Unboxing the Balikbayan Box: Photographic Rupture and the Limits of Performing Diasporic Care

In 2011, one year after immigrating to Canada, my mother assembled her first balikbayan box. She was eager to fill the largest size available. At just over 3 feet tall, the brown cardboard box reached the height of my chest. I was nine years old then. The box was printed with the freight company's name "UMAC"[1] in large, blue bolded letters, alongside a list of provincial branch numbers on its sides. At the beginning of summer, my mother assembled the box in our warm Winnipeg basement, carefully wrapping the bottom with layers of duct tape. Over the next three months, she slowly filled it with what she considered to be staple household items, including bulk packs of soap, shampoo bottles, and toothpaste. There were brand new clothes and accessories that she had bought from Walmart and Superstore, such as blouses and hand bags for the aunties, polo shirts and baseball hats for the uncles, and school supplies for the cousins. She packed everything strategically, knowing that freight charges were calculated by size and not weight. She made every crevice count.

My mother has the tendency to overwork herself and, symptomatically, she sweat profusely. Each year I watched her spend hours packing balikbayan boxes, labelling each item with a relative's name and rearranging them to make sure everything fits. Her sweat would drip on the box as she bent over it, and each droplet slowly seeped into the fibers of the cardboard. I had always wondered if our relatives in the Philippines would notice this. Would they feel or smell her sweat, somehow? Reflecting back on my seemingly-absurd questions as a child, I was really wondering if our relatives were aware of my mother's hard work. Would the balikbayan box make my mother's labor legible across the Pacific Ocean?

I begin with this story because it captures the dense layering of labor and affect that often goes unnoticed in such transnational exchanges. Upon receiving and opening the

[1] UMAC Forwarders Express, Inc., a major player in the balikbayan box industry, was officially incorporated in 2003, though its operations began in 1988 under a predecessor company. Named after Teodoro "Uncle Mac" Cariño, the company honors his role in revitalizing the balikbayan box business in the U.S.

balikbayan boxes, my relatives would send pictures—via Facebook—to my mother, but what these photographs concealed are the hours my mother spent taping and packing, and the summer she spent bargain-hunting. These moments that dwell outside the frame are just as important as what the photographs display. My mother's sigh of relief upon seeing these photographs was not only about seeing her family happy, but about the boxes arriving intact, the performance of care completed, and the fragile choreography of kinship and responsibility across distance momentarily secured for another year.

These 2011 photographs are the first in a series, repeated over the years whenever my family sent a balikbayan box home. As I revisit them now, I notice a quiet, gradual shift. By 2014, the balikbayan boxes were smaller and fewer; and by 2019, clothing and accessories were no longer purchased brand new, and non-perishable food grew sparse. In the final photograph of my mother's photo album, taken in 2019, my grandfather sits alone at the center of the frame, holding a drawstring short my father outgrew. He does not pose or smile for the camera. This image carries a quiet ache, or what Roland Barthes calls the punctum: the "element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me [...] this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument" (Barthes 26). I locate this punctum not only in the photograph itself, but in my family's archive of balikbayan images and in the fading ritual of opening them, a practice tethered to the circulation of goods and the careful calibration of distance. Rather than seeking to resolve this wound, my paper turns to toward the punctum to dwell in its rupture, attending to the temporal fraying of a diasporic ritual. What happens when the choreography of diasporic intimacy—once so carefully staged, materially sustained, and visually documented—encounters precarity and its own limits?

Using my family's archive of balikbayan photographs from 2011, 2014, and 2019, I explore how these images register both a material exchange and the affective, relational labor

of transnational Filipinx[2] life. As fewer people gather over the years to open the balikbayan boxes, the photographs begin to reveal the fragility and temporal limits of this diasporic ritual. I read these absences as constitutive elements of my family archive, attending to what the images show alongside what has receded or disappeared. This paper asks: what happens when the performance of diasporic intimacy falters, and how might photographs—especially those taken by and of family—register such rupture in ways that both reveal and conceal it? As Svetlana Boym observes, "diasporic intimacy … is not opposed to uprootedness and defamiliarization but constituted by it" (499), and it emerges "through stories and secrets," through gestures that "imply subtly" rather than speak plainly (499). For Boym, intimacy in diaspora is never fully at home, rather it is "spoken in a foreign language that reveals the inadequacies of translation," marked by an awareness of its own instability and shaped by "collective frameworks of memory that encapsulate even the most personal of dreams" (499). Within this framework, I consider how family photographs documenting the ritual of opening balikbayan boxes both sustain and unravel this fragile intimacy. These images are intimate insofar as they gesture toward a shared history and futurity mediated by absence, migration, and the emotional labor of care. Yet they also record the strain of repetition—the performance of familial closeness persists, even as the photographs quietly register its exhaustion, accumulating soft ruptures over time.

Balikbayan boxes and their photographic documentation are often read as materializations of care, familial love, and transnational belonging (Garfield 2020; Patzer 2018; Yap et al. 2021). I argue, however, that the gradual disappearance of people, gifts, and moments of celebration in my family's archive of balikbayan photographs marks a rupture within these very performances of diasporic intimacy. Drawing on affect theory and feminist

[2] I use the term "Filipinx" as a gender-inclusive term that resists the default masculine and heteronormative framing embedded in the word Filipino. The "x" disrupts the colonial and patriarchal linguistic structures inherited from Spanish rule, while also signaling solidarity with queer, trans, and nonbinary members of the diaspora. This choice follows broader decolonial and queer feminist efforts to make language more inclusive of diverse Filipinx identities.

critiques of labor, I read these images as sites of affective breakdown, where capitalist fantasies of diasporic success and the heteronormative figure of the selfless Filipina[3] caregiver begin to unravel. This rupture is not only personal but structural as it gestures toward the quiet exhaustion and emotional costs that accompany the ongoing labor of sustaining familial obligation across distance. Attending to personal memory, family history, and scholarly frameworks together, I approach these balikbayan photographs as a method of bridging affective memory and critical analysis, and as a site where gendered domestic gestures, affective labor, and diasporic intimacy converge.[4]

To further contextualize these images, I conducted an oral interview with my mother, who responded in Taglish (a blend of Tagalog and English), about her motivations and emotional investments in sending balikbayan boxes to her relatives in the Philippines over the years. Her narrative offers insight into the intimate negotiations of care, obligation, and identity that shape Filipinx diasporic life, particularly for Filipinx women navigating expectations of self-sacrifice and familial duty from afar. By placing these photographs in conversation with her account, I adopt a diasporic feminist methodology that treats the family archive as both affective evidence and cultural critique, one in which personal memory expands and reframes dominant aspirational narratives of migration and success.

What's in the Frame?: Performing Diasporic Care and Sustaining Familial Intimacy

What is a balikbayan box? At its most literal, it is a corrugated cardboard box sent by overseas Filipinxs to family in the Philippines, typically filled with nonperishable food,

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[3] I use the term "Filipina" here deliberately to name a historically gendered and heteronormative figure produced through labor regimes of care and migration, rather than as a general marker of identity, for which I use Filipinx throughout the essay.

[4] In writing this paper, I am inspired by Isa Carlin's articulation of a dialectical relationship between academic and personal voice as they have articulated in their MA thesis, "Archives for a New World: Revolutionary Personal Records in the Filipino-Canadian Diaspora." Carlin's words were able to help me navigate my own relationship with personal and familial archival materials, specifically photographs, and my hesitation to put them in conversation with my academic work using my own "academic voice." Their approach encouraged me to reflect on a set of family photographs, which I will sharing in this essay, depicting moments of my relatives in the Philippines opening balikbayan boxes sent by my mother from Canada.

hygiene products, clothing, and small household items. Yet, as many Filipinx scholars have shown, the balikbayan box is more than a container of goods, but a vessel for emotional labor, gendered obligation, and the maintenance of diasporic intimacy across distance (Alburo 2005; Camposano 2012, 2018; Hof 2018; de Mata 2022). Beyond material contents, these boxes carry gestures of affection, guilt, duty, and longing—some made visible in photographs taken at the moment of receipt, while many remain unseen. Drawing on Tina Campt's reading of Black vernacular photographs as participating in a "structure of feeling" organized around aspiration, that is "to be someone; to be proud and good-looking, respectable and upstanding… to betterment and middle-class prosperity" (Campt 150), I read my family's balikbayan photographs as similarly saturated with such aspiration. They attempt to visualize care, success, and familial closeness, even as these performances strain under the weight of distance and economic precarity. It is within the fractures of these diasporic performances that my paper dwells in.

I begin with the act of looking. I attend closely to what is held within each photograph's frame. The 2011 balikbayan photographs were taken in my aunt's living room in their Antipolo home (a city in the Province of Rizal, east of Manila), the image shows three large balikbayan boxes: one upright on a wooden chair, the other two stacked horizontally on another chair (Figure 1.1). One box bears a shipping label with both sender and recipient clearly legible. As I study the photograph closely, I notice that my mother had listed me as the sender instead of herself. When I asked her about this, she replied, "Para alam nila na galing sayo!" (So they know it's from you!). I was only ten years old then—incapable of giving in any material sense. My relatives knew this, and they also knew that the labor and expense were my mother's. The gesture does not erase her work so much as reroute its meaning, allowing care to circulate through my name while remaining anchored in her. My mother's attribution marks a quiet enactment of what Marianne Hirsch calls

transmission. By naming me—her eldest child—as the sender, my mother inscribes me into a lineage of giving and obligation that structures the ritual economy of the balikbayan box. The gesture inducts me into the rhythms of transnational care work and to the expectations that accompany it. The box becomes both object and rehearsal, inviting me to carry forward what she has long sustained. Growing up, I felt a persistent pull to help my mother prepare these boxes, and I now help her prepare them, folding myself into their seasonal regularity and emotional weight. Care, once transmitted, settles into practice.

This seemingly minor moment, captured in the photograph and reaffirmed in my conversation with my mother, further calls to mind Hirsch's concept of postmemory, which she frames not as identity but as a generational structure of transmission. As Hirsch writes, "family life, even in its most intimate moments, is entrenched in a collective imaginary shaped by public, generational structures of fantasy and projection and by a shared archive of stories and images that inflect the transmission of individual and familial remembrance" (Hirsch 114). My family's balikbayan photographs, including those from 2014 and 2019, participate in such an archive. They function as sites where affective ties are staged and where the responsibilities and desires of migration are quietly passed on. Photographs from a lost past world invite us to look "not only for information or confirmation, but also for an intimate material and affective connection" (116). Through repeated encounters with these images, I have come to understand how my own pull toward this cycle of giving was shaped less by explicit instruction than by the accumulation of gesture, image, and narrative over the years.

The next three photographs show family on my mother's side, such as aunts and cousins, unpacking the balikbayan boxes and so absorbed in the activity they do not look at the camera (Figure 1.2). Instead, the images capture small moments of affective play: an aunt tries on a red gingham hat, and a cousin poses briefly in a Santa hat, then a sheer scarf. In

another frame, another cousin lifts a pair of white sneakers, tilting them to inspect the soles with a faint grin—perhaps gauging fit, or perhaps savoring the gesture itself (Figure 1.3). These subtle acts register relational intimacy enacted through touch and shared attention to the box's contents.

Subsequent photographs shift from bodies to provisions. Two aunts crouch beside piles of groceries—Maxwell House instant coffee, Cheerios, Tetley Orange Pekoe tea, sachets of oatmeal (Figure 1.4). In the next image, the goods are neatly arranged in a corner of the living room. There's Colgate toothpaste, Jell-O, canned luncheon meat, Pot of Gold chocolates (Figure 1.5). These items reflect what my mother has long deemed "essentials," or nonperishables, hygiene products, and small indulgences that signal care. As Clement Camposano notes, the assorted contents of the balikbayan box "conjure a sense of familiarity with—indeed, of intimate involvement in—the lives of loved ones and the everyday life of the household" (Camposano 80). These are things for and into the body, materials that sustain daily life and "re-inscribe migrant women into the domestic and intimate spaces of home" (81).

My mother explains that these items were "sobrang mahal" (very expensive) in the Philippines, and often inaccessible or considered luxuries by our relatives. Their cost transforms them into prized commodities, valued not only for their material worth but for what they signify: provision and attentiveness to the everyday needs of family back home. Following Camposano, I read these images as a form of "transnational grocery shopping" (80), in which "[s]hopping for these goods and sending them home is, in fact, a gendered process that reproduces women's domestic identity and affectively re-embeds them in their translocal household" (75). Through this practice, the domestic identity and maternal presence of migrant Filipinx women are performed and extended across distance, enacted through intimate knowledge of household needs and gendered labor.

The final photograph from the 2011 archive captures my relatives posing for the camera, some holding up items from the boxes as they smile (Figure 1.6). These small yet deliberate acts of holding, smiling, and posing perform acknowledgment and reciprocity. In staging joy and appreciation, they produce an affective feedback loop for the sender. As Camposano writes, such moments are part of a visual economy of intimacy, "conjuring up a sense of quotidian involvement in the lives of loved ones," while allowing "migrant women [to] carve out spheres of relative autonomy within forms of gender domination that bind them into place as providers of care" (82). My mother reflects: "Parang nandoon na rin ako kasama sila" (It's like I'm also there with them). The balikbayan box thus becomes both vessel and stage for maternal care and for diasporic connection.

These photographs also function as a visual return gift, a way of signaling that the labor of sending has been received and emotionally acknowledged. Their circulation extends the affective life of the balikbayan box beyond the physical exchange of goods, carrying care forward into the visual and digital realm. I use the term affective life here to refer to the emotional work my mother invests in assembling these boxes, like selecting items with particular recipients in mind and anticipating the pleasure or relief they might bring. Earvin Charles Cabalquinto observes that "transnational family members rely on the visuality of photographs to display familial roles and duties, and therefore enable a sense of imagined co-presence" (1609), and these images allow the sender to feel emotionally present within the receiving household, despite geographic separation. In carefully staging these scenes and sending them back to us in Canada via social media, my relatives participate in a reciprocal act of care, one that confirms the box's arrival while reaffirming the relationships it is meant to sustain. The photograph thus becomes a medium through which transnational kinship is performed, recognized, and made durable, momentarily collapsing distance through affective display.

Figure 1.1

Figure 1.2

Figure 1.3

Figure 1.4

Figure 1.5

Figure 1.6

Ruptures Creeping in the Frame

The 2014 balikbayan photographs capture a scene that, at first glance, echoes the 2011 photographs. The boxes are unpacked and photographed in various stages of dispersion. For the most part, they are similar, but this time there are some significant changes—or rather, absences. The photos were taken in my mother's home barrio in the province of Rizal, about a five-hour drive north of Manila—a return to a more rural familial center. The first photograph in this series captures two smaller UMAC boxes, tightly sealed with layers of duct tape, sitting side by side on the white tiled floor (Figure 2.1). The reduction in both the size and number of boxes is what I dwell on as it marks a shift in scale that reflects a change in our family's economic situation.

In the interview, my mother reviews these photographs and explains, "Nag mahal na ang bilihin kasi dati, gaya ngayon. No budget [...] hindi na natin kayang magpadala ng marami" (Things got more expensive back then, like today. No budget [...] we can't afford to send as much). This material change registers in the very dimensions of the boxes themselves, revealing how transnational acts of care are shaped by economic precarity and geographic shifts. These smaller boxes carry the weight of diasporic strain, making visible the quiet recalibrations of familial obligation across borders. Rather than simply indicating less, I read them as signifying the uneven labor and emotional negotiations—of navigating complex feelings of guilt, duty, fatigue—required to sustain this ritual under such changing conditions.

The balikbayan boxes' contents, as captured up-close in some photos, consists of similar items in the 2011 series, such as: Maxwell House instant coffee, bars of soap, luncheon meat, Hereford Vienna sausages, Chips Ahoy! cookies, boxes of spaghetti noodles, sugar, Nutella, Reese's chocolates (Figure 2.2 and 2.3). These Western goods continue to stand in for my mother's desire to provide "essentials" continents. When I asked her about

these choices, she explained: "Kasi itong mga pagkain dito sa Canada, like yung Nutella, Chips Ahoy!, ganyan, they are so expensive in the Philippines. And sila tita mo, mga pinsan mo, wala silang pambili. Pero dito, mura lang, like two Dollars before. Kaya natin bilhin. Gusto ko rin i-share yung mga pagkain natin dito sa Canada dun sa kanila tita mo" (Because the food in Canada, like Nutella, Chips Ahoy!, and the like, are so expensive in the Philippines. And your aunties, your cousins, they don't have the money to buy them. But here, it's affordable, like two Dollars before. I want to share the food here in Canada with your aunties). Her intention wasn't to show off success, but to share pleasure and experience.

Vicente Rafael, in his article "'Your Grief Is Our Gossip': Overseas Filipinos and Other Spectral Presences," frames the balikbayan[5] as both a symbol of diasporic care and a structure of U.S. imperial residue. I extend this to think about the balikbayan box. While the box is often read—by both the sender and recipient—as a gesture of familial devotion, it also reveals the uneven structures of global capitalism. Rafael writes that balikbayans relate to the Philippines more as visitors than as citizens because "Being a balikbayan depends on one's permanent residence abroad," he writes, "as if one were a tourist" (Rafael 270). Balikbayans are often alienated from the Philippine nation-state, positioned instead as sentimental figures tethered to family and hometown rather than to national belonging. As such, even their return becomes overdetermined by tourism logics, where "native handicrafts and local food packaged as fragments of the bayan available for purchase" (270). The goods in the balikbayan box, then, can be seen as part of this commodified exchange, where care travels through objects that are themselves marked by empire. Still, Rafael's critique sits in tension with my mother's explanation. Her desire to share "Canadian food" is not about upholding Western superiority but about bridging distance and sharing her newly-built life in the

[5] A balikbayan—which literally means "returning home" in Tagalog—refers to a Filipinx who has been living overseas and returns to the Philippines, either to visit or for good.

diaspora through sensory experience. These boxes carry the burden of both histories: the afterlives of colonial capitalism and the tenderness of a family member's love.

The final photograph in the 2014 archive shows a slightly messier, more chaotic scene (Figure 2.4). The box is fully open and its contents are scattered across the floor and on a wooden bench. A tangle of used Walmart plastic bags, originally wrapped around potentially leaky items, spills out from the box's mouth. One cousin poses for the camera with a smile, holding two items—one appears to be a bottle of medication, the other a box of food. Another cousin looks down, inspecting an item in their hands, while my aunt stands on right hand side of the box, unwrapping something from a plastic. This photograph, like those before it, stages the exchange as a scene of pleasure and recognition. Yet there is a certain weariness here too, that of a visual fatigue in the repetition of poses, in the slightly disordered arrangement of the scene. Fewer family members appear in the frame, and those present seem less engaged with the camera, absorbed instead in unwrapping or inspecting the items. What remains visible is the effort to sustain the ritual, even as participation dwindles. The photograph documents the shrinking circle of people who gather around it. In this way, the image reveals how diasporic rituals continue even in their attenuation, and how the performance of care persists, even when its participants begin to fade.

Despite the temporal distance between these photographs and the earlier ones, the contents remain largely the same. This continuity speaks to an enduring script of what constitutes as "essentials" in transnational caregiving. The persistence of these Western items reflect not just taste or preference, but a larger history of colonial desire, global capitalism, and the politics of provision. The repetition of these close-up photos forms a kind of visual grammar of care, a genre of documentation that asserts the sender's ability to provide and the recipient's embodied gratitude. Yet, these imported goods also mark a participation in a transnational circuit where care is made legible through Western commodities; and these

circuits are shaped by global circuits of labor and consumption, as in routes that are carved out by empire, migration, and economic necessity. The goods they contain, from brand-name snacks to toiletries and over-the-counter medications, come laden with the weight of Western dominance and a global economy that continues to privilege certain nations over others (Rafael). Thus, familial affection becomes inseparable from the exchange of consumer goods, and sentimental attachments are expressed through the language of material abundance. It became clear that, in 2014, financial strain—not disinterest—was behind the rupture. The box grew smaller, but the intentions remained the same.

Figure 2.1

Figure 2.2

Figure 2.3

Figure 2.4

Making My Mother's Sweat Visible

In the final set of balikbayan photographs, taken in 2019, something feels markedly different. The first image shows my grandfather at the center of the frame, looking down at an old pair of shorts once worn by my father (Figure 3.1). In front of him, close to the camera, is an opened balikbayan box, still full of unpacked second-hand clothes. Resting at

the top of the box is my pink varsity jacket from when I was in Grade 5, a bright relic of my childhood now made into a gift. In the next photograph, my grandfather stands up and slips into the jacket, fastening the snap buttons (Figure 3.2). It wraps tightly on his frame. Unlike previous years, there are no familiar flashes of Nutella jars, no bags of chips or bottles of shampoo. According to my mother, she couldn't afford to send any food, hygiene products, or brand new clothes that year. The cost of living in Vancouver continued to soar, and as a part-time retail employee, the best she could manage was to send a small-sized UMAC box with what we already had: clothes we no longer wore or outgrew.

Returning to the photograph that anchors this essay—my grandfather seated alone, holding a pair of worn shorts—I'm struck by how this image defies the aspirational grammar so often embedded in family photography (Campt 2012; Phu and Brown) 2018. Unlike the 2011 and 2014 series, these 2019 photographs no longer showcase the typical markers of prosperity; there's no beaming family members, no displays of new consumer goods, no gathering. Instead, they capture the residue of a different kind of care, one shaped not by accumulation, but by what remains when aspirations are no longer economically sustainable. Phu and Brown suggest that the genre of family photography tends to "erase the precarity of middle-class status by indexing capitalism's aspirations" (Phu and Brown 155), privileging scenes of abundance while masking the emotional and financial strain that underlies them. But what happens when the aspiration falters? When, instead of brand-new goods, all that can be sent are old clothes?

In these 2019 balikbayan photographs, a moment that captures my grandfather quietly fastening the buttons of my old pink jacket, we see a rupture in that aspirational visual script. The photograph does not mask precarity. It quietly reveals it. My mother's inability to send brand-name goods is not a failure but a testament to the shifting contours of care and survival. This is not a photo of aspiration fulfilled, instead it is a photo of care redistributed

and of sacrifice made visible. As Phu and Brown write, “Family photography both expresses and provokes mixed feelings” (155), and these images do precisely that. They hold together affection and discomfort, intimacy and unease. They are haunted by what lies beyond the frame, such as the rising costs of rent and shipping, the hours of waged labor required to earn what little could be sent, the distance that makes the balikbayan box necessary in the first place. The photographs offer no resolution, no reassurance that sacrifice will be redeemed by eventual prosperity. Instead, they leave us with a dense emotional remainder, one inseparable from the material conditions that produced it.

It is here, in this uneasy convergence of care, constraint, and visibility, that I locate both my critical gaze and my diasporic attachment. These photographs make my mother’s sweat vvisible through what could not be sent, through what had to be repurposed, through the quiet dignity of an old jacket worn across generations. They ask us to sit with the contradictions of transnational care, and how love persists under strain, how labor is both acknowledged and exhausted, and how family photography can sometimes refuse aspiration in order to tell a truer story.

Figure 3.1

Figure 3.2

Conclusion

Looking at these balikbayan photographs now, I am struck by how much they were asked to hold—the objects, and the labor and affect that made those objects mobile. My mother's sweat, her careful budgeting, the quiet calculations of what to send, what to hold back, what could still fit. The photographs reach toward joy, gratitude, and familial closeness, yet they are also pressed by what they cannot show, like the guilt my mother carried when she could not afford to send more, the exhaustion in her voice when she told me she stayed up packing until two in the morning. These images are dense with mixed feelings, and it is that density that continues to weigh on me.

Returning to these photographs now also means returning to a version of my mother I

did not fully know growing up. Her care did not always arrive in the recognizable forms of intimacy—long conversations, physical closeness, emotional reassurance. More often, it took logistical and material form, and sometimes care appeared as absence itself, specifically the necessity of distance and of work elsewhere. Sitting with these family images, and with what remains outside the frame, I have come to understand these gestures as an archive of care lived under constraint. To read these photographs through a diasporic feminist lens is to refuse the separation of love from labor, or affect from infrastructure. It is to insist that intercultural understanding must account not only for exchange and connection, but for exhaustion, precarity, and sweat. These photographs document family life across borders as much as they expose the work required to sustain it.

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