

---

ILLICIT FLIRTATIONS

INTRODUCTION

THE INDENTURED  
MOBILITY OF MIGRANT  
HOSTESSES

CLAD IN A PINK SKIN-TIGHT POLYESTER DRESS, I SAT ON a footstool across the table from a slobbering Japanese man, one too drunk not to slur his words as he asked me in English, “Can I touch your secret part?” Stunned by his request, I hid my urge to cringe with a smile, responding, “If we become friends, then maybe.” I continued to smile and proceeded to pour him another drink, not knowing how long I was going to have to bear his harassments. He seemed to assume that the extra money he had paid the club, a mere ten dollars, to sit with me gave him free rein to manhandle and belittle me. He commented on my appearance, evaluating and voicing his approval of my face, skin, and body. I felt harassed and looked at him in disbelief, puzzled that he could not sense how irritated I was.

Sexual harassment is the norm in hostess work. I was not one of the more popular hostesses where I worked, but this particular customer seemed to take a liking to me. Hostesses can never overtly reject customers. If they ask us for a kiss, we must at least blow them a kiss. If they insist we eat, then we have

to eat. When they hand us a microphone, we have no choice but to karaoke with them. Customers take the lead, and hostesses follow. The one who took a shine to me asked me to dance. I should not have been surprised that, as soon as we started dancing, he kept trying to rub himself against me. Attempting to minimize our contact, I danced with one foot forward and my behind protruding. Still, I felt a bulge rubbing against my leg as we moved on the dance floor. I recoiled in disgust, but at the same time I felt void of emotion and quite removed from the situation. Many of the hostesses I met told me that not long after working as a hostess one becomes immune to the customers' sexual overtures. A common saying shared in the Filipina hostess community is "*walang mawawala sa akin*," meaning "nothing will be lost from me." After only a week of working as a hostess, I already knew exactly what they meant.

Though my stint working as a hostess was relatively short, it did not take long to learn how sex and romance work in that world. During my first week at the job, I was summoned to join the table of a group of frequent customers. Known members of the *yakuza*, this group included underlings with missing fingers and a higher-ranked boss I could tell they all listened to, obeyed, and protected. I cannot verify that they really were members of the *yakuza*, but all of the hostesses around me seemed to assume so, including my co-worker Aki, who had proudly told me that the "boss" is her boyfriend. As soon as the men came in, someone announced, "*Ito na ang mga putol*," meaning "Here are the ones with the cut-off fingers." In the community, *yakuza* is better known as *putol*, or "cut-off" in Filipino, a reference to the fingers that many of the *yakuza* lose when they make a mistake and are punished by their bosses.

When I was summoned to join the *yakuza* table that night, I saw it as a harmless invitation, as Aki had already been entertaining them for most of the evening. Not long after joining them, Aki's boyfriend grabbed my hand, examined my fingers and then in Japanese voiced his approval of my unpainted fingernails. He proceeded to tell me, in a combination of Japanese and Filipino, that he likes neither manicured nails nor thick makeup. Instead, he likes "*morena*," meaning dark-skinned women, with natural beauty. He ended his appraisal by telling me, "You are pretty." I thanked him, then grinned awkwardly at his girlfriend Aki. During my first night of working as a hostess, I had been told by one of the workers, Christine, that one should not steal a co-worker's customer. I took note of this, trying to keep my distance from him,

deferring his offers of food and drinks to Aki. I did not want her to think I was stealing her boyfriend, let alone one who is *yakuza*. I also tried to keep our conversation platonic, playful but not sexually blatant. To make conversation, I innocently asked him, "What kind of work do you do?" To which he replied, "My work is dangerous." Teasing him, I prodded, "How dangerous?" Going along with our conversation, he said, "Very dangerous."

I had heard plenty of stories about the *yakuza*, knowing they are often blamed for the sexual trafficking of foreign hostesses, including Filipinos, to Japan. Yet the fear associated with the *yakuza* was not reflected in the attitude of most hostesses I met in Tokyo, many of whom seemed to have not only *yakuza* as customers but also *yakuza* as boyfriends, husbands, and fathers of their children. For them, the *yakuza* were not threatening criminals but potential sexual partners. They were also some of the most generous customers at hostess clubs. The welcoming attitude many Filipinas had toward the *yakuza* must have rubbed off on me, as I did not fear them at all during the entire time I worked in a hostess club in Japan.

While I was not afraid of the *yakuza*, I had no plans of ever becoming one of the many Filipinas in Japan romantically linked to one of them. Soon after my playful banter with the "boss," he asked me to join him on the dance floor. As I danced with him, I could not help but worry about Aki, wondering if she thought I was trying to steal her boyfriend. Sure enough, Aki had an anxious look on her face. Soon after we returned to the table, Aki told me in Filipino that her boyfriend never asks anyone to dance. Supposedly I was the only other hostess Aki had seen him dance with in the three clubs where he had visited her regularly in the many times she had returned to Japan as a contract worker. She then told me that she knew her boyfriend had other women and didn't mind, as long as she didn't lose him. I then realized that this had been Aki's way of giving me permission to sleep with her boyfriend. I wanted to tell her that she had nothing to worry about, that I had no intention of sleeping with this customer, or any customer for that matter, especially a member of the *yakuza*.

After working just one week in a hostess bar in Japan, I realized that I had entered an unfamiliar sexual world, one where people are more open about their sexuality, where both customers and hostesses seem to be open to extramarital affairs, and where men can sexually harass women with no punishment or

admonishment. Yet this world has been dismissed not only for its debauchery and criminal elements but also for “crimes against humanity.” Hostess clubs, specifically those that employ Filipinas, Eastern Europeans, Colombians, and Korean women, have been labeled by the U.S. Department of State as hotbeds of sexual trafficking. These are places where women are not just harassed endlessly but supposedly held against their will, forced into prostitution, and made victims of sexual violence by lecherous Japanese men. This book takes us inside the world of hostess clubs, where hostesses are indeed susceptible to exploitation, but where I also found more open attitudes and different moral standards when it comes to sex, marriage, and romance.

Despite the absence of an extensive study on the plight of migrant Filipina hostesses in Japan, we still hear unsubstantiated cries of their forced prostitution from both journalists and academics.<sup>1</sup> Such claims have led to their identification as sexually trafficked persons in the U.S. Department of State’s *Trafficking in Persons Report* (TIP Report). According to the 2004 TIP Report, Filipina hostesses in Japan constituted the largest group of sex-trafficked persons in the world, making up more than 10 percent of the 800,000 estimated victims of human trafficking worldwide.<sup>2</sup> These migrant laborers were identified as trafficked victims under the assumption of their “sexual exploitation.”<sup>3</sup> Though mostly speculative, we should not take such a claim lightly. Since their identification as trafficked persons, we have seen a near 90 percent decline in the number of Filipina hostesses who are employed as contract workers in Japan, from 82,741 in 2004 to 8,607 in 2006.<sup>4</sup> This decline might seem to suggest a victory in the global antitrafficking campaign, but I disagree with that interpretation.<sup>5</sup> Instead, I argue that it poses a setback to the emancipation of women. The drastic decline in the number of Filipina hostesses in Japan has stripped thousands of migrant women of their livelihood, forcing them to stay at home and helping to reverse the trend in Philippine gendered migration. In 2007, the number of men migrating from the Philippines surpassed that of women for the first time in twenty years.<sup>6</sup>

I challenge the identification of migrant Filipina hostesses as sex-trafficked persons because there are no hard statistics to support those claims. Instead, the numbers indicate that prostitutes are a small minority of all Filipinas in Japan, just 2.8 percent.<sup>7</sup> In fact, empirically grounded studies on Filipina hostesses in Japan consistently make no mention of prostitution, forced or otherwise. They

actually repeatedly find that migrant Filipina hostesses sell drinks, not sex, in hostess clubs.<sup>8</sup> While Filipina hostesses in Japan are not prostitutes, they do perform sex work in the form of sexually titillating customers via commercial flirtation.<sup>9</sup> Rather than reducing “sex work” to “prostitution,” I interpret it as encompassing a wide array of sexual provisions that include flirtation, stripping, escort service, and prostitution.<sup>10</sup> For hostesses, acts of commercial flirtation vary and include playful bantering via conversation, seductive dance and song performances on a stage, and, in rare instances, sexual acts such as groping and discreet masturbating of customers underneath the table.

When we take a closer look at the migration patterns of Filipina hostesses, we see that they generally migrate of their own volition. This calls into question their identification as trafficked persons.<sup>11</sup> For the most part, no one forced or coerced these women to seek work in Japan. They were not drugged, taken on a plane, and trapped in a hostess club. No one lied to them and explicitly told them that they would only be singing and dancing on stage.<sup>12</sup> With few exceptions, migrant hostesses go to Japan knowing that they will be doing the “illegal” work of talking to customers and interacting with them closely at a club.<sup>13</sup> Contact between a hostess and a customer is illegal for those with entertainer visas—that is, contract workers or “entertainers”—inside the club because it threatens the professional status of the migrant worker whose job is to do nothing but sing and dance on a stage.<sup>14</sup> While this is the case, most migrant entertainers come to Japan knowing that they would do more than just sing and dance. Most know they will engage in illicit flirtations with their customers.<sup>15</sup> Given this context, I argue that migrant entertainers are not trafficked persons, or individuals coerced to do hostess work, but instead labor migrants who face severe structural constraints.

Forced labor is without doubt a problem that haunts millions of migrants around the world. The luring of young Mexican women and their entrapment in brothels in the United States by members of the Cadena-Sosa family;<sup>16</sup> the imprisonment of seventy-two Thai garment workers forced to work for \$2 an hour in El Monte, California, in a compound behind razor wires and armed guards;<sup>17</sup> and the numerous convictions of individuals who forcibly enslave migrants as domestic workers or farmhands after luring them with false promises of well-paid jobs: All testify to the vulnerability of migrant workers to “modern-day slavery.” Yet our view of the vulnerability of migrant workers to

“human trafficking” suffers from a lack of systematic understanding of this grave problem. Individual cases become representative of everyone’s experiences. The forced prostitution of one migrant Filipina hostess, for example, becomes proof of the sex trafficking of *all* of them. We also do not know the extent of the problem. The organization Free the Slaves gives the “conservative estimate” of 27 million domestically and internationally enslaved people worldwide;<sup>18</sup> the International Labor Organization estimates there are 12.3 million individuals in “forced labor, bonded labor, forced child labor and sexual servitude at any given time”;<sup>19</sup> UNICEF speculates that 1.2 million children are trafficked every year;<sup>20</sup> and the International Organization for Migration as well as the U.S. Department of State provides the more conservative estimate of 800,000 individuals trafficked across national borders per annum.<sup>21</sup> The U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime admits that “it is very difficult to assess the real size of human trafficking because the crime takes place underground and is often not identified or misidentified.” Still, they boldly claim that there are 2.5 million trafficking victims worldwide.<sup>22</sup> Solutions to trafficking also flatten the experiences of victims with the universal implementation, one advocated by the United States, of a one-size-fits-all template of the 3Rs (rescue, rehabilitation, and reintegration) and the 3Ps (prosecution, protection, and prevention).<sup>23</sup> Lastly, we see human trafficking on a case-by-case basis as if each is a random occurrence that could happen to anyone.

In the case of migrant Filipina hostesses, the limits of their migrant citizenship in Japan do indeed leave them susceptible to forced labor.<sup>24</sup> In a variety of ways, they face severe structural constraints: Contract workers cannot choose their club of employment but instead are bound to work for their sponsoring employer; criminalization leaves undocumented workers overly dependent on employers and other Filipinos who take advantage of their vulnerability by withholding their wages or overcharging their housing; and, lastly, the permanent residency of wives is contingent on five years of marriage to a Japanese spouse, an unequal relationship of dependency that leaves them susceptible to domestic violence. These constraints threaten the autonomy of migrant Filipina hostesses, in turn leaving them vulnerable to various human rights violations. Vulnerability, however, does not automatically make them trafficked persons. After all, we cannot reduce their experiences to the structures that shape them.

Yet migration arguably strips migrant hostesses of their freedom and autonomy. Hostesses who enter Japan with an “entertainer visa” are subject to middleman brokers who impose debt on them, which in turn discourages them from quitting their job prior to the end of their contract. Middleman brokers withhold their passports in both the countries of origin and their destination, retain their salary until the end of their three- or six-month contract, and penalize those who quit before their contract ends. These conditions do not automatically translate into forced labor. They do so, however, when the migrant wishes to quit because she is asked to do a task that she does not want to perform, be it cleaning the bathroom at the club or stripping in front of customers—but she cannot quit. Still, one who cleans the bathroom or strips of her own free will under the same conditions could not be so easily labeled a trafficked person.

How do we account for these severe structural constraints that hamper the autonomy of migrant hostesses, while also not disregarding their agency? The binary categories we currently have for thinking about the migration of Filipina hostesses—either free subject (migrant) or enslaved subject (trafficked person)—fail to capture the complex dynamics of coercion and choice that embody their labor migration experiences. We need to dismantle the binary framework that separates these two distinct migratory flows and construct a middle ground that recognizes the agency of migrants without dismissing the severe structural constraints that could hamper their freedom and autonomy. Filipina hostesses’ labor migration inhabits a middle zone between human trafficking and labor migration, which I describe as a process of *indentured mobility*. This paradoxical position frames their labor migration as one of simultaneous progress and subjugation; the financial gains afforded by labor migration come at the expense of their freedom. This paradoxical position—obtaining financial mobility as unfree workers—is also one of coercion and choice; most migrant Filipina hostesses do not want to leave their situation, but if they did want to quit their jobs as entertainers, leave their marriages without the risk of deportation, or protect themselves from unscrupulous employers, they could not do so without facing criminalization as undocumented workers or without the burden of financial penalties. The framework of *indentured mobility* provides a nuanced picture of the Filipina hostesses’ subjugation as labor migrants, one that acknowledges their susceptibility to human rights



violations but simultaneously rejects the prevailing discourse on human trafficking that paints hostesses as helpless victims in need of “rescue.”<sup>25</sup> So while *Illicit Flirtations* questions their labeling as trafficked persons, at the same time it refuses to dismiss their vulnerability to forced labor.

#### GENDER AND MORALS

Given that even the U.S. Government Accountability Office says that most claims in the U.S. Department of State’s annual TIP Report are based on scant information,<sup>26</sup> why have unsubstantiated assertions of human trafficking, including the supposed forced prostitution of Filipina entertainers in Japan, come to circulate as the truth?<sup>27</sup> In the case of migrant Filipina entertainers, the moralistic norm of antiprostitution undoubtedly shapes their experiences of migration, resulting in the mistaken basis of their identification as trafficked persons and, as a result, the near elimination of their migrant community. Yet unsubstantiated claims of the Filipina migrant entertainers’ forced prostitution flatten our perspective on their experiences as well as diverting our attention from the need to closely examine the conditions of their labor and migration.

We need to recognize that unsubstantiated claims of forced prostitution are morally charged and spurred by abolitionist sentiments. In other words, what philosopher Philip Pettit calls “aspirational morality,” meaning passionate zeal, and not practical reason undergirds spurious cries of antitraffickers.<sup>28</sup> According to Pettit, this zeal is dangerous because it refuses to recognize sex work as viable employment and therefore diverts our attention from solutions that target the regulation and protection of sex workers. Putting aside the assumption that Filipina migrant entertainers are forced into prostitution, this book, based on extensive interviews with Filipina migrant hostesses and my own experience working as one in Japan, provides a grounded and empirically rich discussion of their migration and labor conditions, which I show as involving both subjugation and mobility. Thus, to address the labor issues of migrant hostesses, we not only need to know the actual conditions of their labor but also need to disentangle our understanding of it from antiprostitution sentiments and free ourselves of the assumption of their forced prostitution.

Women and sexual minorities have long been subjected to moral regulation by states and communities.<sup>29</sup> Illustrating the legacy of women’s moral regula-

tion in migration, one maintained in the U.S.-led global antitrafficking campaign, prostitution for instance was the first category of migrant exclusion in the United States.<sup>30</sup> Today those “likely to be a public charge,” meaning those who risk becoming welfare dependents, are excluded from entry to the United States.<sup>31</sup> Not immune from moral regulation, gays and lesbians were banned from entry in the United States until as recently as 1990.<sup>32</sup> Morals, particularly antiprostitution views, likewise motivate the feared global sex trafficking of women in the twenty-first century.<sup>33</sup> Looking at the situation of migrant Filipina hostesses, this fear has resulted not just in unsubstantiated claims of their prostitution but also in false assertions of their forced prostitution.

Helping us make sense of the negative view of commercial sex are sociologist Viviana Zelizer, philosopher Martha Nussbaum, and anthropologist Gayle Rubin.<sup>34</sup> According to Zelizer, commercial sex is dismissed as immoral because such work defies the “hostile worlds view” on intimacy and economy.<sup>35</sup> By “hostile worlds view,” Zelizer refers to the “rigid moral boundaries between market and intimate domains” that criminalize and make immoral acts of “sex for money.”<sup>36</sup> The intersection of love and money, of intimate social relations and economic transaction, is said to result in moral contamination because intimacy and the private are shaped by sentiment and solidarity while economics and the public are motivated by calculation and efficiency. To put it simply, the “hostile worlds view” assumes that love and money are mutually exclusive. In this perspective, sex for money, including acts of sexual titillation for money, such as dancing on stage or serving drinks in Japanese clubs, would be morally wrong, while sex for love would be considered proper. The moral stronghold of the “hostile worlds view” over mainstream views on migrant hostesses, and the sentiment of antiprostitution that it espouses, eliminates the need for evidence in unsubstantiated claims of forced prostitution.

Feminist philosopher Martha Nussbaum would add that the “hostile worlds view” does not equally hinder the sexual activities of men and women. Nussbaum argues that the dismissal of sex work as immoral perpetuates and maintains a gender hierarchy that places men over women.<sup>37</sup> A gendered sex hierarchy defines our sexual activities with stigma, limiting the tolerable sexual activities of women more so than those of men. This double standard, according to Nussbaum, emerges from “the view that women are essentially immoral and dangerous and will be kept in control by men only if men

carefully engineer things so that they do not get out of bounds.”<sup>38</sup> Speaking of sex as a vector of oppression, anthropologist Gayle Rubin further clarifies that it is not just women who are marginalized by the “hostile worlds view.” According to Rubin, a “sexual hierarchy” dismisses certain sexual practices as immoral, including prostitution and sodomy, leading to the marginalization of particular sexual groups.<sup>39</sup>

The moralistic foundation of antiprostitution, the strength of which Zelizer, Nussbaum, and Rubin help us understand, is significant not only for helping us make sense of the unsubstantiated cries of forced prostitution of migrant Filipina entertainers, but it is also a key lens for understanding their very experience of migration.<sup>40</sup> The moralistic foundation of antiprostitution makes meaning of their labor, morally stigmatizing it and constructing it as morally transgressive. As such, hostesses’ labor migration constitutes a “moral breakdown” from the moralistic norm of antiprostitution.<sup>41</sup> The process of negotiating the moral divergence of their labor migration and the means by which they negotiate their moral stance on prostitution underlies and defines their experience of labor migration.<sup>42</sup>

*Illicit Flirtations* documents how migrant Filipina entertainers negotiate, challenge, and reconfigure the moralistic view of antiprostitution that shapes their experiences of labor and migration. It does so to trace how gender and sexual inequalities determine their experiences. Following Nussbaum, moralistic foundations—often measured via sexual practices and hierarchies—limit the actions of women more so than those of men, and to this Rubin would add that they also limit the actions of sexual “deviants.”<sup>43</sup> Hence, morality is a key lens for examining not just gender and sexuality but also gender and sexual inequalities. *Illicit Flirtations* thus uses morals to examine how gendered and sexualized hierarchies shape experiences of migration by looking at the negotiation of sexual morals as a process of subject formation for migrant Filipina entertainers: It traces how society attempts to morally control their actions not only via the law, as we see for instance in the current antitrafficking campaign to “rescue” them, but also through the stigmatization of their occupation; examines the impacts of the moralistic standard of antiprostitution; and finally analyzes the ways that they negotiate the moralistic control of their actions and, in doing so, attempt to reconstitute morality as a means of rejecting their moral disciplining.<sup>44</sup>

Helping us to some extent in making sense of this process is the philosopher Michel Foucault, who in *The Uses of Pleasure* asserts that morality supplies a set of norms and rules that govern everyday experiences.<sup>45</sup> These codes of morality do not overdetermine our actions, but they do impose moral standards that individuals negotiate.<sup>46</sup> While Filipina hostesses are guided and influenced by dominant moral norms and ideologies in society, they re-create alternative moralities.<sup>47</sup> The constitution of alternative moral norms and codes, which is a possibility not explicitly acknowledged by Foucault, emerges from the different social fields inhabited by migrant Filipina hostesses vis-à-vis dominant society.<sup>48</sup> The marginal locations of migrant Filipina hostesses, in the hostess club and the ethnic community, lead to the constitution of different moral codes and norms.<sup>49</sup> Yet, even in these social fields, a diversity of moral formations emerges.<sup>50</sup> In the world of migrant Filipina entertainers, there are multiple moralities, multiple moral codes, and multiple moral standards, differences that emerge from their multiple subject positions.

The recognition of the multiple moralities of migrant Filipina hostesses is key to understanding their labor experiences. It shows us that indentured servitude does not automatically result in forced labor.<sup>51</sup> Indentured workers could experience mobility despite the severe structural constraints that hamper their options. For a hostess unable to quit her job without financial penalty, the requirement of stripping, which she is sometimes expected to perform at work, would have different meanings for the worker. The experiences of those without any moral qualms over undressing could not be equated with the experiences of those who do. Thus, to fully understand the labor of hostesses, we must have a sense of their moral world and recognize that different hostesses have different codes and standards of romance, flirtation, and commercial sex.

#### CITIZENSHIP AND MIGRATION

Also flattening our perspective on human trafficking is its association with crime and illegality.<sup>52</sup> While criminals such as the Cadena-Sosa brothers from Mexico undoubtedly act on the vulnerability of migrants and enslave them in the process of migration, forced labor not only arises from the illicit activities of smugglers and traffickers but also emerges from the terms of migration enforced by nation-states. In the case of migrant Filipina hostesses, it is not so

much the job of hostess work that automatically results in their forced labor but instead the circumstances of their migration that constrain their labor market flexibility; this in turn leaves them vulnerable to situations of coerced labor. On this basis, I argue that what has been identified as “human trafficking” is a labor migration issue, one that cannot be solved on a case-by-case basis via the prosecution of traffickers. Neither is it a problem of sexual victimization, one brought by sinister men who randomly kidnap naïve innocent women. Eradicating the threat of what we understand as human trafficking thus requires us to revisit migration policies worldwide with the goal of implementing policies that ensure migrant workers being granted greater control over their labor and migration.

Citizenship, broadly referring to one’s terms of inclusion and membership in society, offers a lens for interrogating how migration regimes, the set of laws and policies that regulate the terms of membership of migrants, determine the susceptibility of migrants to forced labor.<sup>53</sup> In recent years, we have seen a spectacular growth in the field of citizenship studies, in which the category has been used as a trope for examining the struggles for political, cultural, and social recognition of groups marginalized by race, gender, religion, and sexuality.<sup>54</sup> Citizenship not only is a set of tangible rights and duties but also entails a social process by which individuals claim and stake their membership in the nation-state, including the articulation of their right to be different<sup>55</sup> and the negotiation of their contradictory position of racial exclusion and gender subordination.<sup>56</sup>

Influenced by the work of Michel Foucault, the anthropologist Aihwa Ong views citizenship as a process of subjectification, meaning a dual process of both subject making and self-making.<sup>57</sup> Not discounting Ong’s significant contribution to our understanding of migrant citizenship, I wish to point out, however, that subjectification is not a uniform process; instead, one’s disciplining shifts according to one’s particular subject position within what Foucault calls the biopolitics of the nation,<sup>58</sup> referring to the reproduction of the population, meaning the fostering of life and its care, by the state.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, the subjectification of an undocumented worker would be different from that of a documented worker. We could imagine that the former’s citizenship would entail the negotiation of her or his criminalization, while the latter would be inculcated with the dominant values of the nation. Given this difference, we

must distinguish the subject positions of migrants when examining the terms of their integration into the nation-state.

Emphasizing this point, sociologist Minjeong Kim uses the trope of “maternal citizenship” to examine the citizenship of foreign wives in rural areas of Korea.<sup>60</sup> For these wives, the inculcation of racial and gender ideologies, or in other words their subjectification, occurs via maternal expectations as imposed by the state, church, community, and family. By underscoring the subject-position of foreign brides in Korea as “wives,” Kim’s study reminds us that citizenship, or one’s membership in the nation-state, is situated in and accordingly determined by one’s particular sociostructural location and position in the biopolitics of the nation. Thus, I distinguish the positions of hostesses in my discussion of their integration into Japanese society. The terms and conditions of membership for migrant Filipina hostesses are not uniform but differ depending on their subject-position as long-term residents, temporary contract workers, or undocumented workers. Hostesses have different sets of vulnerabilities, different threats of human rights violations, and consequently different solutions to the problem of indentured mobility.

We could imagine that the integration of long-term residents, as their legal residency is conditional to their provision of sex as a wife or mother of a Japanese national, involves the inculcation and negotiation of traditional cultural mores of mothering or being a daughter-in-law.<sup>61</sup> For wives, permanent membership is contingent on five years of marriage to their sponsoring Japanese husband, which is a bounded relationship whose reward of legal status is contingent on the migrant’s indenture to her spouse. In contrast to these sexual citizens are undocumented migrants, whose term of membership is defined by their criminalization and concomitant invisibility. Remaining in the shadows of the law engenders a different set of vulnerabilities in settlement. Forced invisibility places migrants in unequal relations of dependency with employers and coethnics. Perhaps not surprisingly, many undocumented hostesses I met in Tokyo had been denied their wages at least once by an employer. Lastly, migrant policies deny temporary contract workers the ability to migrate independently of middleman brokers. All of these constraints of membership limit the citizenship of migrant hostesses, threatening their autonomy by denying them full membership in the nation-state, subjecting them to indentured mobility, and finally leaving them susceptible to forced labor.

Notably, the conditions of indentured mobility are not uniform but instead distinguished by the terms of the migrants' citizenship. This diversity requires that we interrogate the susceptibility of migrants to forced labor with rich empirical research grounded in everyday experiences. Otherwise, our knowledge and understanding of the threat of forced labor suffers from generalizations that not only miss the nuances in people's experiences but also gloss over the specific vulnerabilities that people actually face.

#### BECOMING A HOSTESS

The supposed inaccessibility of trafficked victims justifies unsubstantiated claims of human trafficking; we imagine that victims are shackled and held against their will by traffickers. Yet, in 2005 and 2006, I managed to enter the community of what was considered at the time to be the largest group of trafficked people in the world. I spent nine months in Tokyo, where I worked as a hostess in a working-class club in one of the many red-light districts,<sup>62</sup> a club frequented by members of the *yakuza*.<sup>63</sup> They not only controlled the area but were rumored also to finance the club.<sup>64</sup> Based on the reactions of my colleagues at the university sponsoring my visit to Japan, this type of club was often assumed to be a site of forced prostitution. This turned out to not be true, despite the club proprietor's questionable background and the seedy location.

Tapping into the world of migrant Filipina hostesses was not easy. During my first three months in Tokyo, I struggled to meet entertainers willing to participate in my study. My visits to clubs as a customer did not pan out any solid leads.<sup>65</sup> Church attendance among Filipinos, including many hostesses, did not gain the trust of those around me. Neither did visits to various ethnic establishments. Even hostesses whom I befriended would always decline my request for an interview. Seasoned journalists in Tokyo suggested I go to the Philippines. They told me hostesses would be more likely talk to me there because they would no longer be under the control of the *yakuza*. I was doubtful of the reporters' assumption; I had met many hostesses and knew that their unwillingness to participate in my study had not been for fear of the *yakuza*. Instead, many expressed the difficulty of talking about their experiences, which I could not help but assume meant that they experienced emotional distress from the stigma of their occupation. Having come to Japan with preconceived notions about hostess work, I had initially believed claims by other academics

that “hostess work” was a euphemism for “prostitution.”<sup>66</sup> Yet friends I made in the field soon corrected me.

Not quite understanding why hostesses were unwilling to participate in my research, I resorted to looking for employment as a way of circumventing my initial hurdle in the field. I did so with the reassurance that prostitution would not be in my job description. I actually had not sought to do fieldwork in a *yakuza*-operated establishment but ended up there only because it had been closest to where I was standing with a nun when I expressed my desire to work as an unpaid hostess. After I complained to her about the difficulty of locating hostesses to interview for my book and told her of my willingness to work alongside them, she literally walked me to the club closest to where we had been standing and introduced me to the management as a “journalist” wanting to investigate the lives of migrant hostesses.<sup>67</sup> They hired me on the spot and soon introduced me to my co-workers as a reporter writing a book on Filipina hostesses.<sup>68</sup>

Working as a hostess was just what I needed to gain access. After I began working as one, every person I approached to participate in an interview agreed to talk. By the end of my study, I managed to complete interviews with fifty-six Filipina migrant hostesses—forty-five females and eleven transgender.<sup>69</sup> We spoke about their migration, family, work, relations with customers, and plans for the future. I was struck by the complete shift in attitude of the hostesses toward me. Before I worked as a hostess, my offers of money could not lure one single person to an interview. Bribery did not get me very far. After I started working as one, my offers of money would be dismissed as insulting. I was repeatedly told that they could never accept payment from a “*kapwa* Filipino,” meaning “fellow Filipino.” Yet, interestingly, many did not hesitate to add that they would not think twice about taking my money if I were Japanese. To compensate research participants for their help, I spent around US\$50 on each one of them, taking some out to eat in a local restaurant and bringing presents of chocolate, ramen, and occasionally the coveted delicacy of a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken.<sup>70</sup>

Although working in a club opened many doors to potential interviewees, my co-workers were not my main source of interviews. I interviewed only seven of my twenty-three co-workers. To diversify my sample, I solicited research participants in a wide range of areas in Tokyo, including the upscale Roppongi and the seedier Shinjuku, Kinshicho, and Akabane, as well as Nishi-Kawaguchi



in the Saitama prefecture. I identified research participants at various places of gathering in the community including three churches, eight restaurants, one food store, and four clubs.<sup>71</sup> Prominent members of the community, including restaurant owners, old-timers, and religious clergy, also introduced me to potential interviewees.<sup>72</sup>

The difficulty of tapping into this community made sense to me only after I started working as a hostess. One mistake I had made was to initially seek them out in the middle of the day instead of the middle of the night, when they got off work at 2 o'clock or 4 o'clock in the morning. Another had been my insensitivity to the stigma of their occupation. Many individuals whose friends told me they were employed as hostesses even denied being one when I approached them about a possible interview. To them, I was a mere stranger, one they could only assume would morally judge them for doing a job dismissed as sexually immoral in mainstream society. Lastly, the misconceptions that circulate about their work as one of "prostitution" or "forced prostitution" dissuade many of them from talking to strangers about their experiences. Having to undo multiple misconceptions about their occupation made being interviewed a tedious and unwanted experience. Only after learning that I had been working as a hostess did people agree to participate in my study. It somehow reassured them that I would likely ask informed questions about the challenges of their work and not pose questions laden with misinformation. Contrary to my initial assumption that emotional trauma—from what I imagined had to be a result of their forced prostitution—dissuaded them from talking to me about their experiences, it was actually the fact that I would have such an assumption that put them off from speaking to me about their work.

While my study relies primarily on my interviews with hostesses and the data I gathered from conducting participant observation as a hostess, I also gathered supplementary data. I conducted participant observation as a customer and visited other clubs that solely employ Filipina hostesses. In all of these clubs, ranging from working to middle class, I would observe customer–hostess interactions and speak informally to hostesses about their labor and migration. Lastly, I spoke to club owners who employ Filipina hostesses and conducted supplementary interviews in both Japan and the Philippines with governmental and nongovernmental representatives who work on issues of labor and migration for hostesses in Japan as well as with middleman brokers.<sup>73</sup>

Altogether, I gathered a rich pool of information that allowed me to look at the lives of diverse migrant Filipina hostesses from many angles and perspectives, gathering a set of interviews that represents their community. Among my interviewees were permanent residents, undocumented workers, and contract workers. They worked in high-end clubs as well as the lowest-end clubs. Perhaps most significantly, I had access to the group thought to be most inaccessible to outsiders because of their assumed status as trafficked persons: hostesses who worked for the *yakuza*. I did this by working alongside them in a hostess club, which inevitably would have exposed me to “forced prostitution” if it did ever occur. In contrast to unsubstantiated claims of their forced prostitution from those who have only looked at the hostesses’ situation from a distance, I can speak with empirically grounded authority on the vulnerabilities and constraints that define the labor migration of Filipina hostesses in Japan.

#### THE HOSTESSES

The hostesses who participated in my study generally fell into two types of people: highly educated transgender women and economically disadvantaged females. Most entered with an entertainer visa—ten of eleven transgender and thirty-three of forty-five female interviewees—while most others entered with tourist visas they obtained through the sponsorship of a family member, usually an older sister who preceded their migration. Rarely did they enter illegally;<sup>74</sup> those who had done so did become susceptible to what we know as “human trafficking,” or what I prefer to more accurately call “forced labor.” Those who had entered illegally with a “fake” entertainer visa were usually saddled with a huge debt, while those who came illegally as tourists became vulnerable to forced labor. Regardless of whether they enter legally or illegally, what lures them to migrate to Japan? Considering that none of my interviewees had engaged in prostitution prior to migration, had they come to Japan open to this type of work? Or were they ignorant of the stories of prostitution and forced prostitution of migrant hostesses that circulate in the Philippines?

#### *Female Hostesses*

Most female hostesses sought employment in Japan to escape their lives of abject poverty in the Philippines as well as to pursue their passion for singing and

dancing. Stories of prostitution and forced prostitution that have circulated in the media did not seem to deter their decision to come to Japan, as most knew prior to migration that such stories are generally untrue, while others had no problem with this kind of work. Because of lurid tales of the forced prostitution of hostesses, rarely did one venture to Japan without the urging of friends or relatives. Many followed older kin, neighbors, and friends, who provided them with some knowledge of the kind of work they would have to do in hostess clubs. While most came to Japan without the intention of engaging in prostitution, most migrated with a sense of risk and adventure for the work they knew would be sexualized, though many were not sure of the extent. Still they came, with some dreadfully open to the possibility of prostitution. This was the case even for those who came from conservative families that did not allow women to “go to the movies, let alone a club.” Yet they sought work in Japan in hopes of escaping their life of poverty or to fulfill their desire to sing and dance on a stage.

With few exceptions, female migrants who entered with entertainer visas were members of the working poor.<sup>75</sup> All became their family’s breadwinners after migration. When they first ventured to Japan, they ranged in age from fifteen to twenty-seven years old, with most no older than twenty. Rarely did I meet contract workers who had managed to renew their contracts more than three times. Those who could not either secured a marriage visa or became undocumented workers. Prior to migration, those who worked usually held low-wage service jobs as store clerks or counter help, earning no more than US\$3 a day in the Philippines.<sup>76</sup> For many, Japan had been their only option of going abroad due to its “fly now, pay later” system in which middleman brokers would cover the cost of training and travel for prospective migrant workers.<sup>77</sup> Among those entering with an entertainer visa, only two of thirty-three females had completed college.<sup>78</sup> Most others had not attained more than a high school diploma.<sup>79</sup> In contrast, female hostesses who entered with a tourist visa were usually highly educated. Six had completed a bachelor’s degree prior to migration, one that was usually financed by an older sister who had been working as a hostess in Japan. Yet they opted not to secure professional jobs in the Philippines after graduation, choosing the higher income they could earn as hostesses in Japan over the salary they would earn as professionals in the Philippines.

While a much larger number of female migrants from the Philippines pursue domestic work abroad, not one of the hostesses who participated in my study had considered this job option. The placement fees that migrant brokers charge prospective migrant domestic workers would limit their employment option to the undesirable region of the Middle East; stories of employer abuse of Middle Eastern domestic workers abound in the Philippines. Such stories may have deterred them from pursuing foreign domestic work, but many claimed that it is a job they would never pursue regardless of destination. They generally considered domestic work as more dangerous than hostess work. As domestic workers, they would be more susceptible to being raped by employers, they told me, because they would be working in isolation in a private home. Seeing domestic work as a job that was beneath them, some even commented that they were too attractive to be domestic workers. They also saw domestic work as a low-skilled, low-wage occupation undesirable because of its greater physical demands. In contrast, they considered themselves to be skilled professionals with creative performance abilities requiring accreditation. The Japanese government requirement that foreigners with “entertainer visas” must be verifiably trained performance artists attested to their professional status. In other words, the entertainers I interviewed generally considered themselves professionals whose job was to entertain customers from a distance via performance on a stage or up close via conversation at a table.

#### *Transgender Hostesses*

Transgender hostesses constitute a visible minority of Filipinos in Japan.<sup>80</sup> Still, they remain absent in discourses of trafficking. Threats of prostitution, forced or otherwise, do not seem to apply to them; perhaps for this reason it was not a factor those I interviewed considered when deciding to secure entertainer visas to work in Japan. A highly educated group, transgender hostesses sought work in Japan to secure a professional status occupation that had eluded them in the Philippines, despite having degrees from some of the best universities in the country. Generally older than their female counterparts, transgender hostesses sometimes worked alongside females,<sup>81</sup> but they more often worked in transgender hostess establishments. Most transgender hostesses who participated in my study first sought work in Japan in their early and mid-twenties. Unlike their female counterparts, who generally are preferred to be in their

mid-twenties at most, transgender hostesses can make a career out of hostess work and continuously secure contracts until their late thirties.

Of the transgender hostesses I interviewed, only three identified as transsexual.<sup>82</sup> Others had no plans of ever pursuing a sex change because they saw this process as inflicting a “wound” or committing a “sin.”<sup>83</sup> In the Philippines, transgender women are referred to as *bakla*, which is a term that has been used loosely to include homosexuals, bisexuals, transsexuals, cross-dressers, and effeminate men. To distinguish them among those who fall in the general usage of the term *bakla*, I refer to my interviewees as transgender.<sup>84</sup> I do so because all were born male and presented a feminine persona in their everyday life.<sup>85</sup>

With the exception of the tourist visiting her mother in Japan, the transgender entertainers in my study all entered Japan with entertainer visas. At the time of my interviews, none of the transgender hostesses was a permanent resident or an undocumented worker. Five were still contract workers with three-month entertainer visas, one was a tourist with a three-month visa visiting her mother—a permanent resident—in Japan, and five were conditional residents, meaning they had one- to three-year *kekkon* (meaning marriage) visas that were renewable conditional to their continued marriage to the sponsoring Japanese citizen.<sup>86</sup>

While the female hostesses in my study generally came to Japan to escape their lives of abject poverty in the Philippines, the transgender hostesses migrated to pursue professional careers as entertainers. The transgender entertainers who participated in my research had attended some of the best universities in the Philippines, including Adamson University, Mapua Institute of Technology, University of the Philippines, University of San Carlos, and University of Santo Tomas. All five of these schools repeatedly rank in the top twenty universities in the Philippines. Among my interviewees, only one had not attained more than a high school diploma, while two had pursued vocational training in fashion design. Four completed college with bachelor's degrees in fine arts, mass communication, electronics communication engineering, and hotel management. Others dropped out because of financial difficulties or to pursue work as entertainers in Japan.

Transgender entertainers had not sought work in Japan to avoid their families. In fact, all of the transgender entertainers who participated in my study found tremendous support from their parents. Parents showed their ac-

ceptance of them as transgender by entertaining their lovers, supporting their passion for beauty contests, and introducing them to friends and co-workers as a “daughter.”<sup>87</sup> These supportive parents include stereotypical patriarchs—police and military officers—whom one would assume would be likely to be homophobic. Once in Japan, many of the transgender hostesses provided financial support to their extended kin, but most, as they came from well-to-do families, provided only nominal assistance.

Like their female counterparts, transgender hostesses also pursued hostess work in Japan for the pleasure of entertaining men and performing on stage. Many identified as professional dancers. However, many also pursued careers as migrant hostesses to offset the discrimination that confronted them as transgender professionals in the Philippines.<sup>88</sup> Transgender professionals face dim labor market options in the Philippines. As the engineering graduate Peachy, a fourth-time contract worker in Japan, asked, “Who would hire a man who dresses like a woman and has boobs? No one.” Peachy never bothered to seek employment as an engineer but instead started training to audition for a spot working as an entertainer in Japan soon after graduation from engineering school. Nikki, a student who had dropped out of the highest-ranked college in the country, University of the Philippines, explained why transgender individuals such as herself did not bother pursuing jobs in the domestic labor market:

They expect you to be formal [in the labor market] and when you talk about formality . . . you are talking about abiding by gender roles. Formal for us means if you are a man, you have to dress like a man, and if you are a woman, you have to dress appropriately as a woman. . . . Now we have call centers. Many processors are gay, but they cannot accommodate the whole *bakla* population. It is a big help if we have the opportunity to go abroad.

Lastly, the transgender hostesses I met in Japan also repeatedly told me that Japan is a “*paraiso ng mga bakla*,” meaning “paradise of the *bakla*.” They pursued work in Japan for adventure and the promise of romance. Interviewees described Japan as a much better place for transgender women to seek sexual relations with men, and they could walk the streets free of harassment. This greater tolerance is perhaps a product of the normalization engendered by the mass media coverage in Japan of queer cultures in the 1990s as well as the campaign led by the Ministry of Education to celebrate individuality.<sup>89</sup>

Because of this tolerance, Peachy relished her life free of sexual harassment in Japan. As she described, “I am stable here. When I walk on the street, I am safe. No one will look at me, and no one will pay attention to me. Here they will just look at you to admire your beauty, unlike in the Philippines where they will call you names like *faggot* or *bakla*.” Transgender hostesses appreciated the anonymity of their life in Japan; outside the club, they were not objects of spectacle. Hence, they felt that Japan provided them with the opportunity to be “normal,” a far cry from the depiction of migrant hostesses as trafficked persons forced into prostitution.

#### OVERVIEW

*Illicit Flirtations* illustrates the indentured mobility of migrant hostesses by describing the processes of their labor, migration, and settlement. It begins with a description in Chapter One of the labor migration process for “entertainers” and explains why migrants who enter Japan with an “entertainer visa” are subject to relations of indentured servitude or peonage with middleman brokers, which are notably distinct from debt bondage.<sup>20</sup> The next four chapters move to a description of the labor process in hostess work. Chapter Two and Chapter Three describe the labor system in hostess clubs and the job requirements of hostesses. Chapter Two explains the organization and scientific management of flirtation and illustrates how club management disciplines the actions of hostesses by controlling their use of space and time while at work. Chapter Three then moves to a description of the job requirements of hostesses. Contrary to the common view that *hostess work* is but a euphemism for *prostitution*, I establish that the work of hostesses is not to provide sex but instead to bolster the masculinity of their customers. Chapter Four then elaborates on customer–hostess relations. My discussion of the labor conditions of hostess work ends in Chapter Five with an illustration of forced labor as situational and not universal. Forced sexual labor could occur when migrant Filipina hostesses face moral violations in the workplace, which I found not to be a frequent occurrence among them.

The last set of chapters describes the citizenship of migrant Filipina hostesses. It calls attention to the different set of vulnerabilities that plague them and shows how vulnerability to indentured servitude and forced labor differs

according to their citizenship status. Migrant Filipina hostesses in Japan follow three patterns of settlement that accordingly determine their vulnerability to human rights violations. As I describe in Chapters Six through Eight, they are long-term residents (that is, wives), indefinite residents (that is, undocumented), or short-term residents (that is, contract workers). By distinguishing the citizenship patterns of migrant hostesses, I illustrate how each group faces a unique set of challenges that emerge from their particular terms of membership in Japan. Wives are vulnerable, among other challenges, to domestic violence; undocumented workers to employer and coethnic abuse; and contract workers to peonage. Notably, the flattening of their experiences to forced prostitution elides our recognition of the differences in their experiences and in turn prevents us from developing solutions that actually address their problems. The different challenges engendered by the terms of residency of hostesses attest to the variety of their needs, which in turn questions the applicability of uniform and top-down solutions to address their problems as migrants who are vulnerable to forced labor.

As a way of summing up, I address in the Conclusion the policy implications of my study. I underscore the need for us to shift from viewing forced labor, that is “human trafficking,” as an individual problem that occurs randomly to seeing it as a structurally situated phenomenon that occurs in the context of labor migration regimes. Solutions to “trafficking” should not remain in the abstract, for instance with calls for the elimination of poverty or patriarchy. They should also not be universal. Instead, they need to address the particular needs of victims instead of glossing over them with one-size-fits-all fixes such as the templates of the 3Ps and 3Rs. Solutions need to be based on extensive grounded research. They must be empirically informed recommendations that work toward providing labor migrants with greater control over their labor and migration.<sup>91</sup>

The framework of *indentured mobility* blurs the distinction between human trafficking and labor migration by recognizing Filipina hostesses as labor migrants who face severe structural constraints. This framework does not dismiss their susceptibility to forced labor, but it rejects universal claims of their slavery as well as assumptions about the inevitability of forced labor for indentured workers. Blurring the lines between human trafficking and labor migration and recognizing trafficked persons as labor migrants would force



us to rethink not only our understanding of the vulnerability of migrant workers to abuse, including enslavement, but also our solutions. The idea of *indentured mobility*, the recognition of “trafficked persons” as labor migrants, forces a realignment of our solutions from one of “rescue” to one of “harm reduction.”<sup>92</sup> In other words, we would aim for job improvement and not job elimination, as our end goal would be not the “rescue” of supposedly helpless trafficked persons, as advocated by the U.S. Department of State, but instead their empowerment via continued mobility. Moreover, we would no longer tackle problems of forced labor on a case-by-case basis without an end in sight for its eradication. Instead, to eliminate forced labor, we would confront the severe structural constraints that hamper the autonomy of migrant workers, including exclusionary migration policies, the criminalization of migrants, the indentured servitude of contract workers, and the lack of sufficient regulation in the informal labor economies dominated by migrant workers. Such solutions would work toward increasing the control of “victims” over their labor and migration. We would focus our efforts on structurally ensuring the safe passage of migrant workers and not, as advocated by the United States in its global antitrafficking campaign, concentrate on individually prosecuting traffickers.<sup>93</sup>