

REVIEW ARTICLE

Saloma-Akpedonu, Czarina. 2006. Possible Worlds in Impossible Spaces: Knowledge, Globality, Gender and Information Technology in the Philippines. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press. 247 pp.

Raul Lejano

The theme of Saloma-Akpedonu's book is the discovery of new heterotopias within the Philippine IT (information technology) industry. Unlike More's utopia or Castell's hypertext, a heterotopia is a real place (Foucault 1986). Indeed, even that most ethereal of worlds, the internet, exists in real places, as zeroes and ones pulsing on and off in some server, over which hovers an IT specialist slurping a real cup of coffee (or tea) or inhaling a slice of pizza (or Tandoori chicken). Unlike Baudrillard's simulacrum, the heterotopia does not exist so much as a hyperreal copy of real places, but instead as a counterpoint that relates to every other place as a site of deviance, irony, and a radical reordering of space and time.

In the beginning of the book, the author proposes two things. First, that the Philippine IT industry allows for the creation of a local community (which, in its dialectic with the global, moves us to make up awkward words like glocal) that is embedded in and embeds in itself the global and that, furthermore, this community allows for feminine spaces in an otherwise masculine field. The second

proposition is that this should not happen, if IT is to go the way of other technological advances (e.g., industrialization, computerization) where the global completely colonizes and dominates the local, and where feminine spaces are relegated to the lower-end, routinized, phase of production.

The author proceeds to study the Philippine IT industry not as an industry or state of the world per se but as a practice – in the doing of IT. In this manner, she employs a mode of research popularized by Latour in his study of science in action – simply observe IT professionals actually producing IT in its everyday sense and see what its culture and supporting networks are (Latour 1987). Working as journalist and ethnographer, she proceeds to study two such "laboratories": the nondescript office of the Pinoymail headquarters, and the more formal Makati office of a GPS (global positioning system) hardware/software developer. The contrasting ecologies of the two sites lend us much insight into the range of contexts that might be found within the IT world – giving credence to her thesis that within

this space might be found unexpected worlds. Indeed, it makes the reader desire to see into other such laboratories.

In chapter six, the author builds the intriguing argument that the Philippine IT industry is an active site of glocalization. She illustrates how the local manifests itself in the globalized theater of internet mail. The most interesting example of this is Pinoymail – which like Hotmail (which is globalized) and yet Filipino. The phenomenon goes the other way, too, as the local Pinoymail expands discursively, as users bring to it ideas that exceed any local meanings. In chapter five, she looks at the emergence of feminine spaces within IT. The explanation she gives for these spaces, while preliminary, are quite plausible, having to do with the nature of this particular technology (e.g., combining both digital and business know-how) and the agency of the intermediate technology professional herself.

Mind you, I felt the treatment of the Philippine IT phenomenon tended to tail off when it started to get most interesting. Primarily, it might have attempted a thicker description of everyday practice, on the one hand, and a more ecological treatment of its sociological dimensions, on the other. In terms of the everyday, one wonders what practices constitute the identities of the technicians within it. What is the social habitus within which Pinoymail establishes and sustains itself? Cyberspace is irreducibly contextual, as Woolgar (2002) has pointed out and, so, one needs to have a richer treatment of context. How do these places interact with their virtual spaces (e.g., Horan 2001; Blanchard 2004)? Having broached the sphere of the personal, one might as

well enter all the way into an ethnographic description of this professional and social milieu. How do IT professionals construct their own identities, and how does society reinforce this, as Giddens (1987) might wonder? How are these heterotopias constructed, both discursively and materially? Regarding the sociological, I had hoped for a more thorough working out of the process of realigning the global labor force and, particularly, the Philippine labor scene.

I believe that the book manages to carve out an important area of thought and sociological research. Engaging questions surface, such as:

- What exactly are the implicit and tacit knowledges embedded in IT?
- Is glocal, in IT, merely the merging of global or local, or is it a new topology?
- What are the ecologies and practices like in other IT “laboratories” in the Philippines?
- How is “Filipino” constructed in the internet? How is “Filipina?”
- What is the phenomenology of place in this new medium? How does place matter?
- Is the net really a public domain or, if not, who are the hegemons?
- Is the net a tool for neoliberal discourse, or is it what I have heard some long-winded theorists call a directly deliberative polyarchy?
- Who is reading my email?
- When I get email from a former ambassador in Sierra Leone who needs help recovering \$50M from his late father’s, the shipping magnate’s, trust, what do I email him back?

but answering these is not what the book is ultimately about. It is more about uncovering a new heterotopia, suggesting where to find it, and what it might look like. I do see how the world of Philippine IT might be heterotopian, simply because its places are sites of irony, allowing feminine spaces and glocal communities that one might not have expected (hence the title). In it, space and time are reordered, and relations between social spaces are reconfigured. Lately, I am feeling otherwise—it is not so much a heterotopia but, in fact, a new type of private-and-public (prublic? publivate? neo-hemiprivipublicate?) space, sometimes supplementing, other times displacing, ordinary spaces. Perhaps we

should map these like we do real spaces (e.g., Stokols and Montero 2002) — now that is an area that is just ripe for research.

The book introduces inquiries that are not just novel but maybe crucial. It gestures toward a horizon to which Philippine society and economy may be heading—where everything is increasingly disemplaced and migratory, interstitial, ethereal, and fragmenting. I wish Philippine academics did more research, like this and more. We owe it to society to begin unearthing the nature of these new spaces of industry and identity at the same time as the latter unearth us.

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