

HOMEWARD

At Home Becoming Alien

“Is there a direction home that
doesn’t point backward?”
PAUL CHAN^[2]

The creatures go about their crossings and connections unnoticed at the airport, checking for departure gates, buying overpriced fast food, and whiling away time at the duty-free. “Uuwi ka ba?” (Are you headed home?) the Filipina sales worker at Detroit Duty-Free asks me during one of my layovers on the way to Manila. Having caught my eye, she nods in recognition. She refers to a “home,” the Philippines, a colony of Spain and then of the United States before it was granted independence in 1946, a place neither of us inhabits. The sales worker’s query has been asked more widely across the planet since the 1970s, when the Philippines began exporting professional and service labor as part of a domestic political safety valve and later as its comparative advantage in the global marketplace.^[2]

The woman never actually referred to home as such. In Tagalog or Filipino, “uwi” refers not to home (*tahanan*) or house (*bahay/balay*) but rather to the direction toward home: homeward. “Ka” refers to me, the addressee, and “ba” is the interrogative. The repetition of the first syllable in “uuwi” denotes eventuality, and the root, “uwi,” is not so much an endpoint but a direction we both understand is toward home. Thus, the word connotes not necessarily a physical topos or telos, but a shared orientation, an embodied anticipatory movement in time, space, and imagination. In the context of migration and histories of colonization, to go homeward for many Filipinos is perhaps not an act of return, but is about anticipation, communality, and the fact that we together are here and no longer *there*. With the friendly query, the saleswoman marked not only our shared displacement from Philippine soil but also our alien origins. After all, she sees her fellow creatures daily passing through her workplace, a way station for transients. These aliens hide in plain sight, holding blue and other passports like appendages at these border crossings, more aliens of Manila and other points in the archipelago.

[1] Paul Chan, quoted in Monica Youn, *From From* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2023).
[2] The inhabitants of the Philippine archipelago have been arriving in the Americas since the sixteenth century as compelled and forced labor with the Manila-Acapulco galleon trade under Spain and Mexico, and as laborers and students to the US, as colonial subjects, since the early twentieth century. See Kale Bantigue Fajardo, *Filipino Crosscurrents: Oceanographies of Seafaring, Masculinities, and Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

Aliens of Manila (2014–present) is a photography series by Philippine-based queer artist Leeroy New that features the mundane lives of Filipinos. The photographs document aliens as both migrants and otherworldly creatures, organic-inorganic humanoids, partaking in workaday activities like shopping, commuting, even passing through airports. Inspired by the Humans of New York series (2010) but departing from the inspiration that sought to humanize and tell stories of millions of urban dwellers,^[3] Aliens of Manila centers the nonhuman elements of urban dwellers and their global migration. Staged in different cities around the world, Aliens of Manila depicts the inhumane conditions of living in one of the densest cities in the world, in a country where a chunk of its population is born and destined to be transported to other sites overseas as immigrants and Overseas Filipino Workers.

In 2022, almost two million Filipinos left the Philippines to work abroad.^[4] More than four million now live in the US, and many others find themselves working in Saudi Arabia, Canada, Australia, and Japan.^[5] Siphoned off by capital-rich nations, many work in healthcare, teaching, domestic service, and care professions, embarking on life precarities and possibilities elsewhere. Cash sent home by overseas Filipinos through banks hit US\$33 billion in 2023.^[6] As with the duty-free shop or the TSA at US airports, many hotels, hospitals, schools, and care homes are where Filipinos earn their livelihoods by nourishing, transforming, educating, and caring for others. Speculating on their own futures abroad and loved ones at home, they contribute personal remittances accounting for almost 9 percent of the national GDP in a constant tension of care and loss, presence and absence, as they make new homes elsewhere.^[7] Initiated by the US-backed Marcos regime in 1974, the out-migration of skilled workers was a way to quell domestic unrest and unemployment as well as a response to debt restructuring. Subsequent administrations have taken up what was then considered a temporary solution to consolidate the brokerage state.^[8] From training and governmental bureaucracies and financial and commercial outreach targeted to potential emigrants, the Philippine state and corporations optimize the conditions by which exporting labor becomes the national comparative advantage



Leeroy New, Aliens Grocery, from Aliens of Manila series, 2014–present

[3] Interview with Leeroy New, Quezon City, Philippines, July 2023. See also Humans of New York: <https://www.humansofnewyork.com/>.
[4] “Survey on Overseas Filipinos,” Philippine Statistics Authority, Republic of the Philippines, September 13, 2024, <https://psa.gov.ph/statistics/survey/laborand-employment/survey-overseas-filipinos>.
[5] Jeanne Batalova and Luis Hassan Gallardo, “Filipino Immigrants in the United States,” Migration Policy Institute, July 15, 2020, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/filipino-immigrants-united-states2020>.
[6] Christy Balita, “Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) Cash Remittances 2012–2023,” Statista.com, April 19, 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1242750/remittance-overseas-filipino-workers-tophilippines/>.
[7] “Indicators,” World Bank Group, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator>.
[8] See Robyn Rodriguez, *Migrants for Export: How the Philippine State Brokers Labor to the World* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

enabling the state to compete in the global marketplace. For a host country like the United States, Filipinos arrive as commodified sources of surplus labor whereby lifetimes of acquired knowledge are translated into usable labor and profit. In the last half-century, three generations of Filipino migrants have taken up roots elsewhere, including New’s mother, who lives and works in New York.

The fantastical worlds New invites us into do not depict other planetary spaces but rather our own neighborhoods. Aliens of Manila: *New York Colony* (2019), exhibited on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, uses brightly colored plastic household cleaning items—sponges, feather dusters, flyswatters, colanders—to produce luminescent environments. These mundane housekeeping items employed for domestic labor are often pushed out of sight, like the people who use them. Here, the items radiate an extraterrestrial glow. Whereas the forms seem alien, this environment is home-grown from the vestiges of domestic labor, built from the very material and effort that transform houses into homes. Once out of sight and out of mind, with New’s expert touch and imagination, labor’s traces come to surface as this ethereal yet strangely familiar world.

New has been known to create fantastical hybrid creatures thriving undaunted in cities across the globe. For *New York Colony*, as with others, he designed breathing apparatuses and exoskeletons made of plastic and other castoff material that performers wear in a public movement piece around the site-specific installations. Donning the plastic headgear and suits made of discarded water bottles and jugs, the creatures’ extended limbs and adorned heads move through the Lower East Side streets alongside spectators. The appendages are not additions: they are adaptive capacities that help the aliens grow into a place that may make no place for them. These appendages are the outward manifestations of how they have transformed physiologically to adapt to harsh conditions of the equally alien environment. They reshape themselves as much as they transform these alien worlds into homes. *New York Colony* is but one of the many colonies Filipino workers inhabit in their quest to make home by fusing past and future worlds, dead and living material, stasis and movement, disposability and permanence—all mutually constitutive in making manifest new life-worlds in the here and now. It is not the case that the alien migrants do not belong here or cannot navigate the hostile worlds. They navigate them all too well. They were always here and are now reshaping our homes as they build theirs; we just don’t notice.

Indeed, the sales worker in her uniform and I in my sweats ready for the long-haul flight somehow saw each other past our



Allan Punzalan Isaac, *Aliens at Balete Bulate Bituka* (Banyan Worm Viscera) under the Bentway Expressway, Toronto, 2023

disguises, as creatures always anticipating that journey homeward, away from familiar notions of belonging to one or any national community. We blend and circulate, imperceptible not only to others but also perhaps to ourselves, until we hear that whisper of recognition and reminder to go homeward: *Uuwika ba?*

The author thanks Lucy San Pablo Burns, Ethel Brooks, Martin Manalansan, Donette Francis, and Mark Berkowitz for providing insights and clarifying ideas toward this direction home.