donate to victims of natural disasters in the homeland: "I was able to invest in building a two-storey house in Ifugao and also, part of my winnings was donated to [Typhoon] Yolanda victims" (Sunshine Manuel, "She's My Girl" prize winner of 2013; *Pinoy Star* July/August 2014: 14).

Figure 3: The façade of the photo studio Cez Services at Lucky Plaza, Singapore, displaying a magazine cover with a Filipina beauty queen. Photo by Mina Roces, 2017.

But more importantly, much like beauty queens in the Philippines, the winners acquire social status from their beauty titles. Some of the beauty queens married foreigners or boyfriends, who encouraged them to move out of domestic work. For example, one former "She's My Girl" beauty queen married a British citizen and has moved with him to Qatar; another one now has a European boyfriend who is a manager in Singapore. Another former winner has a foreign boyfriend who helped her set up a business in the Philippines, while another followed her boyfriend to Vietnam (Campos Mesenas, 11 January 2021). But although as beauty contestants these domestic workers challenge their employers' rules of dress, one can argue that they also endorse hegemonic cultural constructions of the feminine (Roces 2022). In the Philippines it is usually only models, actresses and celebrities who appear in magazines, television and social media posing provocatively in photographs wearing revealing clothing. Ordinary women, particularly married women, are expected to be more modest. In the homeland, only single women participate in beauty contests. But most of the contestants for the many beauty contests run for Filipinas in Singapore are Filipina domestic workers who are wives and mothers. In this sense the contestants in Singapore send the message that married women can also express their sexual selves and wear swimsuits in a public arena.

Many domestic workers do not participate in beauty contests or go to Lucky Plaza on Sundays. For many religious and devout Catholics, attending Sunday mass is a major highlight of their week. One of my interviewees, Portia, loves to go to church on Sundays. But even this conservative activity inspires her to primp herself because: "I love Sunday also to go to church and have a reason to be beautiful. I want [it to be that] every time I go to church, I must be beautiful" (Portia, Lucky Plaza, 21 July 2017). Attending church requires more modest attire rather than "sexy" clothing, but even here, domestic workers can take pride in their appearance. Other women prefer to spend their day off volunteering with the many migrant NGOs or the Catholic Church, or they enrol in some of the courses to learn new skills such as caregiving, cooking or dress-

making run by the HOME Academy; some with the intention of changing careers or moving to a different job in another country. I was privileged to witness the fashion makeovers that graduates of these courses underwent in preparation for a graduation ceremony on my last Sunday at Lucky Plaza (30 July 2017). I complimented a group of ladies attired in long formal gowns who were clients at the many beauty parlours at Lucky Plaza. They told me that they were getting ready for their graduation from one of the NGO-run weekend courses that had updated their qualifications from "domestic workers" to "caregivers". They had treated themselves to hair straightening, hair extensions, perms, false eyelashes – the lot – and they all looked just as if they were going to step out onto a red-carpet event (see Figure 4). Their success was symbolised with new clothes and a new "beautiful" look. In other words, it was important to mark their achievement on graduation day also with a fashion makeover. These women were clearly celebrating their project of self-transformation and perhaps launching their first steps to move away from domestic work. When I participated as a speaker at a graduation ceremony at one of the HOME Academy courses, those who went up to the stage to claim their diplomas were also dressed formally (some in formal long gowns even though the event was in the morning); they were all wearing make-up and most had had their hair done professionally in a beauty salon.

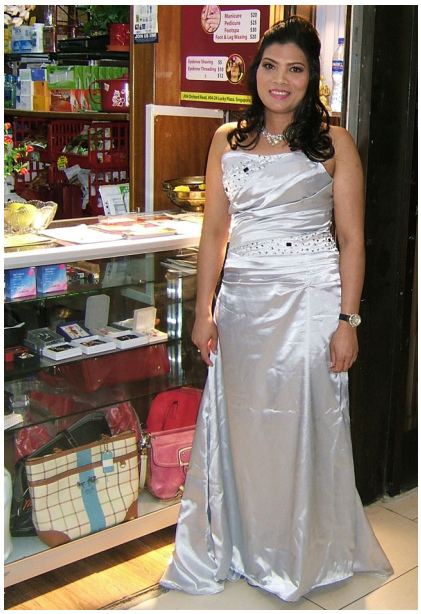

Figure 4: A Filipina domestic worker in front of one of the beauty parlours at Lucky Plaza, Singapore, on her way to her graduation ceremony from a weekend course. Photo taken by Mina Roces, 2017.

There are a handful of professional photography studios at Lucky Plaza that provide services for passports and visas or employment papers. The majority of those who pose for formal studio portraits at Lucky Plaza are Filipinas.[7] Some of the photo portraits are 8½ by 12 inches or A4 size and formatted like a magazine cover. These magazine cover photos are sent to the Philippines as mementos to convey the subject's self-representation as a glamorous woman. In the shiny laminated photograph, a gorgeous "cover girl" with perfect coiffure and make-up smiles at the audience. According to Cez, who owns a photograph studio on the fourth floor, these portraits declare to friends and relatives in the homeland that the portrayed are "beautiful" (*maganda sila*) and that

7 In contrast to the more evenly ethnic division of requests for passport pictures (interview with the owner of Cez Services, Lucky Plaza, 19 July 2017).

they have made it abroad (interview with the owner of Cez Services, Lucky Plaza, 19 July 2017; see Figure 3). In so doing, they are tapping into the beauty/power nexus in the hegemonic cultural constructions of the feminine and send the message that the migration project was a success.

Summary

Singaporean female employers subject their Filipina domestic workers to strict rules governing their dress and behaviour, in the name of de-sexualising them and maintaining their status as invisible servants at their employers' beck and call. I suggest that the sexy and fashionable attire that Filipina domestic workers don for their day off at Lucky Plaza is also a symbol of rebellion and a rejection of both the labour brokers' (the maid agencies and the Philippine government; Guevarra 2010, Lorente 2017) and their employers' desires to render them plain and unattractive. In this sense, fashion is more than just a coping strategy; it is a way of expressing a sexual self, a beautiful and feminine self that they are not allowed to exhibit at work. Although these fashion makeovers only last less than 24 hours, in their leisure time Filipina domestic workers transgress the weekday restrictions of their employers while marking their own personal self-transformation as ultra-modern, independent women with consumer power and cosmopolitan tastes. Many of the contestants of the beauty contests I analysed here hail from the countryside and, prior to their migration journey, did not got to beauty salons or wear make-up, nor did they dare to wear sexy fashionable clothes. Becoming a beauty contestant taught them how to wear fashionable and sexy attire and to apply cosmetics. They learned how to walk like runway models, to pose seductively and confidently at the camera, and how to speak in public. They became celebrities and cover girls with photographs of their new glamourous selves appearing in, for example, the *OFW Pinoy Star* Magazine and in Facebook posts. The transformation is not just physical – it mirrors their own journey from lower-class wife and mother to breadwinner, independent woman and influential consumer. The photographs also document their transformation from *provinciana* to sophisticated *fashionista* – thus proving that migration was not merely an economic project.

Filipino domestic workers become beauty queens and fashion gurus, handing out advice on diet, exercise, good grooming and fashion styles in the *OFW Pinoy Star* magazine. Clearly, this new role as arbiter of what is in vogue is evidence that they are no longer *provincianas*. Interviewees told me that an appointment with the beauty salon before they return to the Philippines for holidays ensures that the first impression they give when they return home is that they are now modern, cosmopolitan urban women. Some of those who are married

with children in the Philippines behave much like single, independent women while abroad – joining beauty contests, for example. The expenses and time involved in making themselves beautiful (*pampaganda*) also shows that they are rejecting the ideal of being self-sacrificing martyrs (also the hegemonic ideal for motherhood) (Roces 2012). In this sense, their Sunday sartorial style calls attention to the way they have empowered themselves.

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