

Balikbayan: Gendered labour, migrant care work, and resistance

By Zene May Maceda

I still remember seeing it for the first time. I watched in anticipation as my father opened the box, enveloped in several layers of duct tape and rope. My mother took every necessary step to secure her packages, for fear they would fall apart on their way to our door. When the final layer of tape was finally off, my hands were always inside the box first. I peaked in and turned to my younger sisters, *“Ouu! This one’s good. This one has KitKat and Smarties!”* My mother sent us a Balikbayan box.

For me, Balikbayan boxes serve as a constant reminder of where I come from and where I was going. They are an integral part of my family story and the decision my parents made to move to Canada in hopes of a better future. My mother arrived here years before us, alone. She worked several jobs, sometimes simultaneously, and all over Toronto. She cared for children and the elderly, all-the-while working towards having my father and her three children join her in Canada. While it reminded me that my mother was far away, Balikbayan boxes also offered a glimpse into a life we hoped we could have in another country seemingly full of opportunities.

Today, the Balikbayan box, for me, symbolizes other aspects of this transnational relationship. I have become less concerned with “what” is in the box than the “why.” *Why* the Balikbayan box? Seeking answers in the context behind my family’s departure, connections can be drawn when considering the history of migrant care work in Canada and the colonial genealogies of the Philippines.

In the decades following the Second World War, care and gendered labour took on a particularly racialized nature in Canada. The postwar era saw an explosion of women in typically male-dominated workplaces, leaving their historically rigid domestic roles in the home for new opportunities in the workforce. This, coupled with the introduction of new government programs, such as the Caribbean Domestic Scheme and the Live-in Caregiver Program, facilitated a shift where migrant women of colour were singled out as “inherently” better suited to do care work.

As such, for many black and brown women of the third world, this story about migrant care work is not new. My story is a story shared by many children in the Philippines and around the world, of mothers who go abroad to care for other families as a way to care for their own. It is also the story of the women who came before them, women from the Caribbean recruited to do the care work that Canadian families needed to manage the initial increase of women entering the Canadian workforce. It is the story of the Caribbean women who fought for status for migrant care workers.

And yet, the Balikbayan box remains unique to the Filipino diasporic identity. The national labour export policy, which encourages workers from the Philippines to leave their families and work overseas in hopes of sending money back home, has introduced an interesting contradiction in which this project of nation-building unfolds. The Balikbayan box signifies the great things available for consumption in the

West. We were not just eating KitKats and Smarties, we were consuming the very core of western ideas of choice, freedom, and liberty. But at the end of the day, these products were not *meant* for us. My mother sending gifts in the Balikabayan box was a direct confrontation with the ideals of global capitalism that seek to employ the many to serve the very few. By receiving and using those products, manufactured right in our backyards no less, we were in essence partaking in privileges we thought only the elite in society could enjoy and throwing in reverse the flow of global capitalism.

If you told my mother that what she was doing was an act of resistance she would laugh and say: “No, I just love my kids.” But in an age where a mother will fly halfway across the world to look after someone else’s children so she can support her own, this would qualify as the modest answer. While the “what” might be the KitKats and the Smarties, the “why” remains tied to the agency of migrant care workers and their resistance to poverty and racial prejudice. More than just the bounty of my mother’s labour and care, the box is a reminder of who I am, where I’ve been, and where my path of resistance will take me next.

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