

# THE POLITICS OF GENEROSITY: TRAFFIC IN GOODS, RESISTANCE, AND THE CRAFTING OF SELVES WITHIN THE CONTEMPORARY TRANSNATIONAL FILIPINO HOUSEHOLD

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Following through on insights supplied by Daniel Miller's work on materiality, I shall explore how the "door-to-door" or *balikbayan* boxes of everyday goods sent by Filipino migrant women to their loved ones constitute the very space of deterritorialized householding. Aiming to demonstrate "how the things that people make, make people", this article discloses how such a mundane transnational practice – and the struggles over identity it gives form to – can present us with a way to be more attentive to the ways people try to achieve some coherence in their lives, particularly in response to what has been termed, "the destabilizing flux of the post-contemporary world". Indeed, by exploring how everyday objects enter into the constitution of relationships this article attempts to go beyond the subject-object duality that has saddled anthropological inquiry.

**Keywords:** *Migration, Filipino, balikbayan box, materiality*

## Introduction

Anthropologists John and Jean Comaroff argue that "macro-historical processes ... have their feet on the ground" and we need to see them as rooted "in the meaningful practices of people great and small..." (1992:32-33). Thus anthropology needs to descend from "[places] of ultimate revelation at the mountain's peak" into the quotidian terrain of ethnography (Miller 2005:10). In this spirit, I explore a central and overarching theme in globalization—the deterritorialization of culture—by looking into the struggles over identity *within* receiving households engendered by the transnational traffic in goods practiced by migrant Filipino women in Hong Kong. Taking my cue from Daniel Miller (2011, 2010, 2008, 2005), I examine how this traffic, made through door-to-door or so-called *balikbayan*

**AghamTao**, 2014, Volume 23:123-144

boxes<sup>1</sup>, not only expresses but also fundamentally mediates the politics of the self triggered and sustained by the reshaping of roles and relations in labor migration. By exploring how everyday objects enter into the constitution of relationships (see also Holbraad 2001, Douglas & Isherwood 1979, and Mauss 1925) this article is one more attempt at moving beyond the subject-object duality with which anthropology is said to be saddled (Miller 2005:10).

The focus on material objects, although today often associated with Miller's work on "materiality", has early roots in Mauss' (1925) path-breaking exploration of the constitutive role of objects in gift exchange (or 'prestations'), and how such 'total social phenomena' revealed underlying social structures. Luminaries such as Levi-Strauss (1963) and Bourdieu (1977) have carried forward this interest in underlying structures, even as Miller initiated within this structuralist tradition a renewed interest in material objects (Borgerson 2009). Acknowledging intellectual kinship with Bourdieu, Miller nonetheless purveys a more process-oriented and dialectical approach, pointing out that while material culture in fact constitutes a form of "practical taxonomy" into which individuals may be socialized, they themselves "are the very vehicles by which orders of material culture become transformed" (2009:163). The practical taxonomy constituted through material objects forms part of an individual's habitus—the historically inscribed generative scheme of perception, thought, and action (Bourdieu 1990:54-55)—that orchestrates into existence a commonsense and taken-for-granted world (the *doxa*). This is a highly structured order within which individuals play creatively and, in the process, "make up something that is quite possibly unprecedented". It is not a deterministic process. Miller notes however that individuals, because they cannot create order out of nothing, are socialized into those pre-existing orders and later on transform those orders creatively through, among other things, their relationship with material objects (Borgerson 2009:163).

I am engaging this aspect of Miller's work by pursuing the following line of inquiry: How might the regular sending of "door-to-door" (or *balikbayan*)

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<sup>1</sup> The term *balikbayan* refers to someone returning home after a prolonged period overseas (*balik* means return, and *bayan* refers to either the country or nation). It is customary for a *balikbayan* to bring gifts for family members, other relatives, and friends. Those who cannot come home, either for short visits or for good, may send a box—a *balikbayan* box—filled with all sorts of items for loved ones. The cost of shipping a box depends on the size of the box rather than the actual weight of the box once it is filled up.

boxes by overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) to loved ones frame the intricacies of self-making within the transnational householding process? How could this mundane practice, viewed in popular media as expressions of love, care and concern across the miles, also serve as the stage upon which complex transnational struggles over identity play out? How does it constitute the space of deterritorialized householding and its politics, and what implications are there for what Miller claims as the constitutive role of material objects? This article hopes to disclose not only how transnational householding processes are sites of contestation, ambivalence and contradiction (e.g. Tacoli 1999, Constable 2002, McKay 2004, Manalansan 2006, and Sobritchea 2007), but also and more specifically how the traffic in goods, and the plurality of struggles it gives form to (see Holbraad 2011), present us with a way to be more attentive to the contending ways people try to achieve coherence in their lives within “the destabilizing flux of the post-contemporary world” (Gilroy 1993:101).

*Narrative productions and 'guileful ruses'*. One other key assumption of this article is the notion of selves as on-going “narrative productions” undertaken by individuals as they occupy various subject-positions within conflict-ridden fields of meaning (Kondo 1990:26). This notwithstanding, analysis must remain attuned to the ways subjects struggle to achieve some coherence in their lives. This is on account of the fact that identity is actually “lived as a coherent (if not always stable) experiential sense of self” that could not be reinvented at will (Gilroy 1993b:102). It is important to note that while identity is fundamentally fractured and unstable over the long-term, “there must be some sense of stability of the self for the human to participate effectively in society, since effective participation requires relatively coherent and predictable action” (Farrar 2000:6). Thus, while a sense of self and the politics it generates are fictions marking a temporary and arbitrary closure of meaning, this kind of temporary closure or stabilization is necessary for anything to be said or done (Hall 1993, cited in Barker 2000:191).

I have previously argued that this traffic in goods allows women to achieve biographical coherence through the enactment of domesticity, one based on women’s assumed maternalism and propensity to do care work (Camposano 2012:84). The regular flow of goods from abroad is really part of a complex performance that maps these migrants back into “the interpersonal emotional economy of domestic relationships” (Morgan 1996:131). This way, migrant women continue to be mothers despite their physical absence. However, I have also pointed out that, in their pursuit of

domesticity, these absent women do more than just reproduce, in a transnational setting, domestic identities reflecting traditional constructions of femininity (Camposano 2011). The “performance of intimacy” (Camposano 2012) in fact materially “re-embeds” them in disruptive ways into the mesh of household relations. From distant sources of cash, migrant women transform themselves not only into affectionate breadwinners mothering their children from afar, but also into physically absent homemakers making unilateral consumption decisions for the household, generous benefactors to whom household members and other relatives may be obligated, and/or successful and affluent patrons to those left behind. In this respect, the practice may be seen as a “guileful ruse” (de Certeau 1984), a deceptive maneuver where the dominant cultural logic of familial intimacy and domesticity are availed of by migrant women in ways that open up spheres of relative autonomy within the space of household relations already constituted by hegemonic gender ideologies (Camposano 2011).

***A brief note on data.*** This article draws from a study that originally covered seven Ilonggo<sup>2</sup> migrant women in Hong Kong and their respective households in the municipality of Capan in Iloilo Province, the Philippines. Although close to 80 percent of Capan’s land is devoted to agriculture, an increasing number of its residents have in fact been leaving for jobs abroad since the 1980s, and remittances have had a palpable effect on the local economy. While many of the men in Capan who were working overseas at the time of fieldwork were seafarers, a large number of the municipality’s women abroad were engaged in domestic work. The women’s preferred destinations included places like Hong Kong, Singapore, and Italy, although posters from various manpower agencies were also recruiting for domestic work in places like Malaysia, Dubai, Jordan, Oman, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. These agencies were likewise announcing openings for caretakers in Taiwan, hotel staffers in Macau, and nurses for the U.S. and Australia.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>The term *Ilonggo* used in this article does not refer to speakers of a particular Philippine language but actually to people living in areas now forming part of Iloilo Province and Iloilo City. Aside from Iloilo City and the Northeastern coastal towns of Iloilo Province that today speak *Hiligaynon* (also often referred to as *Ilonggo*) as their first language, the rest of the province, including the town of Capan, speak one or other variant of *Kinaray-a*, a language indigenous to the island of Panay.

<sup>3</sup>Based on data from the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA), there were 9,038 Ilonggo domestic workers in Hong Kong who were members of OWWA in 2007. Of this number, 6,671 were women (OWWA n.d.). The stock estimate for

Multi-site fieldwork was conducted between 2006 and 2008 in Hong Kong and in Capan. Most engagements took place between June of 2007 and April 2008, with initial interviews in July of 2006. For this article, three left-behind members from different households were chosen as cases. These households belonged to migrant women with varying personal circumstances, who were either working in Hong Kong at the time of the study or, as in the case of one of them, had spent many years working there. One of the women was employed as a domestic helper while the other two have had this job at one time or another.

### **The women and their boxes**

When Naida (57) left many years ago for Hong Kong to work as a domestic helper, much of the parenting and care-giving at the family home in Barangay Taculan were assumed by her unmarried sisters Nitang (72) and Ading (62) (sources in Capan refer to them as *mga la-on* --- the spinsters). This enabled Naida to work almost continuously in Hong Kong for 18 years, and her husband Emil (57) to spend practically all his time in their tailoring shop at the public market, and in the small family farm in the outskirts of town. The spinsters were determined to take on the responsibility of caring for Naida's then young children, and at the time the study (2007–2008) were still caring for a grandniece and a grandnephew that came to live with them, as well as two grandchildren. Although two of Naida's daughters have since moved out, two of their children remain in the household—her eldest, Diday (29), and her youngest and only son, Bitoy (23). With more than one employer (an illegal practice Filipinos call “aerobics”), Naida makes more than the HK\$3,480 per month minimum for domestic workers. A significant part of this income pays for the regular shipments of goods to her family via door-to-door boxes that usually arrive in July and December.

Alona (47) was a domestic helper in Hong Kong from 1989 to 1999. Her daughter Laila (21) and son J.L. (23) were not even of school age when she left their home in Barangay Irimnan to work overseas. Her husband, Natoy (47), an ex-infantryman who turned to full-time farming after his discharge from the military, cared for the children in her absence. Although Alona was actually paid more than the minimum wage for domestic helpers, she supplemented her income by cutting and styling hair during her free time, and by accepting various part-time jobs—a matter she loves to talk about. After Hong Kong, she joined her sisters in Finland where she worked briefly.

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Filipinos in Hong Kong for the same year places the number of Filipinos on temporary status at almost 120,000. (CFO n.d.).

Concerned her children were not being cared for properly, Alona returned 'for good' ("*porgud*") in 2000 after only nine months. Informants close to the family however claimed it was Natoy's extra-marital affair and physically abusive parenting that forced her to come home. Proudly (and sometimes loudly) recounting her shipment of as many as four boxes a year when she was still in Hong Kong, Alona claimed that these would be so full she needed the help of co-workers to push the contents in. There were even times when it was necessary to sit on top of the box just to force the contents further down.

Jolly (41) left to work as a domestic helper in Singapore in 1990 after her second child was born and after her first marriage failed. Unhappy in Singapore, she relocated to Hong Kong in the mid-90s and works there to this day. Jolly has since remarried and, unlike the other women in this study, has moved up to become a supervisor in an upscale bar in Lan Kwai Fong district. She claims her job pays her HK\$12,000 a month, exclusive of tips. Additional income also comes from serving as part-time assistant to a wealthy businessman. Her present husband is a Filipino musician from Bicol and a permanent resident of Hong Kong. Jolly's now teen-age children, Dhelia (18) and Jon-Jon (17), are cared for by her older sister Mina (49) who is based with her husband Budoy (48) in their home village of Amabulo. Together, Mina and Budoy run a small farm and a thriving charcoal business. According to Jolly, she ships large boxes of goods to her family and relatives in Amabulo two to three times a year. She pointed out, and not without some sense of pride, that for her to make the most out of her box the contents need to be worth at least three times what she spends for the freight charges (i.e., the cost of the box). The goods are for Mina's household, which includes Jolly's two children, and also for four other households in Barangay Amabulo—those of her brothers and two aunts. Impressed by the usual size and contents of the shipment, Jon-Jon said that his mother always makes sure that there is something for everyone in these boxes in order to avoid hurting the feelings of relatives.

The following are items one can expect to find inside these boxes: soap, toothpaste, laundry detergent, shampoo, lotion, instant noodles, canned goods, school bags, shoes, socks, sanitary napkins, toilet paper, bed sheets, blankets, towels, carpets; other food items such as cereal beverages, breakfast cereal, tea, chocolates, dried fruits; and also items like tools and utensils, mugs, cups, and plates, used clothes and used household appliances. Although items are often labeled with the names of intended beneficiaries, a good number—mostly consumables—are not. Clearly, these are not souvenirs but everyday goods that have been selected based on the migrant's

knowledge of concrete household needs (McKay 2004:19). Camposano has called attention to the fact that goods shipped through *balikbayan* boxes occupy an ambivalent position: while migrants often invoke their role as medium for conveying affection, they are also equally conscious of their value as commodities, and getting the most from the money they are prepared to spend is an abiding concern. Indeed, a sale or special offer at a retail outlet like Watson's would prove irresistible to many. Ordinary articles of consumption, they are also gifts that affectively connect migrants to loved ones. Although not reducible to their cash equivalent—at least to the women, who often parry requests for the cash equivalent to be sent instead—the goods are also procured with a view to their usefulness at home (2012:94).

Much is obscured by this ambivalence. The quotidian quality of the goods reveals how women are making unilateral consumption decision for the entire household. Naida once complained that if she sends cash it is never enough (“...*man-an mo kon cash gani permi lang ginakulang!*”). Also, it was common for these women to justify the practice by saying that if it is cash, it might be spent on some other things, although none has gone far enough to specify what these 'other things' might be (“*Man-an mo... kon kwarta gani basi kon sa di-in ma agto*”/“You know... if it's cash it might go to other things”). Just as important, the personalized form of generosity these goods represent transform physically absent women into personally involved providers, creating for migrants a transnational chain of obligation that gives influence over the lives of loved ones. In one conversation on the goods she sent home when she was abroad, Alona actually bundled her expression of love for her children with a claim to their love and respect (“... *insa kon way sa Hong Kong si nanay ninyo maka tiraw kamo ka di-a haw?*”/“...if your mother had not gone to Hong Kong would you get to enjoy these things?”).

Finally, as markers of material abundance and modernity, the regular flow of imported goods allows migrants to pursue a more compelling narrative of achievement and triumph, within which they assume the role of an affluent patron to members of their households, other relatives, and even friends (see also Camposano 2011:10-11, 13-17). The sight of these densely packed boxes (e.g., the huge Afreight “Bida” box measuring 24”x24”x36”), containing all sorts of items for just about every member of the extended family, some distant relatives, friends and neighbors can be quite impressive, and does speak volumes (pun intended) not only about the migrant's financial means but also her journey of achievement. Some boxes, containing more than just consumables and clothes, tell a more dramatic tale. I recall the way Jolly playfully boasted about a shipment of used appliances.

One was an air-con unit because “someone” (apparently, one of the children) complained of the heat, and the other a television set—that an aunt of hers was *not* getting because she quarreled with Jolly’s sister. Indeed a visiting relative once called her *manggaranon* (wealthy), something she actually did not deny.

The pursuit of coherent narratives of the self—to which the desire for connectedness among these women may be attributed—can therefore be seen as obscuring a process where migrants assume new subject-positions that, while reflecting traditional and disempowering notions of female domesticity, are predicated on migrants’ access to and control of greater material resources (Camposano 2011). Evidently, by mothering from afar through their shipment of goods, migrant women do not only fulfill conventional notions of mothering (Parreñas 2005a, 2005b) but are also attempting to shift, further in their favor, the calculus of power in the household. These power-laden performances can be made more transparent, and their larger significance for the politics of identity within the transnational household more fully teased out, by focusing analysis on the specific forms of resistance they engender among those left behind. In the following sections, I demonstrate how resistance by certain members of receiving households towards the traffic in goods actually forms part of their narrative production of selves, and how this creative process of “crafting selves” occurs within conflict-ridden fields of meaning (Kondo 1990:26).

### **Counter-performances**

Displaying a clear disinterest in the goods, Naida’s husband Emil assumes a highly dismissive stance. In one of our early conversations Emil said he does not request his wife for such things. He also gave the impression that he was not fond of the goods, and neither did he look forward to receiving them. More than once he said he would rather receive cash. In one other instance, when we were discussing the box that his wife shipped for Christmas, Emil described the contents of the box in rather hostile language, using the *Kinaray-a* diminutive for litter (*ramó-ramó*). When the first of two boxes shipped in December of 2007 arrived at the Tejada home early in January of 2008, they contained many items for Emil’s young grandchildren. After the box was opened, according to one of the spinsters, Emil remarked that the items were also available at SM, a local department store. Emil actually repeated this remark when I came to see him later at his tailoring shop. Naida of course finds his attitude irritating, saying he would sometimes go “negative”.



Like Emil, Natoy was similarly dismissive of his wife Alona's goods. In one conversation where I pressed him to talk about how her regular shipment from Hong Kong became part of their everyday lives, Natoy ventured to use the term "rejects", apparently in reference to the used clothes that came with Alona's box (items also more commonly known as "relief"). Natoy also consistently displayed evasiveness in these conversations, as if there were always other, more interesting things to talk about. For instance, in two conversations where I attempted to focus the discussion on the goods from Hong Kong, Natoy initiated a decisive shift away from the subject towards his own domestic accomplishments when he was left behind to care for the children. These goods sometimes seemed like contraband to him: his daughter reported that he instructed them not to request their mother for anything and just be content with what was sent. More tellingly, he quietly gave away his daughter's collection of dolls from Hong Kong (something that Alona still recounts with annoyance), and has refused to even unwrap many of the branded personal items his wife sent him many years ago.

Mina's disagreement with Jolly over the latter's usually large shipment of goods is not quite as intense as that of Emil or Natoy. Still, it was most certainly an ongoing dispute given the open incredulity that the normally shy Mina displayed when she shared how she even asked her sister not to bother sending consumables like toothpaste and soap ("*Hambal ko ganî kana, indî ron bala tana dya*"/'I said to her, please don't send these anymore'). She was of course rebuffed by Jolly who insisted on what she felt was her prerogative. Mina however remains defiant and, in one chance encounter at a beauty parlor in town, not only repeated what she said earlier to me about the goods being available locally but even suggested, this time in the presence of friends and with a note of exasperation, that I use my influence with Jolly and advise her not to engage too much in the practice ("*Hambala balá...*"/'Please talk to her...').

Across these cases, resistance was revealed by disinterest in the goods or evasiveness in discussing the subject, dismissive remarks, claims that the goods are also available locally, direct criticism of some goods, expressed preference for cash, and non-use of the goods. Needless to say, these acts of resistance can only be fully understood as particular acts and in their specific contexts. There is a need to see how these counter-performances form part of the struggle of specific household members to sustain coherent narratives of the self, and how these are in fact shaped by the particular ways individuals are positioned, and are positioning themselves, first, in response to shifts in relations instigated by migration and, second, in light of the specific ways in which this artful insinuation of women into the mesh of household relations

undermine the possibilities for self-making by other household members. After all, migrant women cannot be the only ones engaging in the narrative production of selves.

These acts of resistance can only bring into sharp relief the politics of the self triggered and sustained within the transnational householding process if analysis situates them within individual identity projects. What follows therefore is a discussion of specific identity projects that disclose how selves are contextually constructed and relationally defined by individuals. Here, individuals constitute themselves through subject positions that are in turn shaped in and through specific interactions and relationships, not only with other individuals (e.g., the migrant seeking to re-embed herself in the household) but also with the boxes of goods that are regularly sent home by the migrant women. They are engaged in the process of what Kondo calls “crafting selves” --- i.e., “the ways people construct themselves and their lives --- in all their complexity, contradiction, and irony --- within discursive fields of power and meaning, in specific situations, at specific historical moments” (1990:43).

### **The hardworking tailor-farmer**

Emil has actually admitted that some of the things that come with the box are quite useful, e.g., the used shirts that he actually liked to wear on certain occasions, and the second-hand Butterfly brand sewing machine that he found to be of good quality. As a former migrant worker in Saudi Arabia he does have insight into the practice, having engaged in it himself. He says it is really about a person’s feelings (*baratyagon*), and that one sends these boxes of goods because 'one feels good doing it' (“*nami man pamatyagan mo kon makapadará kaw*”). Emil is not unaware of the emotional implications of the practice and, in at least one instance, did seem prepared to accept that this must really make his wife happy. Still, saying 'she must really be happy doing it' also betrays a lack of empathy, suggesting that the practice is something removed from his own concerns or interests.

Emil's pronounced lack of enthusiasm for the imported goods may be linked to his devotion to farming and his need for cash to pay for farm inputs. Naida's box of goods are not only far removed from things that truly interest him, they also represent financial resources that otherwise could go into things like fertilizers and farm chemicals. In fact, he would periodically lobby his wife (and lately his daughters who are now employed, if Naida turns him down) for money to buy these inputs. Despite the long hours he spends working at the tailoring shop, Emil has been unable to generate the

income necessary to sustain the needs of the family farm. His constant need (and lobbying) for cash even occasioned some criticism from Naida who, although generally appreciative of Emil's work ethic, once described him as hardworking but often short of funds.

The larger context of this is clearly the reconfiguration of household relations brought about by Naida's overseas work and consequent higher status and power as primary breadwinner, her effort to re-embed herself in the household, and the role played by her unmarried sisters as surrogate parents and homemakers. This reconfiguration has made it both possible and convenient for Emil to retreat into his work as a tailor and a farmer. Lodged comfortably in the sphere of non-domestic work, he appears to have insulated himself from most of what goes on in the household. The lack of appreciation for Naida's regular gift of goods, the refusal to share in the spinsters' alarm over his son's active love life, the refusal to assert his authority in the face of his son's habitual insolence, his non-involvement in many household decisions, and even his avowed ignorance of a daughter's plan to marry (improbable, according to a niece privy to family matters) all appear to be enactments of this insulated and defensively distanced persona. What one of the spinsters (Ading) had to say in a frustrated tone about Emil's relaxed attitude towards his son's amorous pursuits for instance was quite revealing: He is just "uninvolved" (*Wa-ay tana ka ra*), she said.

Emil's retreat into tailoring and farming is however strategic. By concentrating on his tailoring shop and farm, Emil is not only able to withdraw from domestic engagements where he risks openly contending with the spinsters and with Naida, but is also able to craft a more viable masculine identity (Kondo 1990). How this works was revealed in one conversation we had at his tailoring shop over his effort to irrigate his rice field and his work arrangement with farm hands. Emil, who was as usual busy at work in one of the sewing machines, saw in the thread generated by our exchange an opportunity to bring up the matter of how some families with remittances from abroad have been unable to put the money to good use. To keep up with this unexpected twist, I shared how another migrant woman complained about her relatives' dependence on her. Emil then replied that 'God will help you if you work hard to improve your own situation' (*Ang Diyos tana buligan nikaw kung mag tinguhâ kaw*”).

His work as tailor and farmer has allowed Emil to present himself as an active contributor to the household economy. His critical comment on the inability of some families to put remittances to good use not only indirectly downplayed his wife's economic role (because remittances in and of

themselves will not make a difference in a family's life), but also called attention to the complementary economic activities he engages in. Apparently, his use of *tinguhâ* (to make an effort) referred to this, and by downplaying the significance of remittances Emil was also highlighting his labors as tailor and farmer (of course, Naida's complaint that her husband may be hard working but has no money pointedly suggests where the line of contention is). These activities create a defensible space within which Emil could mitigate the emasculating effect of Naida's economic dominance within the household.

That farming remains a popular and traditionally male-dominated activity in Capan recommends it to left-behind husbands in search of spaces within which to ground, and reconstitute, a masculine identity destabilized by the economic ascendancy of their migrant wives. This is particularly significant since in the community (as in many other communities in the province) a lot of importance is placed on a family's ability to produce its own rice. Being forced to buy rice (*darawat*) from the store is traditionally seen as an indication that one has fallen into hard times. This makes it strategically important for Emil to highlight the economic viability of his farming activities. When once I asked who paid for the fertilizers he used in his farm, he proudly claimed that he raised the money himself by selling his pig. Acknowledging the ₱5,000 his wife gave him, he nevertheless pointed out that he had augmented it by selling his melons. He likewise reported that he did quite well with his tomatoes since prices have recently been good. Thus, despite Naida's hefty contribution of, Emil was concerned to highlight (and here, somewhat incoherently) that he is not completely dependent on his wife for financial support, and that he is able to raise some of the cash he needs. Of course, Naida has a different opinion.

Against this backdrop, one can understand how Emil, a former OFW himself who admitted to engaging in the practice when he was abroad (although it is not clear to what extent), could display such antipathy towards the traffic in goods. Naida's door-to-door box grinds against her husband's effort to secure a more viable masculine identity within the mesh of household relations that have been transformed by his wife's migration to Hong Kong, and consequent economic ascendancy. As an intimate form of generosity that allows Naida to play the personally involved provider, the regular shipment of goods constantly threaten to overshadow Emil's bid to credibly present himself as an important contributor to the household economy. This has engendered a competitive, if ultimately defensive, stance particularly visible in his dismissive attitude towards Naida's goods—e.g., his claims that “they are also available here”, or are just “pieces of litter”.

Emil is not simply trying to challenge the ascribed value of the imported goods. For all the modernity and the prestige that these imported goods bear, Emil dares to say that he is unimpressed—and says more: “[*Wa-ay*] *tana sa kálag ko ra*” /‘these are nothing to me’. *Kálag* (versus *kalág*, meaning soul or spirit) includes “sensibility”, “sensiblyness”, or “sense” (Kauffman 1934:online), and for something to be not (*wa-ay*) in a person’s *kálag* means it has no effect, or that he is not moved by it. Having placed himself outside the domestic sphere (i.e., having withdrawn from most domestic engagements) Emil now finds it expedient to deny the imported goods their ascribed power, conveniently forgetting the used shirts from Hong Kong that he likes to wear, and the second-hand sewing machine that now sits in his shop and whose quality in fact impressed him.

### **Ex-soldier, zealous homemaker**

Emil and Natoy make for an interesting comparison. While Emil “retreated” to the tailoring shop and the farm, Natoy stepped up to fill the domestic role vacated by Alona. He was quite successful, helped by his competence in such chores as cooking. In the face of Alona’s role as a good provider when she was working abroad, Natoy assiduously “remade” his masculinity by negotiating a new sense of what it means to be a man (Pingol 2001:229). Reduced to economic dependence when he went on AWOL (absence without leave) from the military due to his involvement in the 1989 coup, and being under the constant gaze of Alona’s family and other relatives (Natoy is not from Capan), he was forced to use the domestic sphere for enacting a reconstituted masculinity. This process may have been helped by his being an ex-soldier, which allowed him to assume a domestic role without his maleness being seriously threatened (see similar observation in Parrenas 2005a:100).

This process was a feat of reinvention as the soldier transformed into a consummate homemaker. Natoy was unequivocal in his embrace of homemaking as a calling—he cleaned the house, cooked, did the laundry, mended clothes, attended to all the other day-to-day needs of the children, and managed the family’s finances. He often speaks of his domestic accomplishments, bragging about things like his diligence in cleaning the house, his delicious cooking, and his prudent management of Alona’s hard-earned remittances. Natoy not only brags about his homemaking skills but has even criticized his wife’s cooking, claiming that his children always knew if it was he or his wife who prepared their meals. He also openly talks about his attachment to his children, an attachment that even Alona finds excessive. An infantryman by training, Natoy also brought a certain military

mindset into his homemaking. Alona said that when the children were younger, he would fix their uniforms and school bags, arrange their notebooks into neat stacks, and even check their nails for dirt. He was 'overly fastidious' ("*Tam-an ka id-id*"), she said. Laila added that her father even inspected their cabinets to see if their clothes were properly arranged. He was also very strict, with sources claiming that his methods for disciplining his children were physically abusive.

Natoy's hostile disinterest in the goods Alona sent from Hong Kong is in dramatic contrast to the almost frenzied way Alona conveys the density and immensity of her boxes. The context for this disinterest may be the compensatory and fragile nature of Natoy's performance of a domestic identity. The fragility is explained by the fact that Natoy's reformulated masculinity—organized around the assiduous and devoted care of their children—is best pursued in contraposition to Alona's assumption of a dominant role as primary breadwinner. To guarantee the success of this performance, there had to be a convincing play of contrast: Alona was going to be the distant provider, and Natoy the devoted father who took really good care of the children and made sure his wife's remittances were put to good use. Indeed, Alona's enthusiasm for sharing her life abroad is matched only by her husband's propensity to boast of his domestic skills and success in this sphere.

For Alona to effectively convey her affection for her children through her regular shipment of goods, and thus share in their nurturance and emotional care, was potentially disruptive as it blurred this all-important contrast. Additionally, Alona's attempt at converting material resources into emotional resources through the goods also meant exercising substantial control over the management of household resources (Camposano 2011). Natoy's resistance may thus be seen as a defensive stance provoked by his wife's intrusion into the domestic sphere where he has anchored his reconstituted sense of self, a sphere where he could be both a responsible parent and an efficient and effective manager of household resources. Outside of this he was merely an economic dependent, a beneficiary of Alona's hard work and success as a provider, which the latter loves to highlight. Not surprisingly, Alona's overseas calls, which Laila described as 'really lengthy' ("*...lawig-lawig pa ra*"), were not always welcomed by Natoy since such attempts on the part of his wife to make her presence felt at home were, in a special sense, emasculating.

Laila's explanation for her father's insistence that they do not request their mother for anything said it all. She said her father felt he was useless if

they did that (She said it in Tagalog: “*Parang wala daw siyang silbi*”). When I shared this with Alona she bluntly explained that Natoy was that way because such things 'did not come from him' (“*Bukon ti halin kana mong!*”). While it is clear that Natoy too defined himself against the regular shipment of goods from Hong Kong, an important difference with Emil exists. Having embraced domesticity and located his sense of self within the same domestic space to which the goods belong, Natoy was in a much more vulnerable position: The goods from abroad--such as the spicy noodles his daughter was very fond of--challenged his domestic achievements. Alona may have been a poor cook but the imported instant noodles made her daughter just as happy, if not happier.

### **Struggling against “charity”**

Unlike Emil and Natoy who pursue divergent approaches to crafting more viable masculine identities, Mina’s identity project is arguably less complex, built simply on the idea of not being seen as a dependent of her more successful and affluent (*manggaranon*) younger sister. More dramatically in Jolly’s case, the goods are a performative idiom for presenting herself as a successful and affluent migrant, one who is a benefactor to her siblings and their families. She is also never shy about the material things she provides her own family and other relatives. Once when I visited her at work, Jolly playfully claimed that she has a lot of “charity” in the Philippines (“*Marami akong charity sa Pilipinas*”). Neither is she coy about her financial resources. In one instance when I accompanied her on a shopping trip to Iloilo City, she found occasion to show me a thick bundle of cash inside her bag (an over withdrawal, she claimed). Against this performance of affluence and generosity, Mina affirms her being a person of independent means and one who contributed significantly to her sister's success. For instance, she easily talks about her role in helping Jolly through the difficult times in her life. Once, after she acknowledged receiving a regular “allotment” (cash remittance) from her sister, I followed up by saying that it seemed only fair since the children are with her. On hearing this, Mina quickly replied, as if making sure that I get the full picture, saying that even when they were all still living in Manila she was already taking care of Dhelia and Jon-Jon, adding that she was also the one who got Jolly back from her in-laws when the first marriage failed.

This attitude seems to me to be partly driven by the obvious dependence on Jolly of their other siblings, with Mina concerned to show that she was not the same way towards her sister. While herself a beneficiary of Jolly's monthly remittances, Mina is in fact not dependent on her younger sister for

her everyday needs—she has her own business and also derives income from other sources. She is a person of independent means who contributes significantly to the household's finances, and she makes an effort to inform people about this, albeit in a subtle way. She may not readily volunteer information (as would her sister, for instance) but she would not miss an opportunity to talk about her business in charcoal and bananas, or even show me her pigs and backyard garden. Usually reserved and shy, Mina was quite open about her profit margins and monthly business income. In her willingness to provide details of her business activities, I could sense that she was not only proud of what she has achieved for herself but was also concerned to highlight her non-dependence on Jolly and her generosity.

Mina's resistance to the traffic in goods, in so far as this forms part of her sister's performance of affluence and patronal generosity—and the subordinate position to which this consigns all the rest of them—is due to her desire to be seen as a person of independent means. Yet, the goods from Hong Kong present her with a daunting challenge given their capacity to impress. The scale of the shipments and the quotidian quality of their contents are two edges that cut through Mina's narrative of non-dependence: The hefty boxes allow Jolly to loom large over her siblings even as their imported contents loudly tell the story of material dependence over and against what Mina's thriving charcoal business, farm animals, and vegetable garden can say about her capacity to support her needs. For this reason, she is especially loath to receive toothpaste and soap from her sister (*"Hambal ko gani kaná, indi ron bala tana dya"*/I said to her, please don't send these anymore')—their everyday ordinariness clearly have the power to hail her into place as a beneficiary of her affluent sister's "charity".

### **Resistance and the pursuit of coherence**

The reshaping of gender roles and relations instigated by the attempt of women to enact embeddedness in their households are clearly disruptive of the production of selves by other members of the household. The struggle for stability and coherence is really something we should expect to find at the core of any identity project which "builds on what we think we are now in light of our past and present circumstances, together with what we think we would like to be, the trajectory of our hoped-for future" (Barker 2000:167). This implies the need for "a consistent feeling of biographical continuity" (2000:166) which would, in turn, explain efforts to stabilize an identity threatened by the reshaping of traditional gender roles and the reconfiguration of household relations. The different instances of resistance to the traffic in goods suggest that while identities may be fragmented—not



essential wholes, but constellations of subject-positions (Kondo 1990:46—analysis must remain attentive to the different ways subjects attempt to sustain coherent narratives of the self.

Like Kondo who needed to reconstitute herself as an American researcher after her experience of fragmentation and collapse of identity (1990:17), the individuals above are also in pursuit of some feeling of biographical coherence, and in contexts where a reconfiguration of household relations is involved. Emil's bid to present himself as an important contributor to the household economy, Natoy's insistence on playing the devoted parent and a competent manager of household resources, and Mina's desire to be seen as a person of independent means who contributed significantly to her sister's success in life are specific narrative productions directed at the dominant economic role of the women migrants, and their attempt to re-embed themselves within the domestic space of the household through the traffic in goods. The resistance to the goods displayed by Emil, Natoy, and Mina are counter-performances aimed at sustaining the above narratives of the self, in so far as these fragile narratives are undermined by the performance of generosity working to amplify the already dominant position of the migrant.

### **Conclusion**

As the cases show, the door-to-door or *balikbayan* box serves not only to make and maintain relationships or allow people to say what they could not properly say with words (Auslander 2005). Beyond even their biographical use as cornerstones in the “narrative process of self definition” (Hoskins 1998:2), the box and its contents play a decisive role in the acting out of lives, not only as props but as the very stage on which such lives are acted out. The social fact of resistance shows that even as objects may be harnessed unto the process of self-making, the full compass of their involvement reveals not only their being mute witnesses to “the fundamental unity” of their users (Hoskins 2006:78) but also, and more importantly, their capacity to give form and shape to contending processes of self-making in the differential ways they are experienced. While serving as a technology of coherence allowing physically absent women to engage in long-distance mothering, the box (and its contents) is also a technology for exercising new forms of power that re-embeds migrant women into the mesh of household relations. Subsequently, in this article, I have shown how it works as a technology of disruption and destabilization against which other members of the households struggle in their narrative production of selves.

It is interesting to note that Madiannou and Miller did observe how certain communication media—in this case, letters and cassette tapes—could be differentially or asymmetrically experienced by Filipino migrant parents and their children, and even exacerbate inequalities already existing in those relationships (2011:23). I am picking up from here, noting that perhaps one way to push Miller’s agenda of showing “how the things that people make, make people” (2005:38) is to take analysis outside the theoretical confines of Bourdieu where he locates it (see Borgerson, 2009). This is imperative given an everyday world where territorial frames of reference are constantly destabilized, where even the “formation and sustenance of households is increasingly reliant on the international movements of people and transactions among household members residing in more than one national territory” (Douglass 2006, quoted in Porio 2006:3). Although Miller discusses the possibility of creative play within the structured order of the *habitus* (Borgerson 2009:163), I find the ascribed solidity of the *habitus* and its effects to be ultimately problematic. This is seen not only in the improvisational (and guileful) acts of migrant women that surreptitiously shift the domestic calculus of power, but also, as this article has demonstrated, in the struggles over identity that such “guileful ruses” have engendered. This excessive solidity—let us call it that—claimed for the *habitus* is what moved Appadurai to declare that globalization, because it involves the pervasive deployment of imagination in everyday life, has meant the dissolution of the *habitus*, and in its place has created an “arena for conscious choice, justification and representation” (1996:44).

In the space of deterritorialized householding constituted by the traffic in goods, one finds not consensus on the meaning of practices and the world orchestrated by the *habitus* (i.e., the *doxa*) (Bourdieu 1977:80) where one might imagine all manner of goods “making visible and stable the categories of culture” (Douglas and Isherwood 1979:38), or as noted above, providing people with the means to say what they could not properly say with words (Auslander 2005). Or indeed, as Miller contends, serving either as “medium of objectification” that conjure, because they express, relationships across the miles (Miller 2010:13), or constitute relationships by allowing people to negotiate discrepancies between normative categories of idealized objects and their experiences with actual persons (Miller 2011:16). Rather, what is encountered is something akin to “a contested process of meaning-making” (Wright 1998:9), a process framed, shaped, and made possible by everyday material objects where meanings are twisted, re-worked, and stretched in new directions by differently positioned actors struggling to craft more desirable identities for themselves.

### Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge the financial support of the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) of the Philippine government, and the generosity of the University of Asia and the Pacific in granting me a full-year sabbatical from 2007 to 2008 in order to conduct the fieldwork. This article is based on a chapter of a dissertation I submitted to the University of the Philippines in 2009. An early draft was presented at the Ninth International Conference on the Philippines held at the Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, USA, from October 28 to 30, 2012.

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