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ENACTING EMBEDDEDNESS THROUGH THE TRANSNATIONAL TRAFFIC IN GOODS: THE CASE OF ILONGGO OFWS IN HONG KONG

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Abstract

This paper examines a transnational practice that re-inscribes migrant women in Hong Kong into the disempowering domestic spaces of home -- the regular sending of door-to-door boxes packed tight with goods for loved ones -- which however allows these very same women to simultaneously undermine structures of male domination at home. The practice thus acquires the character of what de Certeau (1984) calls a "guileful ruse," a tactical maneuver which allows participants to carve out spheres of relative autonomy within forms of gender domination that bind them to the process of social reproduction.

Data for this paper comes from multi-site fieldwork conducted between 2006 and 2008 in Hong Kong and in the Kinaray-a speaking municipality in Iloilo. This paper features five married migrant women and their respective households.

Introduction

With close to ten percent of the country's population working and/or residing in 214 countries and territories (CFO 2009), transnational families are increasingly becoming the norm in Philippine society (Parreñas 2005a, 30). This has given rise to what has been described as "global householding," a phenomenon where 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…"

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(Douglass 2006 quoted in Porio 2006, 3). "Global householding," according to Porio (2006), involves the "sharing [of] 'virtual pots' of material and nonmaterial (e.g., emotional labor/capital) resources across territories to sustain the household" (8). Thus, in the case of contemporary transnational or global households, transnational communication involves not only the flow of goods and money but also the flow of emotions (Parreñas 2005b, 317). This is the case for instance in "transnational mothering," a phenomenon where "migrant women attempt to relay intimacy when they reconstitute mothering to not only encompass breadwinning but also to include nurturing from afar" (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila 1997 cited in Parreñas 2005b, 319).

One notable aspect of global householding is the regular sending of consumer and other goods by overseas Filipinos to their families in the Philippines. That such a practice has deeper cultural significance is suggested by a finding that it is actually more expensive to send these goods from abroad, than it would be to send money that would allow receiving households to buy the same goods in the local markets where they are also largely available (McKay 2004a, 18). Indeed, one journalist who examined the practice more closely has asserted that these goods, which often come in huge "door-to-door" boxes, "were a way of reassuring folks back home that relationships remained intact despite the distance, that they had not been forgotten and were wished well." The boxes, it is said, are never really about their tightly packed contents (Rimban 2005, 2). Another article entitled "Love in a box," this time from a glossy in-flight magazine, has this to say of the practice: "Albeit materialistic in nature, it's living proof of our thoughtfulness, a tangible expression of care and concern from across the miles" (Mercado-Obias 2008, 100).

Yet, the regular door-to-door box and its contents do more than convey affection across national boundaries. The performance (as against mere signification) of intimacy made possible by the practice obscures a more complex process, something that not only "maps" migrants back into the household economy (McKay 2004b, 21) but in fact "re-embeds" them into the mesh of household relations --- that is, an attempt, as it were, to performatively reverse

the "lifting out" or abstraction of relations from localized contexts of interaction (Giddens 1991, 18) through the concrete and material particularity of the traffic in goods (Here, the migrant does not merely signify her engagement but effectuate it by acting as if she never really left). I must hasten to add, however, that this enactment of embeddedness is not reducible to the migrant's attempt at merely reproducing, in a transnational setting, her domestic identity at home (McKay 2004b, 19). In the context of the shifting configuration of relations constituting the bounded domestic space of home, the enactment of embeddedness in fact involves the assumption of new subject-positions by the migrant which, while deriving from her pre-migration domestic identities that reflect traditional constructions of femininity, e.g., as a mother and/or a wife she is expected to manage the family coffers and plan household expenditures (Sobritchea 2007, 176), now rest upon her access to and control of greater material resources. This process involves a struggle for autonomy that is for instance made transparent where and when the migrant, through her participation in the transnational traffic in goods, ventures to make consumption decisions over and against the wishes or preferences of family members.

This article forms part of a key research strand in migration that explores transnational householding processes as sites of ambivalence and contradiction. In particular, this includes studies that examine how migration has engendered ambivalent desires and feelings on the part of migrants (see Tacoli 1999; Constable 2002; McKay 2004b; Manalansan 2006 and Sobritchea 2007), desires that either indicate a competing sense of personhood that grows with prolonged stay overseas (Constable 2002) and/or prompt migrants to exploit opportunities for resisting traditional or conventional constructions of gender (Tacoli 1999; Sobritchea 2007). Of particular interest for this article is the work of McKay (2004b) which pays close analytical attention to the "everyday technologies of translocality" and their associated practices (e.g., the regular shipping by migrants to loved ones of boxes containing household goods). Aside from making transparent issues of power within transnational households, McKay points out how boxes sent home can actually create opportunities for renegotiating gendered expectations even

as they re-inscribe migrant women into the household economy (that is to say, even as the practice is itself a gendered process that reproduces their domestic identity at home).

Data for this article came from multi-site fieldwork conducted between 2006 and 2008 in Hong Kong (for participating migrant workers) and in the *Kinaray-a* speaking municipality ("Capan") in Iloilo where the households were based (note: with the exception of a few areas, particularly Iloilo City and the Northeastern coastal towns comprising mainly the 5th congressional district which speak Hiligaynon or "Ilonggo," inhabitants of the Province of Iloilo generally speak one variant of *Kinaray-a* or another as their native language). Four trips were undertaken between these sites. While preliminary interviews were conducted in July of 2006, the bulk of these engagements occurred between June of 2007 and April 2008. In these engagements, care had been taken not to force the subject matter of the study on the participants: thus, while specific questions were asked (questions regarding door-to-door boxes, for instance), participants were always given wide latitude to direct the course of the discussions or exchanges. Digressions were entertained or pursued as far as practicable. Similarly, participants were not prevented from tackling other topics, concerns or issues. Five married migrant women and their respective households are featured in this article.

A "guileful ruse"

This article explores how a transnational practice that re-inscribes these migrant women into the disempowering spaces of home also allows them to *simultaneously* undermine structures of male domination. I suggest that the traffic in goods is a way for migrant women to exercise direct control over consumption in their respective households, even as it also serves as a strategy for converting economic capital into emotional capital. I suggest further that this pursuit of emotional capital explains why women can be obstinately attached – *indi masaway* [cannot be admonished or talked out of] – to the practice despite the lack of appreciation or even opposition on the part of some family members. According

to Reay (2002), the concept of emotional capital "encompasses the emotional resources you hand on to those you care about" (5), which includes "knowledge, contacts and relations as well as access to emotionally valued skills and assets, which hold within any social network characterised at least partly by affective ties" (Nowotny 1981 quoted in Reay 2002, 5).

The traffic in goods acquires the character of what de Certeau (1984) calls a "guileful ruse" – a tactical move that plays on and takes advantage of "a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power" (37). It is a tricky maneuver where women carve out spheres of relative autonomy within forms of gender domination that bind them to the process of social reproduction. By making consumption decisions for the rest of the household and personalizing their generosity through their regular box of goods – tactical maneuvers that extend the effect of their economic dominance – migrant women bring about the further reshaping of gender roles and household relations by constricting the spaces of male power. I use the phrase "enactment of embeddedness" to mark off this register from the more strategic "performance of intimacy" whereby migrant women "map" themselves back into the emotional economy of their respective households and thus achieve, despite their physical absence from home, reasonably coherent narratives of the self. Needless to say, I invoke de Certeau's (1984) theoretical schema of *strategy* and *tactics* as a helpful way to theorize these contradictory logics.

This theoretical schema allows analysis to treat not only of the *strategic* and positional character of identities (especially in migration) but also of the *tactical* play of other interest and desires "that are neither determined nor captured by the systems in which they developed" (de Certeau 1984, xviii). Interestingly, this reveals the transgressive acts of migrants not only as they struggle to assume new subject positions within the household (i.e., their enactment embeddedness) but also as these same struggles inaugurate other dissonant and more prideful trajectories of self-making that are not completely determined by social reproduction and very clearly escape the confines of the household and the householding process. Thus, within and beyond the "enactment of embeddeness," I call

attention to the migrants' "performance of affluence and success" in migration. Not reducible to the process of social reproduction, the traffic in goods is disclosed also as a way to enact some form of affluence or material success vis-à-vis other relatives and neighbors, an idiom as well for relating the migrant's transformative journey of achievement (see Aguilar 2002).

Intimacy as a one-way street

While clearly the contents of the women's boxes reflect their engagement with the details of everyday life and with the needs of individual household members, the traffic in goods is nevertheless unilateral in character. The decision regarding what goods to send and, indeed, the decision to ship anything at all, are almost entirely the migrant's, and she too decides who should get what. A left-behind husband named Emil (57) said they do not really request his wife (Naida, 57) to send home boxes of goods. The items being sent are chosen by his wife and she ships them on her own initiative. Both his son Bitoy (23, his youngest child and only son) and sister-in-law Ading (62, one of the two unmarried sisters of Naida who have looked after her children since she left to work in Hong Kong as a domestic helper almost two decades ago), would confirm this. A similar claim was made by Alona's daughter, Laila (21). She said that they did not really request her mother for particular items when the latter was still in Hong Kong (Alona, 47, is an ex-OFW who once worked for close to a decade in Hong Kong as a domestic helper), and neither did her father, Natoy (47). In fact, Laila also said that her father told them to just be content with whatever was sent (*Ko-on ni Papa kung ano lang ang padara ni mama amo lang di-a*) [Papa told us not to want things other than what Mama sent us].

Jolly's older sister Mina (49), who has always looked after her younger sister's children, finds it odd that she still bothers to send home items like toothpaste (Jolly, 41 is now a relatively well-paid supervisor at a high-end bar in Hong Kong where she has worked since the mid-1990s, initially as a domestic helper). Both Jolly's teen-age children (Dhelia, 18 and Jon-Jon, 17) have also pointed out in separate conversations that they have no expectations about

receiving goods from their mother. Indeed, Jon-Jon has told me that he does not request his mother for anything. Mina supported this claim, although she could not say the same for Dhelia who, she claims, asks her mother to send her personal care items from time to time. Still, both Dhelia and Jon-Jon are one in saying that it is their mother's idea to send home these boxes of goods regularly. The same is true of two other migrant women, Ellen (53) and Pinang (57). Ellen's eldest, Jhoel (29), said that, with the exception of the hydraulic hose for use in their vulcanizing shop that they requested his mother to purchase in Hong Kong, it is not their practice to ask Ellen to ship home boxes goods. On the other hand, Pinang herself informed me that her family does not ask her for particular items nor do they have expectations about her having to send them boxes of goods on a regular basis.

The cases of Ellen and Pinang are quite revealing of how unilateral this traffic can be, and of the kind of contestations that such one-sidedness can bring about. Although aware of her grown-up children's lack of interest in tight-fitting Hong Kong-style clothes, Ellen, who has worked as domestic helper in Hong Kong since 1991, has only belatedly shifted her emphasis away from these mainly second-hand or used articles of clothing (*relip* – "relief" goods) to things like cleansers and soaps. As a consequence, the second floor of their house now serves as a storage area for large bags full of clothes that Jhoel and her youngest, Barry (23), do not want to use (her other son, Gerry, 26, is a seaman deployed abroad and a daughter, Joey, is already married and, like her mother, also works as domestic helper in Hong Kong). Even in her account of her decision to shift to other kinds of household items, Ellen did not so much recognize her sons' distaste for "Honkee" clothes as she came to terms with the inevitability of her gift of clothes either gathering dust at home or, worse, given away to other people. I first came to know of this issue from Ellen herself when she told me that her children do not really like the "fitting" style so popular in Hong Kong and that, apparently because of this, they have been wont to give the clothes away. Interestingly, a mere couple of months after our conversation, Ellen was no longer so certain about the reason for her sons' lack of enthusiasm for the clothes she has been sending home – she could

only speculate: perhaps the fit is not good, or maybe the style is not to their liking.

With Pinang, a domestic helper in Hong Kong since 1992, a similar aversion to the clothes displayed by her family did not result in a grudging shift to other, allegedly "more useful," goods. Her husband (Indok, 66) reportedly said the boxes of goods simply added to the clutter at home (*Nagatipon kang ramo...*) [Collecting litter/trash]. When she found out family members were giving away the items (and some of these were brand new), she appealed to them not to do so as the clothes were really intended for them. When they persisted, she asked her sister to whom her door-to-door boxes were usually consigned to withhold the goods. She and her sister then decided to start selling the goods in town. Her son Nonito (25) claimed that his mother's boxes often contained clothing that did not fit them. They tried telling their mother about it but she kept sending the wrong sizes. There was a problem too with the used clothes -- the styles are often at odds with the fashion trends here, and one would not want to be seen wearing them. Pinang herself has admitted that the clothes are too small but she has tried buying clothes with very large sizes to address the problem. Still it was her sense that, whether the clothes fit or not, they would still end up with their other relatives. It was when she failed to convince her immediate family not to give them away that Pinang decided divert the bulk of the traffic to her sister. These days, according to her, she is content to send money for tuition and allowance, especially for her youngest son Nonito.

Making consumption decisions

In all these instances, the insistence on sending goods from Hong Kong seems to be a way for the migrant to participate in the management of household resources. More to the point, by shipping what they think their respective families need in lieu of cash, Naida, Alona, Jolly, Ellen and Pinang all presumed to make consumption decisions for the rest of their respective households, while simultaneously denying other members the opportunity to make such decisions. The reasons given by some of them for these

boxes are quite revealing. Naida bluntly pointed out that she engages in the practice because if she sends shopping money the people at home might not buy the items she would want them to buy. The money could end up being used for something else. Also, in an exchange of text messages that came in the wake of one of my visits to Hong Kong, Naida complained that if it is cash it is never enough (*...man-an mo kon cash gani permi lang ginakulang!*). Alona, too, quite emphatically explained that one of the reasons why they keep sending these boxes is that it is one way to make sure that their families get exactly what they want them to have. If they send cash, it might be spent on some other things, although she stopped short of saying what these "other things" were (*Man-an mo to, kon kwarta gani basi kon sa di-in ma agto*) [You know *to*, if it's cash it might go to other things].

Pinang was of the same mind and just as unequivocal about her reason for sending boxes of goods home. She said that she would send things for use at home such as cleansers as well as clothes, claiming that if she gave members of her family money they will just spend it on other things (*Kon kwarta gani, sa iban nga butang naga agto*). She also revealed her desire to exercise some measure of control over their consumption behavior by saying that she does not want them to be buying too much from the stores because she believed that it is going to be more expensive in the long-run. The items identified by her son Nonito as the usual contents of her door-to-door box appear to reflect this. They include not only used and brand new clothes, toothpaste and canned goods, but also items for use at home (*gamit sa balay*) such as cups, plates, and other household utensils.

Noteworthy, too, are the ways in which migrants would often try to exert some measure of control over the distribution of goods. They would, for instance, label the items in the box with the names of the intended beneficiaries or recipients, although this was not done consistently. Emil, Naida's husband, also said that his wife would usually call to give instructions on how some items will be distributed (incidentally, their relatives and even their neighbors in Barangay Taculan would often be included in the distribution). Ellen was the same way according to her son, Jhoel, who informed

me in an oddly composed text message that his mother would label the goods but sometimes she would not, preferring instead to call them to specify who should get what (*My ara minsan wla ha ok! Gapanawag n lng sa telepono kon sin-o ngalan niya ha!!*) [She does, sometimes she does not *ha* ok! She just calls to give the name *ha*!!]. Bitoy, Naida's son, added that there would also be items or packages in the box that they will not touch as these are items that Naida herself would open/unpack and then distribute when she comes home for her yearly vacation. Pinang does this as well. Her son, Nonito, pointed out that his mother's box would also contain goods that she herself will distribute to other relatives when she comes home for vacation (these, he said, are usually used clothes).

Converting economic resources into emotional resources

It is important to point out that participation in the traffic in goods allows the migrant to exercise substantial control over the management of household resources while simultaneously performing generosity. I should note that generosity, particularly in the sense of *kaalwan*, is a highly valued trait among Kinaray-a and Hiligaynon speakers (the two languages spoken in the province). Generosity as *kaalwan* has a strong affective content and is generally taken as evidence of a kind heart, the word itself associated with being compassionate or merciful (*maloloy-on*) (see Kauffmann 1934). By sending boxes of goods instead of cash for shopping, and personally presiding over the distribution of these goods, usually from a distance, the migrant not only makes a range of consumption decisions for the rest of the household but also directly and personally engages its members. The intimacy, affection and *kaalwan* conveyed by the goods could allow the participants to each assume a dominant position vis-à-vis other household members and relatives beyond what their roles as primary, but physically absent, breadwinners would allow them. Assuming the performance to be successful, the familiarity and personalized form of generosity that the goods represent could transform the women from distant benefactors into personally involved providers. The goods and their specific trajectories help create an affective chain of obligation that allows

the migrants, despite their physical absence, to continue exercising influence over the lives of loved ones.

The traffic in goods, it would seem, confers a particular form of what Tacoli (1996 cited in McKay 2004b, 13) called "emotional advantage" (the latter described a condition where family members who benefit from money remitted by the migrant become obligated to her). As such, it serves as a strategy for converting economic capital into emotional capital (Reay 2002), or for converting financial resources into emotional resources that one hands on to those she cares about (Reay 2002, 5). The conversion occurs as the abstract and impersonal universality associated with money is replaced by the tactile particularity of goods that translates into (and, therefore, conveys) familiarity and intimacy (for a helpful discussion of the line between cash and gift, see Douglas & Isherwood 1996, 36-38). Here it can be argued that, from the point of view of the sending migrant at least, the kind of emotional advantage, or the state of obligatedness to the migrant procured by and through goods, is qualitatively different from that gained through cash remittances. It is thus easy to understand why, according to Ading, her sister Naida would not be talked out of the practice, that she was being obstinate (*indi masaway*), and why the latter found particularly irksome the suggestion (of her husband and her son) for her to instead send the cash equivalent. The point, it would seem, is precisely to avoid the impersonality of cash since, as far as she was concerned, her engagement in the practice is really about her feelings (*baratyagon*) for her loved ones.

Naida's disappointment (*sunggod*) regarding her daughters' attitude towards her participation in the traffic in goods is also illustrative of the subtle but all too real pursuit of emotional advantage. Despite her daughters' concern for her welfare (they want her to save the money so she can retire), a matter which she insisted she understood (*Ti, intiendihan ko man ra*), Naida chose to lament how their financial independence have led to a pragmatic view of things that fails to see what sending home the goods really mean to her. Naida not only complains about their inability to recognize her effort to communicate love through the shipment of goods, but in fact calls attention to their financial independence – i.e., to the fact

that they have ceased to depend on her for their needs, claiming this as the reason why they are no longer appreciative of her goods. The bigger issue for Naida is therefore the perceived shift in her relations with her daughters brought about by their employment, which has not only made them less cognizant of her affection but also more independent and therefore less attached to their mother. This, in effect, reduced the potential "emotional advantage" Naida could hope to gain vis-à-vis her daughters. Indeed, her daughters' pragmatism bears directly upon the convertibility of Naida's economic capital to emotional capital as it amounted to an erasure of the operative line separating gifts from their so-called "equivalent" value in cash (see Douglas & Isherwood 1996).

The link between the traffic in goods and the pursuit of emotional advantage is more clearly suggested by what Alona said when sharing her struggle to provide for her children's needs. With her, the regular flow of imported goods helps justify the separation they all had to endure as a family when she left to work in Hong Kong. She claimed to have told them that had their mother not gone to Hong Kong they would not have gotten a taste of these imported things (*… insa kon wa-ay sa Hong Kong si nanay ninyo maka tiraw kamo ka di-a haw?*) [...why, if your mother had not gone to Hong Kong would you get to enjoy these things?]. The enjoyment of imported goods is invoked by Alona not only as the symbol of her love for her children but also as the fruit of her willingness to endure separation, something that in turn entitled her to her children's love and respect. Indeed, Alona's expression of love for her children is bundled with her claim to their love and respect – a reclaiming of motherhood's entitlements believed to have been threatened by prolonged physical absence.

All these point to a more precise understanding of Pinang's frustration when she complained that she had to ask her husband and sons to desist from giving away to their relatives the brand-name clothes she bought for them, explaining that these were really meant for them (*Para tana di-a kaninyo*) and that she was giving something else to their relatives (these, according to Nonito, were usually second-hand or "relief" items). Here, the giving away by Pinang's husband and sons of the clothes she intended for them have undermined

her ability to convert economic resources to emotional resources, which she could hand on to loved ones left behind. The same may be said of Ellen's disappointment when she found out that her regular gift of used clothes and shoes, given to her by her employer, were either left unused or also passed on to other relatives by her husband Gener and their children. The giving away of the goods by intended recipients constitutes not only a rejection of the migrant's expression of intimacy but also, ultimately, an undermining of her pursuit of dominance constituted by and through intimacy. The way goods are implicated in the building and maintenance of (transnational) relationships reveals how the emotional could also, and at once, be political.

Performing affluence and success

Jolly's case shows, however, that the traffic in goods could work not only to facilitate the performance of intimacy, the making of consumption decisions for the rest of the household or the transformation of migrants from distant benefactors into caring providers. With her transition from domestic helper on short-term contract to bar supervisor and personal assistant earning more than PhP100,000 a month, Jolly's door-to-door box is also a way to present herself as an affluent patroness to those left behind. Her regular shipment of goods far exceeds those of the other participants' as these are not only meant for her immediate household but also for four other households in Barangay Amabulo. Her son Jon-Jon is particularly impressed with his mother's shipment, saying (he actually said it twice, at different times) that they are quite big, and that sometimes there would be two of them. These would come three times a year he said, particularly noting that there would always be something for everyone, including other relatives. Jolly, herself, in a somewhat muted boast, claimed that for the whole thing to be worth the expense, she would pack items collectively worth three times the amount she pays for the box (the one I saw in Amabulo was an Afreight "Bida" box, the biggest size for this particular forwarding company at 24"x24"x36").

By being the patroness through her regular shipment of goods,

Jolly highlights her dominant economic role vis-à-vis her immediate household, as well as those of her siblings and other relatives in Amabulo. One time, she proudly informed me that she bought a door-to-door box for a used air-conditioning unit she was sending to her family in Amabulo, saying in her usual playfully spirited tone that one of her children has been complaining of the heat. To the best of my knowledge, this would be the first air-conditioning unit in the neighborhood, if not in the entire barangay, and Jolly was quite happy to report the forthcoming shipment. Against a rustic backdrop, there is no doubt that the air-con unit, although not brand new, would be a prestige item – a very visible symbol of Jolly's generosity and financial capability. In another instance, this time involving a used T.V. set that she originally intended to give to one of her aunts, Jolly's performance of affluence, as patroness, more directly revealed her dominant positioning. Sounding a bit pompous, she said that she withheld the item because her aunt quarreled with her sister Diding (Mina's nickname) over their purchase of a piece of property. She said in Tagalog: *Inaway nya kasi si Diding eh, ayan wala syang T.V.* [She quarreled with Diding, so there, she is not getting a T.V. set].

Jolly is never shy about the material support she provides family members and other relatives, nor about her financial resources. In one exchange, when I made reference to Mina's house, she bluntly corrected me by saying that it was in fact her house (*Akin yan…*) [It's mine…] and that she was the one who spent for its construction. In fact, this was the second time for her to say that she was the one who spent for the house, having already made that claim the very first time I met her in Hong Kong a few months earlier. In another conversation the day after that very first encounter, after supplying me with details of the financial assistance she extends to her siblings (this one was upon my request), Jolly playfully claimed that she has a lot of "charity" in the Philippines (*Marami akong charity sa Pilipinas*). Although unhappy with the way her generosity has often been overlooked by relatives, or with the dependence of some of her siblings, Jolly is nevertheless firm about her decision to help them --- it's just money (*pera lang yan*), she nonchalantly pointed out.

The success of this performance was apparent when Jolly

came home to Amabulo for the barangay fiesta and the *hukas lalaw*, the traditional lifting of the mourning period for her parents. I had a distinct impression that her siblings and relatives generally deferred to her, and she going about as if very much in charge of things (she of course made no secret of the fact that she was the one who shouldered the expenses for the two events). The prestige she enjoyed was quite obvious in her being looked upon as some sort of a "financier." Relatives and friends who came to visit them sought her out to greet her, and at least one visiting relative publicly referred to her as *manggaranon* [rich]. Jolly made no effort to deny this tag or be self-effacing as was perhaps customary in such situations.

This performance of affluence may be explained by the circumstances surrounding Jolly's decision to go abroad. A single parent and a factory worker in Cainta before she left the country, Jolly said that her reason for working abroad was to provide for her children. And although her sister Mina was willing to help her, and there were others she could count on for support, she said that she did not want to depend on other people's generosity (this was said in Tagalog: *…syempre mahirap kung kailan ka lang abutan*) [...of course, it was really hard just relying on other people's generosity]. A bit later in the same conversation, she implied how her trips to the mall with her children would often remind her about their financial situation. For Jolly, the decision to work abroad was fueled by her desire not only to end her poverty but also to end her dependence – her children's future may have been important reasons, but so was her pursuit of a new sense of personhood, one that is not at the receiving end of other people's generosity. This helps to explain why, with her well-paying job in Hong Kong, she now also plays the affluent migrant who is a generous benefactor to her own household, her siblings and their families, as well as other relatives – such generosity marks the complete reversal of her pre-migration situation.

It is important to note here that the inclusion of people in the distribution of goods outside the migrant's household is not only true with Jolly. Indeed, this is the case with most – four out of five – of the migrant women who participate (or participated) to any significant degree in the transnational traffic in goods. With Naida's box, for instance, her husband Emil has reported that the contents

are individually named and intended not only for members of the Tejada household but also for his wife's relatives in Sitio Camaga-on (*mga tawo sa uma*) [people in the farm] and even their neighbors in Barangay Taculan. Parenthetically, the term *mga tawo sa uma* [people in the farm], which Naida also uses, is slightly pejorative since this implicitly involves contrasting "farm-dwellers" with "town-dwellers," and to be called *taga uma* denotes lack of sophistication. Naida usually calls to give instructions on how the items will be distributed although her son, Bitoy, said that there would also be packages or items that his mother would herself open or unpack and personally distribute when she come home for vacation. Pinang, too, notwithstanding her comparatively meager resources, would ship goods that she will personally distribute to other relatives once she is home. These goods, according to her son Nonito, were usually "relief" items or used clothes.

Alona, who claimed to have shipped as many as four large boxes a year that would be so full she needed to sit on top of them to cram the contents in, also regularly included close relatives and neighbors in her distribution. She, one time, explained to her apparently annoyed employer that some of the items that threatened to crowd her out of her small room in the flat were for her siblings back home. But more can actually be said about Alona's boxes: Talking about them usually paved the way for her to regale me with her experiences working abroad. She was quite proud of what she has achieved in life – finding work abroad, learning new things and encountering all kinds of people from different cultures, experiencing the modern life in Hong Kong (and later, in England and Finland) and having used her income to acquire land, to build a house and to provide her children with education.

The box and its contents, particularly in the way they serve as markers of material abundance and as symbols of modernity for a rural and farming community, seem to have also become, for Alona, something akin to what Hoskins (1998) calls "biographical objects" – by becoming closely associated with her exploits abroad, the box and the imported items with which it is crammed, has also become a potent trigger for her to share her personal journey of achievement and triumph, a point of departure in a narrative process constitutive

of a new sense of personhood. And really, Alona's storytelling and dramatic performances were notable. To emphasize the high points of her stories (usually about how she dealt with challenging situations abroad), she would often point her finger at me while having this dagger look on her face, quickly following up with a sharp clap, a kind heaving turn, or sometimes a few lines in accented English of what she claimed to have said to foreigners.

Perhaps the more striking instances of this performance of affluence (although this time not coming out of the box) were those actually directed at me. During my second visit to Hong Kong, I spent an afternoon with Naida going around Central. After our snack at Delifrance which, like the lunch we shared when I first visited, she insisted on paying, we went to a discount store (Pricesmart) across Des Voeux Road where Naida again insisted on buying chocolates for me to bring home. Later, she would prevail on me to allow her to pick up the tab for the three pairs of socks I selected at a Bossini outlet. It does not end here. On my third visit, Naida gifted me with a blue long-sleeved shirt and a pair of cuff links. Jolly, the bar supervisor, was certainly no different. In the bar in Lan Kwai Fong where she works, all my attempts to pay for drinks and snacks have been effectively thwarted. Members of the bar staff were apparently instructed by her not to accept any payment from me. Accompanying her and the children at a mall in Iloilo City one afternoon during her vacation, Jolly vigorously insisted on paying for the shirt I took a fancy on. As if to justify her impromptu generosity, she later showed me the thick wad of cash in her bag, and jokingly asked me if she still had to return the money to the bank (*Ibalik ko pa ba to sa banko?*). Apparently, she withdrew too much cash due to the piling up of expenses in the wake of her brother's motorcycle accident.

I was never comfortable with these displays of generosity, yet each time I felt that I had no choice but to accept them. Perhaps they were ways of showing hospitality, but they have also achieved for these migrant women an important social feat. In these instances, the scion of a local political clan who also belongs to a family of university-educated professionals was at the receiving end of their generosity. The significance of such enactments becomes clearer when we revisit a key Kinaray-a/Hiligaynon term for generosity – *kaalwan*.

The notion of *kaalwan*, as already pointed out, has strong resonance among Kinaray-a and Hiligaynon speakers. Its association with being compassionate and merciful [*maloloy-on*] notwithstanding, *kaalwan* as beneficence signals a nobility of character similar to what Enriquez claimed for the Tagalog *kagandahang lo-ob* (Enriquez 1992, 45) and, quite significantly, also a measure of material affluence as the word is also used to signify "bounteous" and "bountiful" in Kauffmann's *Visayan (Hiligaynon)-English Dictionary* (1934). To be *maalwan* towards somebody, especially a non-relative, elevates a person vis-à-vis the object of her generosity both in a moral sense because of her character, i.e., her inherent graciousness and beneficence, and in a material sense by providing evidence of her capacity to be generous.

Conclusion: Other interests, other desires

One problem with focusing analysis on relations of nurturing between mothers and their children is the tendency to bracket off of other processes, relations and roles that are implicated when a migrant mother weaves herself into the mesh of household relations (see for instance, Parrenas 2005a). Evidently, the migrant is not only trying to nurture her children from afar. As the cases above provisionally show, she could also be a homemaker claiming her right to make consumption decisions for the rest of the household, a generous and personally involved provider who goes to great lengths to allow family members a taste of life abroad, a breadwinner bent on closely monitoring investments in her children's education, an affluent migrant acting as patroness/benefactor to her siblings and their respective families, a mother who tries hard to be a friend to her children, or the head of a household trying to manage conflicts and tensions at home. These performances are not only overlapping but are also, in some instances, potentially contradictory – as shown by the case of Jolly who is struggling to negotiate a position between being a mother and being a friend to her children.

But more than the shifting and fragmented character of identities is revealed here: The performances made possible by the traffic in goods, performances that extend the effects of migrant women's economic dominance, are enactments that run

simultaneously with the performance of intimacy where the same women attempt to play conventional domestic roles. Seeming extensions of pre-migration identities that reflect traditional constructions of femininity, these performances involve the carving out by women of counter-spheres within forms of domination that bind them into caring and nurturing roles within the household. They have, in the words of Fleming (2002), "[changed] the trajectory of controls and quietly [challenged] power relations without necessarily leaving them" (Fleming 2002, 194). In making consumption decisions for the rest of the household through their regular box of goods, for instance, migrant women use the dominant cultural logic of familial intimacy and domesticity in a manner that opens up spheres of relative autonomy within the household (201) – that is, by attempting to exercise control over the consumption behaviors of other household members. The same may be said of the women's effort to convert financial resources into emotional capital: By personalizing their generosity through the goods, migrant women attempt to procure the obligatedness of household members in ways that the abstract impersonality of cash remittances cannot.

The traffic in goods serves as an idiom, not only for performing intimacy but also for enacting embeddedness – a process that further reshapes gender roles and reconfigures household relations. Where migrant mothers insinuate themselves into the everyday lives of loved ones left behind, they are doing so no longer as economic dependents nor as subordinate providers playing supporting economic roles, nor exclusively as providers of emotional care, but as primary breadwinners surreptitiously altering the calculus of domestic power. Their income and access to modernity that come with living and working in a wealthy and cosmopolitan city like Hong Kong, as well as the physical distance that separate them from their families, certainly create spaces for the renegotiation of pre-existing identities.

The case of Jolly also shows that, with enough resources the traffic in goods could even allow the migrant woman to essay the somewhat feudal role of a local "big shot," one whose generosity makes her the object of deference among relatives. It is interesting to note, however, that even without the kind of financial resources that

Jolly has, the flow of goods is rarely confined to migrant women's households. In almost all cases of participation in the traffic in goods examined in this study, the distribution includes other relatives outside of the household and, in at least two cases, neighbors. This suggests that the tendency to enact affluence is not confined to Jolly but is something that may occur generally. The practice may be better understood in the context of the Kinaray-a/Hiligaynon concept of *kaalwan*. Translated either as "generosity" or "beneficence," the term also reflects a state of being bountiful (Kauffman 1934). It implies that a person has the means to be generous even as it also reflects a kind of inner nobility that makes her or him worthy of respect. These performances of affluence and material success indicate that the struggle of migrant women to assume new subject positions through the traffic in goods ultimately involve dissonant trajectories of self-making that are neither completely determined by the process of social reproduction nor confined to the household and to householding. Although linked at one level to social reproduction, the traffic in goods is clearly not reducible to this process.

In an important sense, therefore, the traffic in goods acquires a "tactical" character: Although pursued by migrant women within the confines of gendered norms and ideologies that locate them within the process of social reproduction, their attempt to weave themselves through their goods into the mesh of household relations "trace out the ruses of other interests and desires that are neither determined nor captured by the systems in which they develop" (de Certeau 1984, xviii). It reveals both the struggle for coherent narratives of the self by Ilonggo migrant women as displaced individuals, and the multiple subjectivities they are capable of inhabiting as diasporic subjects. A double operation is detected: A transnational practice that reproduces hegemonic gender relations by re-inscribing women into the bounded, private and domestic spaces of home, the traffic in goods nevertheless allows these very same women to occupy new subject positions that subvert what in effect would be the remaining structures of male domination in the household. Such ambivalence shows how labor migration can increase the potential for power to be negotiated, contested and re-valued in everyday life, even within the constraints of gender, post-colonialism and globalization (see

Cannell 1999; Victorin-Vangerud 2002, 1-2).

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