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Speaking with and for activists: Kanlungan Filipino Consortium organisers in conversation

Abstract: This interview is authored and edited by Susan Cueva, Andrea Martinez-Eade, Noemi Magnani and Adam Ferner. Its focus is the intersection of academic philosophy and political activism. Susan Cueva (SC) and Andrea Martinez-Eade (AME) are activists who worked alongside Dara Bascara at Kanlungan, a London-based community consortium for Filipino communities. Susan is a trade unionist and community organiser who campaigns for the employment rights of Black and minoritised communities working in low paid services. Andrea is a Global Data Research fellow at the University of Edinburgh and a mental health worker with the charity *Mind*, whose PhD focussed on mental health and help-seeking behaviour of Filipino migrant domestic workers. As described on their website, Kanlungan is an 'incorporated organisation consisting of several Filipino and other Southeast and East Asian community groups working closely together for the welfare and interests of… migrant communities in Britain'. Their services include legal guidance and counselling, welfare and housing advice, and mental health and psychosocial wraparound support.

In conversation with Noemi Magnani (NM) and Adam Ferner (AF), Susan and Andrea Martinez-Eade discuss the complex relationship between the UK and the Philippines, the exclusion of activist voices from academic institutions and other such spaces, and the obstacles to solidarity between disenfranchised migrants and the bourgeoisie.

AF: Maybe you can start by telling us something about Kanlungan. What kind of organisation is it? How did you get started? Who are its members?

SC: We set it up after leaving another institution, one that was supposed to support migrant workers in the UK. We'd been patronised and subject to all kinds of unconscious bias, and we complained and they kicked us out. We took them to trial and tribunal and we won, but for obvious reasons we didn't want to go back there. We organised and, independently, we began to campaign around the issues of racism and discrimination. To begin with, we worked with the support of the Housing Association but eventually took the leadership away from them, and became mainly Filipinos, because we continued to experience a general lack of trust about the ability of migrant workers to speak for themselves about the issues we were and are experiencing. That's common here. Friends

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from Europe often demonstrate colonial thinking in this way.

We campaign in different areas, but we don't have many resources. We don't have a lot of money and are heavily dependent on the volunteering work of people like Dara. When she came to us, Dara was a volunteer, she worked raising awareness about our campaigns, about how we are treated in the UK, about the history of our country and how the Philippines has been colonised.

We try to get support from different organisations, but at the same time we're careful to assert our right to speak for ourselves and to resist other people's ideas about how we should be supported.

NM: Did you face any challenges in creating Kanlungan? There are certain obstacles that organisations like yours, and other charities, face in the UK, including a hostile environment for charities helping migrants, right-wing government rhetoric, and the Charity Commission's requirement that 'all and any campaigning by a charity must …avoid inflammatory rhetoric'. Did you experience any of that directly when building the Consortium?

SC: It's difficult. We're volunteers, and we're trying to be different. We aren't 'mainstream' and most of our work is based in our community, and community-based organising isn't very sexy for funders. They want you to provide services, to be institutionalised. Organising within a community, setting up workshops and educating that community, is very difficult to resource. On top of that, a lot of funders don't trust us because they think we're just a bunch of, you know, Filipinos, domestic workers, people who don't have enough education to be able to run organisations and to be trusted with money. So yes, setting up an institution which isn't really an institution is difficult, and if we'd tried to be a campaign organisation we probably wouldn't have survived. We needed to walk the line between campaigning and charitable work. It's a difficult line to walk.

AME: To add to what Susan's said, the Charity Commission sets certain restrictions. For one thing, you're not allowed to call for a change in government and that's something Kanlungan is invested in doing. Our campaigns are organised around our community and sometimes focus on the government back home. The government in the Philippines is very corrupt, but it's hard for us to criticise it because we're worried about violating the Charity Commission regulations. Fortunately, there are community-based organisations that campaign along those lines, so what we do instead is try to support them.[1]

1 Kanlungan's member organisations include: Alaga Kita, Bayanihan Leicestershire, Bahay Kubo Housing Association, Campaign Human Rights Philippines, Anakbayan UK, Filipino Domestic Workers Association, Philippines Theatre, Tinig UK, Filipino Chaplaincy in Leicestershire, Southeast and East Asian Centre, Southeast and East Asian Women's Association, and Greenwich Filipino Community.

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NM: You've touched on the complex relationship between the UK and the Philippines. Could you say more about that, and about how that relationship is experienced by the migrants you work with?

AME: I'm not sure if the relationship is really all that complex. The Philippines export manpower to the UK, including, of course, domestic workers. They have an export-oriented foreign policy and the UK benefits from this, taking advantage of the incredibly low labour cost. Ultimately, the UK is the main beneficiary here. The most the Philippines get are the remittances from the migrant workers. They're at the losing end of the trade agreement. They're exporting the best of the population. There are even adverts on buses in the Philippines, which say 'We give the world our best!' or something like that. It's true. It's a brain drain – a brain haemorrhage.[2]

SC: Exactly. There's a bilateral agreement between the Philippines and the British Government, which states that the main export from the Philippines are migrant workers. That's been embedded since [Ferdinand] Marcos was the president. The UK benefits a huge amount from this policy. Vital services like the NHS and the care sector can't function without migrant work – which is why the resistance to immigration is so hypocritical. People say they don't want migrants here, but the system can't run without us. This dependence is enshrined in the legal agreement between the two countries.[3]

In the Philippines, the policy is promoted in a similar way to the 'American Dream'. There's a 'UK Dream' too. A nurse's dream is to become a nurse in the NHS. That's the hope being sold in the Philippines. The NHS and other organisations here target the Philippines, which is the largest supplier of nurses to the UK, higher even than India. We have a whole industry in the Philippines, which is built around mass-producing nurses, then exporting them to the UK and to America, and other countries like Australia and New Zealand.

The relationship between the UK and the Philippines is an extractive one.

2 The 2018 National Migration Survey, published on the Philippine Statistics Authority website (https://psa.gov.ph/), found that 12% of Filipino households had a member who was or had been an Overseas Filipino Worker. 16% of the population aged 15+ received remittances, and 10% had sent remittances to other family members in the previous year. Information about the numbers of Filipino migrants travelling to the UK can be found on the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) website (https://dmw.gov.ph/archives/ofwstat/ofwstat.htm

3 The Labor Code of the Philippines (known as Presidential Decree No.442) was enacted in 1974 under Marcos's presidency, creating the legal framework for overseas employment, including the POEA (see previous footnote) and laid the groundwork for state-sponsored migration of Filipino workers, especially nurses, engineers and domestic workers. There have been several bilateral agreements between the Philippines and the UK, including the Recruitment Agreement (2002), Memorandum of Understanding on Healthcare Cooperation (2003) MOU on Advance Education for Filipino Caregivers (2005) and the 2021 MOU on the recruitment of Filipino healthcare professionals (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/memorandum-of-understanding-between-the-uk-and-the-philippines-o

The UK extracts skilled workforces from the Philippines, but they also extract material resources like gold and copper, whatever kind of natural minerals we have, and we have a lot. It's a one-way extractive industry, and the Philippines only benefits because of the remittances. Maybe fifty years down the line, when the second generation of migrants has grown up and there are fewer first-generation migrants, the issue of remittances might lessen. But I think it will continue, because the hospitality services here thrive on migrant work coming from the Philippines.

NM: So, as Dara might put it, we have a country dominating and oppressing another country through asserting a particular kind of economic power.

AME: Right. The problem is that people don't always see it as a one-way relationship, so to speak, and that it's only really the UK that benefits – because they feel like they're supporting their families back home. They feel like it's also to their advantage. The issue is both at the economic level, and the cultural level too. That's the point about the 'UK dream'.

NM: How do you create spaces and resources for members of your community to become politically engaged?

SC: Most of the things we do are around raising awareness of workers' rights. Many Filipinos are workers here, and one of our main goals is to help people understand their rights in the UK, and to link these rights to the migrant experience and the exploitation and discrimination that we face because of these colonial relationships. It's also important for us to link these issues to the domestic policies in the Philippines, and to help people see that the government is willing to sacrifice Filipino life, mental health, well-being and the separation of families in order to promote this export policy. We try to conscientise workers, starting from what they experience and linking that to their families' experiences of poverty back home. The cost of living in the Philippines is high, there's no pro-public healthcare, and there's no free education either. When people understand these relationships, they understand that policy change needs to happen both in the UK and the Philippines. The problem isn't just the 'hostile environment', and other UK policies weaponised against migrants, it's the policies back home, the poor living standards and lack of social provision. Migrant workers are squeezed in the middle, suffering exploitation here, in the hope that they can improve the life of their family.

To be honest, there will probably be only a small number of people who engage with these issues – but from our point of view, if we have x-number of people who are able to speak about the rights of migrants in the UK, that's better than none.

AME: We must understand that when people come here it's mostly for economic reasons. There's a real challenge to engaging people politically, and that's what we need to do. We have to be very creative in terms of getting support, or even just acknowledgement. That's why, in Kanlungan, we start by engaging people through the services we offer. That's the first point of contact with the organisation – people come to us because they need something. That's where we start, we try to educate the service users. Sometimes we even get them involved in our campaigns. We talk about the reasons they left the Philippines. We try to give them a basic education about the trade relationships, and to show how their choice to leave their country is in part a result of this economic context.

SC: Dara and I used to disagree about Kanlungan's approach to this. Dara would say we should be more revolutionary in our approach to working in the community, and I'd say to her, Okay, but try talking to domestic workers about politics and trade agreements and see how far you get. Organising and raising people's consciousness takes a lot of time. It takes a toll on everyone, on workers and volunteers. There's only so much we can hold at once. People must be in a good place, a safe place, to have these conversations. They need to be able to support themselves, to have their basic needs met. Maybe once that's all-in place, people will be able to talk about their experiences and to engage with institutional exploitation.

I can see why Dara felt frustrated about it, but we'd joke about it too. I'd say she could afford to be angry because of her bourgeois lifestyle, because she didn't have to worry about putting food on the table. Consciousness raising takes time and money. That's the reality of the work we do.

NM: What you do is amazing. I follow you on social media and there are lots of workshops and events. There's always something going on. You really create a sense of community. And as you say, maybe what people need first is safety and community, and only afterwards can you build on that. I think a good example of this was how Kanlungan helped people during the pandemic. Dara was involved in that.

AME: She was the poster model!

SC: We started the work in the height of lockdown,[4] making deliveries to people who needed them. She'd say she could go because she didn't have to use public

4 The mutual aid work undertaken by Kanlungan during the pandemic included food and medical deliveries to people who needed them; culturally appropriate, trauma-informed well-being support; employment support (e.g. in relation to their employment rights to safety, and on sick pay); campaigning initiatives relating to sick pay, and remuneration for families whose family members died in care-work from COVID-19.

transport; she could use her bike. She said it would be safe because there were no cars. I told her I wasn't worried about transport, I was worried about her mental health. I told her she'd be talking to people suffering, who might have severe mental health issues. She told me she thought the work would save her mental health. She said the work needed to be done, so she wanted to do it.

Of course, I told her it was up to her, but it's important to flag these things. Organisations like ours have a duty of care towards our volunteers. Even though she was part of the management team she was still our responsibility. But she went, and I think she went because she was moved by the injustice of the pandemic, the way it affected some people more than others, people who didn't have the resources to isolate or to buy food. That was typical of her.

NM: That's right. She was very much engaged in the struggle of migrants, including undocumented migrants. Like you said, she was also bourgeois, in a way, and I wonder how this affected her involvement in Kanlungan. Do you think consciousness raising can be a common project between those who have lived experience, as Filipino migrants, for instance, and people who don't have those same experiences and are in more privileged positions?

AME: There was a recent campaign in Canada, focussed on the rights of domestic workers and victims of human trafficking. The target of the campaign wasn't just the domestic workers, or the people who have lived experience of trafficking, or modern slavery, but the middle classes too, and the second- and third-generation migrants, as well as the academics. The campaign was a success, in the sense that it managed to get support from those sectors of society. It's important because, as we've mentioned, a lot of migrants feel they don't have a voice in the society they live in. So, it's important that people who have louder voices, or voices that carry further, like academics and the middle-class, are involved in these campaigns. It's important to campaign for greater public awareness of these issues, not just consciousness raising of migrant workers themselves.

SC: I agree with Andrea. Different people from different classes have different responsibilities in terms of transforming society to make it more just and equitable. I was so happy when Dara finished her PhD. I had so many hopes for her in terms of targeting and organising the bourgeoisie to support our work. There are a lot of second-generation, intelligent people who have very little knowledge or experience of the struggles that their co-Filipinos are experiencing – and just because they're intelligent doesn't mean they understand what's going on. It takes a lot to understand. People need to ask questions. That's why it's important to build alliances with the academics, with the intellectuals in the

Filipino community, and all intellectuals. I think that's what we're hoping for from this article.

AF: Given everything that you've said about engagement and colonial relationships, I wonder how you feel about this project. We're producing this text for an academic journal, which will have some reach, though primarily within academia. I'm also aware of my subject position here, and Noemi's, as 'interviewers' who are in some ways extracting information from both of you.

AME: I think it's good to start the conversation about these issues within the academic community. We have been trying for a long time to engage with academics with regards to these different issues. Occasionally we'll be invited with other community-based organisations to talk at conferences – but writing things down and possibly elevating it to a higher level of academic discourse, moving it beyond specific campaign issues, is really, important. There are progressive movements in the higher education sector, so it's a way of hopefully gaining followers and support.

SC: I agree with Andrea. It's a good idea. Dara was also exemplary in relation to this kind of engagement. Even though she lived a bourgeois and very academic life, she worked with us on the ground, with people who have very different experiences from her. She took on a role; she felt that she had a stake in our project.

Susan Cueva is a trade unionist, community organiser and activist and has been a campaigner for rights and justice throughout her working life. As a trade unionist, she organises and campaigns for the employment rights of black and minoritised communities working in low paid services. Currently she is seconded by Kanlungan to the Greater London Authority as Citizenship and Integration Adviser with a specific focus on addressing migrant labour exploitation. She is the founder of the Kanlungan Filipino Consortium. She is one of the founders and a non-Executive Director of the Southeast and East Asian Centre (SEEAC), an organisation which campaigns for the rights of East and Southeast Asian (ESEA) Communities in the UK and also pioneer of the Status Now for All campaign with other migrants and refugee organisations. She is also one of the trustees of Gabriela Safehaven for Southeast and East Asian Women's Association, a recently formed feminist organisation advocating for women's rights and emancipation from patriarchy. Susan is also a trustee of the Dara Bascara Trust.

Andrea Martinez-Eade is an associate professor at the Department of Behavioral Sciences in the University of the Philippines Manila. She earned her PhD in Psychology at King's College London. She also serves as the Executive Director

of Kanlungan, a migrant-led charity that aims to promote the rights and welfare of Filipino and East and Southeast Asian migrants in the UK.

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