Refashioning Commodities: Women and the Sourcing of Secondhand Clothing in the Philippines

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Abstract: Since the mid-1990s, the increasing export of the West's used clothing to southern regions may initially appear to be another marker of northern exploitation. But to consider the southern flow of this commodity in such terms sees people as passive recipients of global commodity chains and overlooks the alternatives they create in dress and work practice. Focussing on women's roles in the secondhand clothing industry in the Philippines, this paper argues that traders and consumers reconfigure the logic of the market and the meaning of this transnational commodity by incorporating cultural practices into a global trade marginal to state influence. By dialectically engaging this commodity across diverse cultural and economic spheres, women dissolve assumptions of fixed dichotomies and dominance to reconceptualize global processes from a gendered perspective and as multiple and ongoing.

Keywords: secondhand clothing, commodity flows, globalization, gender, Philippines

Résumé : Depuis le milieu des années quatre-vingt-dix, l'augmentation de l'exportation de vêtements de seconde main vers les régions du Sud peut paraître de prime abord comme un autre signe de l'exploitation des pays du Nord. Mais considéré sous cet angle la circulation de ces biens vers le Sud dépeint les gens comme des destinataires passifs du réseau global d'échange et néglige les solutions de rechanges créées dans les pratiques vestimentaires et les modes de travail. Cet article traite de l'industrie du vêtement usagé aux Philippines pour démontrer que les négociants et les consommateurs, les femmes en particulier, reconfigurent la logique du marché et le sens de cette marchandise transnationale en incorporant des pratiques culturelles sur la scène d'une économie globale, en marge d'une influence étatique. En engageant dialectiquement cette marchandise, à travers diverses sphères économiques et culturelles, elles dissolvent les suppositions entre des dichotomies et dominances fixées pour re-conceptualiser les processus globaux en fonction de la répartition des sexes dans une perspective multiple et continue.

Mots-clés : circulation de biens, globalisation, répartition des sexes, vêtement de seconde main, Philippines

> With Asian Spirit's regular flights to Baguio City starting on October 25 [2002], pine-scented breezes, strawberry jam and even *ukay-ukay* adventures are just a flight away (Asian Spirit Airlines, 2002).
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> Among teeners, the *wagwag* [secondhand clothing] craze is called "WW.COM" to give it a more Internet-like sound. Cell phone texters call it "WAG2" (Sanidad, 2001: 4).
>
> Just check out the new wagwag line displayed at the city's first rummage festival last week: a checkered Prada Scots suit, a pair of conservative Gias Italia footwear, a body-fit dark blue Versace blouse.... The *wagwag* industry has blossomed into Baguio's official tourist attraction.... (Cabreza, 2001b: B1)

Popular media releases like these, now common throughout the northern Philippines, highlight how traders and consumers have transformed the West's secondhand clothing into innovative and alternative practices in dress and work. Since the mid-1990s, the export of used clothing from North America and northwestern Europe to "developing" regions has increased dramatically. The southern flow of this commodity is not simply another marker of passive incorporation into a northern-dominated global capitalist system, but rather a process that traders and consumers have exploited to fashion personal statements of identity and new livelihood opportunities. *Ukay-ukay* (to dig) or *wagwag* (to shake and sell) are terms that graphically describe how people in the northern Philippines choose pieces of secondhand clothing from boxes and bales that are imported in ever-increasing volume and sold in shops and open markets throughout the region (see also Hansen, 2000b: 2). The brisk sales of these goods epitomize how people move a globally traded commodity across diverse cultural spaces and practices, shaping and redefining its meaning and value in each site along its trajectory.

Following the players who enable such commodity flows, this paper argues that Philippine traders and consumers in the northern Cordillera provinces use second-

hand clothing to reconfigure work and identity by incorporating cultural practices into a global economic trade marginal to state influence. As women are the primary family caregivers and work as the region's foremost *ukay-ukay* traders, I focus particularly on women's multiple activities in this emerging sector. Consumers, for example, selectively choose secondhand garments, tailoring them and combining pieces with new locally manufactured clothing, to fulfill their families' needs. Female traders in secondhand clothing build on their history in local and regional informal sector vending to engage in *ukay-ukay* at different levels of business—from part-time sales and trade to full-time work. Those who engage in trade full time (wholesale and retail) are the more successful *ukay-ukay* dealers and invest substantial capital in goods and in national, as well as international real estate (e.g., in Hong Kong) to secure the warehouse facilities they require for their growing businesses. Their forays into such transnational investments and activities distinguish them from female entrepreneurs in other locales who also use such cross-border trade to increase income. In the latter case, however, such as that outlined by Carla Freeman (2001) for contemporary Caribbean "higglers," (female market intermediaries) women's earnings from such international trade tend to supplement their low formal-sector wages but do not involve investing capital and employing workers internationally or making the leap from part-time to full-time cross-border work.

To understand how women in the Philippine Cordillera transform the international flow of secondhand clothing, I draw on recent scholarship that adopts a "gendered window" through which to analyze such global processes (e.g., Freeman, 2001). Seeing women's engagement in *ukay-ukay*, as instrumental in determining the character of the global movement of goods, "(not as a result of them)," introduces alternative renderings of the relationship between gender and globalization (Freeman, 2001: 1012). As Carla Freeman (2001: 1012) argues, this approach "disrupts familiar formulations in which the 'third-world woman' is defined either outside globalization or as the presumed back upon which its production depends." It makes clear that women, through their work in *ukay-ukay*, for example, actually shape and redefine the very sites in which global processes take place—not simply by responding to such processes, but by "dialectically engaging" with them (Freeman, 2001: 1013, 1014). Philippine women's work in secondhand clothing—a specific transnational commodity—indexes an international order with which traders and consumers engage as they set prices and marketing practice and choose garments based on local cultural preferences and hierarchies of these goods. At the same time, because traders and consumers continue to operate according to customary community expectations, credit arrangements and competitive practices, they negotiate a complex cultural matrix across household, community and class in both rural and urban spaces. In so doing, they use local practices and values to re-craft the global to form something new within specific commodity chains. Fashioning new spaces of agency, innovation and resistance, Philippine women engaged with *ukay-ukay* reconfigure opportunities and consolidate identity and class positions despite the ever-present potential of these positions to shift.

To demonstrate the multifaceted nature of women's work within processes of globalization, I first review studies that dismantle the lingering dichotomies between social and economic sectors. I then outline the Philippine's secondhand clothing industry generally, and how women move across multiple spheres to establish new business opportunities and improvise on consumption options. This paper demonstrates that Cordillera women, as small-scale actors, domesticate the logic of the market and the meaning of a global commodity to recognizably local signs of status and value at the same time that they transform them (see also Brenner, 1998).

Gender, Work and Globalization

Exploring Cordillera women's work in the trade and consumption of secondhand clothing offers a useful lens for the analysis of gender and the economic consequences of globalization as women's workforce participation throughout the Philippines is among the highest and most varied in the "developing" world (Broad, 1988; Ofreneo and Habana, 1987; Torres, 1995). Recent studies examining women's micro-activities treat as an analytic whole both the economic and cultural practices that women use to shape their living and working conditions (Seligmann, 2001; Simon, 2003; Ypeij, 2000). By considering how the cultural dimensions of a global economy and of state and international agency interventions either constrain or facilitate women's activities, these studies demonstrate that women fashion a plurality of routes through global capitalist processes. They emphasize the complexity of women's changing positions and the cultural configurations women craft to participate, more on their own terms, in the global flow of goods and money (Seligmann, 2001: 2; see also Horn, 1994; Lockwood, 1993).[1]

Current studies on gender and work worldwide challenge determinist ideas about bounded socio-economic categories by clearly demonstrating that women work across different spheres—household and market, rural and urban spaces, local-to-national arenas, formal and

informal economic sectors (Babb, 1989; Clark, 1994; Freeman, 2001). This scholarship also links the spheres of production and consumption. As Carla Freeman (2001: 1026) demonstrates for female Caribbean "higglers," their work in production—sourcing a variety of goods for their clients—is simultaneously work in consumption. While traders such as Philippine women in *ukay-ukay*, procure goods from geographically diverse locations to increase their cash income, at the same time they are making consumption choices about clothing styles and taste for the customers they supply with these goods. Consumption emerges then, as a form of economic activity equally important to and interdependent with production (Freeman, 2001: 1025-1026; see also Fine and Leopold, 1993: 33; Hansen, 2000b: 4, 16-17). Women borrow social and economic practices from each of these sectors adapting and reapplying them to the other. As Wazir Karim (1995: 28) argues for Southeast Asia, women secure a "continuous chain of productive enterprises" for family and personal well-being by establishing "a repertoire of social units" linked to household, market and environmental resources; and they "unlink" themselves when situations change. Women thus create an "open-ended" and "multi-focal" system of socio-economic relations with "undifferentiated boundaries" and "varying connotations of 'space'" (Karim, 1995: 28).

In both rural and urban communities, women develop extensive social networks as potential sources of economic, social or political capital on which they can draw for work or subsistence needs (Horn, 1994: 147-149; Narotsky, 1997: 190; Seligmann, 2001: 8; Ypeij 2000: 13, 136). In the Philippine Cordillera, many business or patron-client associations in secondhand clothing (as in other trades) are, in fact, rooted in pre-existing kin- and community-based relationships; and in rural areas these relationships are often established through reciprocal labour exchanges (see Milgram, 1999). Such networks result from and continue to depend on nurturing long-term associations. On a practical level, since women often lack the collateral (land or capital) necessary to obtain formal credit, good social networks provide female traders with ready access to informal loans that require little if any paperwork and encompass negotiable interest rates and repayment terms (Milgram, 2004a). Given the increasing competition among self-employed traders generally, strong informal bonds are a key factor to ensure the loyalty of clients and reliable access to stock from suppliers (often obtained on credit).

In order to make a living and meet their families' subsistence needs women work in different income-generating activities across formal and informal economic sectors to engage in "occupational multiplicity" (Comitas, 1973; Illo and Polo, 1990). While this multifaceted nature of women's local-to-national work in different trades has been studied worldwide (e.g., Clark, 1994; Simon, 2003; Torres, 1995), of particular note here is that Cordillera traders and consumers use the emerging opportunities in the growing imports of secondhand clothing to carve new cross-border avenues of connection. Moving beyond the national, they innovatively transform their activities, originally rooted in self-employed, informal sector work, into a more fluid form that expands from this base to formal sector capital investments and then back again. Women engaged in *ukay-ukay* thus reconfigure oppositional assumptions across spheres to highlight the cultural and gendered dimensions of global economic processes, and in so doing, render globalization as more than simply a growing transnational network of "interconnectedness" (Inda and Rosaldo, 2002: 5). They employ secondhand clothing as a harbinger of modernity in a process of translation; what it means to be modern, or globally connected, materializes new social, cultural and economic patterns that are, in fact, intimately rooted in practices that have their own local precedents (Bestor, 2001: 77).

Commodity Flows and Identity

Because a commodity such as secondhand clothing crosses borders between sites of production and consumption, it develops a personal history (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986)—but a biography in which the meanings and values of goods are mutable depending upon how people understand and use them (Thomas, 1991). As Jonathan Friedman (1995: 88) argues, "the products of a global field of interaction [take] variable forms of incorporation into the practice of local strategies;" and "the relation of these processes" to the construction of identification is an "ongoing practice." Recognizing that people's intent can differentially transform everyday goods (such as used clothing) into highly desirable objects (Hansen, 2000b: 15), highlights how values and practices are contested, negotiated and forged, historically and jointly with other variables, at critical interfaces in the transnational flow and cross-cultural consumption of commodities (Carrier and Heyman, 1997; Fine and Leopold, 1993; Hannerz, 1987, 1992; Stone et al., 2000). The influx of goods from northern to southern countries then, does not lead to a wholesale adoption by the latter, but rather, such processes are best understood in terms of "positioned practices such as assimilation, encompassment and integration in the context of social interaction (Friedman, 1995: 87-88).

The scholarship on cloth, dress and culture clearly argues this point by demonstrating that clothing is a spe-

cial commodity that "mediates between self and society" in multiple ways across the production-distribution-consumption cycle (Hansen, 2000b: 4; see also Eicher 1995; Entwistle and Wilson, 2001; Hendrickson, 1996). John Picton's (1995: 11-12) discussion of current shifts in African textiles and dress, for example, suggests that changes in local clothing styles have been ongoing; they are about "constantly revised design agendas" that maintain a "contemporary relevance...in a series of engagements among artists, patrons and local and imported materials." Thus any trickle-down effect of northern fashion on southern dress practice is qualified by the "trickle-up corrective" that people apply to personalize such influence (Hansen, 2000b: 5). Historical studies also document that the trade and consumption of secondhand clothing have long provided avenues through which people crafted not only their livelihoods but also personal spaces, feelings of well-being and identities in a changing world (Ginsberg, 1980; Lemire, 1997; McRobbie, 1988). Hansen's (1999, 2000a, 2000b) important work on the current global trade in secondhand clothing and its application to Zambia brings this issue into a sharp contemporary focus. She (2000b: 6) demonstrates that understanding people's preoccupation with clothing and their long-standing use of imported garments is essential to understanding the process of becoming modern in Zambia—what Friedman (1995: 88) terms "the identity space of modernity." Extending this inquiry to the Philippine context, this paper demonstrates how Cordillera women, as traders and consumers, use local customary practice across multiple sites to indigenize imported secondhand clothing, thereby challenging any unilineal materialization of the cross-cultural flow of these goods.

The Philippine Cordillera Setting

The Gran Cordillera Central mountain range that extends through much of northern Luzon creates a landscape characterized by dramatic rice terraces. The main economic activity in the Cordillera provinces (Ifugao, Mt. Province, Benguet, Abra, Kalinga-Apayao), as throughout the Philippines, is wet-rice cultivation carried out in irrigated pond-fields. Except for Benguet's commercial vegetable industry and a few pockets of market vegetable gardening and fruit farming in more lowland areas, there is little agricultural surplus for sale and the region remains predominantly rural and subsistence-based. Most family members who do not out-migrate to find work, combine cultivation with non-agricultural income-generating activities such as producing crafts for the tourist market, working in the tourist and general service industries and most recently engaging in *ukay-ukay*. The Cordillera provinces do not support a manufacturing sector and thus most production remains based in households or in small workshops employing less than five people (NCSO, 2002: 104). With such limited opportunities, women have built on their historical engagement in formal and informal sector trade to emerge as the region's primary businesspeople in secondhand clothing, a role they also hold with regard to handicrafts (Milgram, 1999, 2001). The differences among women's positions, however, depending upon factors such as social class (landed elite, tenant or landless) and education, means that some women may have more of an advantage than others to gain social prestige and accumulate capital through work in new enterprises such as *ukay-ukay*. The local-to-regional trade in *ukay-ukay*, as with other regional businesses, remains closely connected with markets in Baguio City (Benguet province), the administrative capital of the Cordillera and the main regional service and trade centre supporting a population of approximately 260 000 people.

The regional position of the Cordillera provinces means that national macroeconomic policies do not always have the same affect on this area as they do on the more heavily populated lowlands. After World War II and with Philippine independence in 1946, the new Philippine government initiated a policy of "import substitution" through local industrialization, supported, in part, by the export of primary commodities (Aguilar and Miralao, 1984: 2). This policy was designed to promote domestic manufacturing and preserve foreign exchange through the limiting of imports (Aguilar and Miralao, 1984: 2-3). In the 1950s and 1960s, within this environment of a protected domestic market, textile mills were established in southern Luzon. Although dependent upon cotton imported from the United States, this industry produced a supply of cheap textiles that, in turn, fostered the development of a national garment industry in parts of the Philippine lowlands closer to Manila. The widespread availability of ready-to-wear (RTW) clothing throughout the Cordillera provided alternatives to the household production of locally woven cloth, although indigenous weaving continues to be produced in all provinces to fulfill the need for traditionally styled garments in ceremonial events (Aguilar and Miralao, 1984: 5; Milgram, 1999).

The accessibility of second-hand clothing from northern countries started to grow in many parts of Southeast Asia, generally, with increases in development aid following the end of World War II. In the Philippines, more dramatic increases in the importation of used clothing, as well as with other manufactured goods, coincided with government measures to loosen the stringent import restric-

tions in the Philippines in the last half of the 1980s with the establishment of a new democratic government in 1986 (Chant, 1996). The boom in the export of secondhand clothing to southern countries worldwide occurred in the early 1990s fueled by a large surplus of usable clothing in the North and the economic liberalization of many southern economies that enabled more people to enter the market as consumers of northern goods (Haggblade, 1990: 508; Hansen, 2000b: 249-251). Charting the international trade of secondhand clothing, Hansen (2000b: 99-126) states that the bulk of used clothes that enter the West's export trade to regions such as Africa, Asia and Latin America, originate in donations made to charitable organizations; these garments are then channeled to different European and Asian centres for collection, packing and redistribution. As the practice of wearing Western-style clothing was firmly in place by the mid-1900s throughout the Philippines, people simply exercised their option to purchase *ukay-ukay*, as well as locally manufactured ready-to-wear garments, to meet their clothing needs.

The Secondhand Clothing Trade in the Philippine Cordillera

During my initial fieldwork in the Cordillera in 1995, residents in rural areas purchased Western-style ready-to-wear (RTW) clothing from itinerant traders who participated in the region's weekly markets. Female traders, primarily from the lowlands, brought Philippine-made RTW clothing, along with a host of other manufactured goods (kitchenware, grooming accessories, tools, audio equipment) to display in the towns' central markets. Throughout the provinces, RTW was available for purchase only from such market vendors and from grocery stores that stocked a small selection of garments. Those seeking more choice had to travel to some of the larger neighbouring lowland towns or make the eight- to ten-hour trip to Baguio City. By 1998, itinerant market women had started to stock used clothing along with RTW, and between 2000 and 2003, many of the rural, village-based RTW shops that had sprung up throughout the Cordillera, had changed their stock from RTW to secondhand clothing to meet local consumer demand. During this time, the number of Baguio City businesses selling used clothing expanded dramatically both within the central market area and along the main street where they took occupation of abandoned movie theatres and vacant shops. Newspaper headlines such as "Baguio Means Berries, Veggies and 'Ukay-Ukay'" (Cabreza, 2001a) and "'Wagwag' Fashion Pushed for Pinoys," (Cabreza, 2001b) testify to the ongoing popularity in the trade and consumption of this desirable commodity.

Shipping containers of secondhand clothing, originating in countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, Japan and northwestern Europe, arrive at Philippine ports such as that of Manila. Clothing brokers, some of who are also involved in wholesaling new ready-to-wear clothing, distribute the shipments to larger towns in the north, central and southern Philippines. Of particular note is the fact that Hong Kong functions simultaneously as one of Asia's largest importers of used clothing (presumably destined for local consumption) and as a major textile and garment exporter (Hansen, 2000b: 115). In 2000 and 2001 there was an approximately 50-50 split between Philippine marketers who purchased their stock from suppliers dealing with clothing coming from Hong Kong and those who purchased stock from suppliers dealing with goods coming from Europe, the United States, Australia and Japan. By 2003, a larger percentage of Philippine traders were obtaining their stock from Hong Kong, either by traveling there directly or by purchasing from suppliers importing these goods. This suggests a dramatic shift in the industry whereby Philippine suppliers sourcing secondhand clothing now increasingly exploit the country's close relationship with Hong Kong (geographical and the history of women out-migrating to work in domestic service)[2] to carve new cross-border avenues of trade. Their actions recall what Hannerz (1980; quoted in Bestor, 2001: 77) refers to as "provisioning relationships"—how those in the middle negotiate opportune market niches to refashion the character of such commodity flows.

In northern Luzon, Baguio City has emerged as the main retail outlet for *ukay-ukay* boasting over one thousand shops or stalls in mid-2002 (Cimatu, 2002). Baguio City also operates as the pivotal distribution point from which wholesalers supply stock to *ukay-ukay* vendors with smaller businesses throughout the Cordillera provinces. Indeed, the trade in *ukay-ukay* had grown to such an extent by early 2002, that the Philippine government, lobbied by RTW clothing retailers, repeatedly threatened to impose a total ban on used clothing imports and to dramatically restrict *ukay-ukay* businesses (Lacuarta, 2002: 7). But these proposals, a subject of ongoing debate, never came to fruition (Manila Standard, 2002: 2; Ronda, 2002: 9).

Secondhand clothing arrives in the Philippines packaged in either boxes, which contain assorted garments (as well as special boxes of assorted handbags or shoes), or in bales, which contain only a single type of garment. Standard-sized *balikbayan*[3] boxes (72 x 42 x 48 cm) arriving from Hong Kong contain assorted garments either for adults—men and women—or for children. These boxes

are priced according to the quality of the garments they contain, A, B, or C grade. Prices range from 9 000 pesos ($243)[4] for a class A box, to 8 500 pesos ($230) for a class B box or a box of assorted children's garments. Many traders feel that they are throwing away their money when they purchase a class C box of assorted garments at 7 000 pesos ($190). Traders also try to purchase class A boxes to increase their chances of finding "signature items," garments with well-known designer labels such as Nike, Lacoste and Levi's. Such items are always highly sought after by fashion-conscious consumers.

Sacks or bales of used clothing, unlike boxes, are packaged in 50 or 100 kilogram amounts and contain one garment-type only such as T-shirts, men's and boy's pants, women's dresses, women's pants, or bed linens and blankets. Many of the wholesalers importing these bales into the Philippines operate businesses in the well-known Manila (Santa Cruz district) clothing and textile market known as *Dulong Bayan* (end of the town). Baguio City suppliers purchase bales of clothing from these Manila businesses; they then sell the bales to traders working in the other Cordillera provinces. Like boxes from Hong Kong, bales are priced according to quality. On the outside of each bale, however, the country of origin is often boldly proclaimed. Traders carefully scrutinize this fact as clothing from Japan, the United States, Australia or Europe is involved in a hierarchical system of status in which bales of particular types of garments from specific countries are sought after for their quality and fit. For the majority of items the standard price per 100 kilogram bale of class A garments is 15 500 pesos ($420), class B is set at 10 000 pesos ($270) and class C at 7 000 pesos. Bales of children's clothing, 9 000 to 6 000 pesos ($243-$162) contain garments to fit either ages one to six or from six years old and up. A 100 kilogram bale of bed sheets (which includes thin blankets) is priced at 17 500 pesos ($473) for class A and 16 000 pesos ($433) for class B while traders can purchase a 50 kilogram bale of each of the above types of clothing for one-half the price of the 100-kilo bales plus 500 pesos ($13.50). I found, moreover, that prices of both bales and boxes vary slightly with some traders paying up to 500 pesos more for their stock depending upon their relationship with their urban supplier in either Baguio City or Manila. The higher price means that these traders must then increase their mark-up to recover their investment. In a competitive market in which consumers can easily do comparison shopping, even a one or two peso variable can make the difference to a successful sale.

The significance of the substantial capital required for such purchases becomes evident when we consider that, in the rural Philippines, the average monthly salary of those people regularly employed generally ranges between 3 500 to 7 000 pesos ($100-$190) (for jobs such as school teachers and nurses at the high end and government clerks and small store owners at the low end) while those engaged in informal sector jobs such as contract wage labour, fresh produce vending and handicrafts often earn as little as 1 000 to 2 000 pesos ($27-$54) a month. The formidable start-up capital required to purchase this stock means that those women most likely to establish businesses in *ukay-ukay* are from middle- or higher-income families. Such circumstances also demonstrate the importance for traders to maintain good credit relationships with their suppliers and to nurture loyalty in clients, points to which I will return in more detail.

The Business of *Ukay-Ukay*

From their first foray into *ukay-ukay*, traders strategize to successfully navigate the uncertainties of informal-sector businesses characterized by lack of control over stock quality, fierce competition, changing tastes of consumers and shifting fashion trends (see also Hansen, 2000b: 165-171). Cecilia Lango,[5] a trader in Banaue, Ifugao who has been selling secondhand clothing since mid-2000 explains that she cannot be assured that each box or bale she purchases contains the quality or number of items that she expects:

> I always try to purchase class A or class B garments to ensure that at least one-half of the package is usable. But even this tactic is not always guaranteed. Sometimes those who put the tag on the sack make a mistake; it depends on the packer. Often I have received items such as miniskirts, short pants, swimming suits, or women's fancy dresses with beads or with a long slit in the back; these items are not very saleable here. I have also received bales in which many of the clothes were in poor condition and thus unusable, and this occurred with a class A bale from Australia!

Such economic vulnerability means that regional traders, consumers and urban wholesalers continue to ground many of their new business dealings in pre-existing social and economic networks while simultaneously developing international linkages for sourcing and distribution. Traders facilitate the sustainability of their business by negotiating a mutual understanding with their suppliers through customary *suki* relations. Throughout the Philippines, the *suki* bond, a type of personalized relationship, is marked by "subjective values and extralegal sanctions which encourage individuals to meet obligations

to others" (Davis, 1973: 211). Economic personalism is essential to Philippine entrepreneurs because it is only by forming personal networks of obligatory relationships that they can overcome the barriers posed by a lack of trust and a weakness of institutional credit facilities (Davis, 1973: 211-212). As I have argued elsewhere, however, with increased competition among suppliers and traders, this taken-for-granted relationship no longer endures unquestioned (Milgram, 2004a). Women, in particular, innovatively nurture the *suki* bond by drawing, for example, on aspects of customary gift exchange, a practice common to special occasions. To cultivate consumers, especially kin relations, traders may offer good customers a discount on their purchases or an extra item of clothing; and to obtain the stock and credit they need, traders keep avenues of communication open with their wholesalers. Wholesalers may similarly offer traders a small discount on the latter's debt in return for traders' promise of regular repayments, however small the amount.

When Karen Tayadan, for example, first established her business in Banaue, she was able to receive stock on credit from Helena Tungal, a supplier in Baguio City, because the two women's husbands had been classmates together in school. Although ready access to credit certainly enables Karen to purchase the stock she needs, her debt also ties her to her supplier in an ongoing patron-client relationship (see Milgram, 2001). Karen explains that she usually owes Helena money for goods, but that even in such circumstances Helena continues to give her other items of clothing. Karen admits that in order to sustain her business, given the challenge of increasing competition, at times she has used her income from sales to purchase new stock from a different supplier instead of paying her debt to Helena. Karen acknowledges the risk she takes by betraying her *suki* obligation, but states, "Sometimes such actions are necessary—it is part of doing business here now." At the same time, because Helena does not want to lose her investment in Karen nor Karen's loyalty, she encourages Karen's repeat business by periodically giving her gifts; these include, for example, one dozen plates, cups and saucers that she gave to Karen at Christmas in 2000. Karen, however, promptly sold these to customers who were furnishing a house for their recently married children.

As Janet MacGaffey and Remy Bazenguissa-Ganga (2000) similarly demonstrate for Congolese street traders in Paris, while personal networks are crucial for organizing such marginal trade practice, these community and kinship ties can also serve as impediments that result in outstanding debts from relatives or neighbours. Although, in most cases, customers eventually repay traders, Karen explains that her capital (like that of Helena's) can be tied up in unpaid bills for long periods of time. Karen explains: "If my customers do not pay me, I often have to collect the debt by visiting their houses; and on one occasion I took one of my customer's "native" [free-range] chickens when she had no cash." The juxtaposition of designer brand clothing and chickens in the exchange process foregrounds how modernity here is worked out on a creolized terrain that channels secondhand clothing through well-worn patterns of consumption and trade. Balancing the opportunity to operate one's own business with the actuality of realizing a profit remains an ongoing challenge for traders in many small enterprises throughout the Cordillera. In some instances, although such business transactions may lead to exploitative situations between suppliers and traders, they also open channels of resistance that smaller traders such as Karen Tayadan and her clients might pursue (see Milgram, 2004a).

To maximize earnings and reduce risk then, most traders follow similar tactics in pricing their merchandise. After opening a newly arrived bale or box of clothing, some traders count the number of pieces in each package and then divide the purchase price by the total number of pieces to give them their basic break-even price per piece. Traders then add their mark-up to their base cost, which may be higher for the better pieces and lower for those that are less desirable. Other traders first sort the garments into categories they identify as "new, slightly used, well-used and destroyed" or unusable. Not surprisingly, the items in the first two categories sell most quickly. Traders using this second system divide the purchase price of the box or bale using only the number of items in the first two categories. In this way, traders explain that they cover their costs with the new and slightly used garments. Sales of the very used pieces comprise their clear profit. As I surveyed the different *ukay-ukay* dealers, however, it became evident that there is a general price range for garments of a similar type in similar condition. Most traders confirm that once they have determined their basic pricing, they make the rounds of other *ukay-ukay* shops to gauge their competition and fine-tune their prices.

Traders with permanent shops must also decide the most advantageous way to organize their stock given that similar items may be differentially priced depending upon the quality of the shipment or upon whether the items are "on sale." Many traders keep their different shipments of clothing separated by placing the items received at specific times on separate racks or confined to their original boxes in specific store locations. Sometimes prices

are marked, but more often customers need to make inquires and thus personally engage with shop owners. Knowing the break-even price they need to receive for the specific garments on each rack, traders can thus make any last minute price adjustments, up or down, as they personally negotiate with clients. Traders confirm that they purposely omit pricing in some instances; this practice enables traders to give special discounts to their favoured clients and thus encourage the latter to shop first at their stores in future.

Mary Bunag, a Baguio City trader outlines her personal pricing strategy for items in good condition, a strategy that seems to be common practice among many Cordillera dealers:

> If my buying price is 54 pesos for that item, I will start my selling price at one hundred pesos. Some shoppers just get it, but others always want to bargain. Once I earn back one-half of the capital that I have spent on the bale or box, then I will start to offer a 10 to 25 peso discount on all items in that shipment. When I have mostly the overused clothes remaining from a box or bale, then I will further discount my stock by offering special sales such as three T-shirts for 100 pesos, or buy two and take one free.

Throughout the Cordillera, traders carefully time the opening of a new box or bale of clothing in order to garner the most attention and thus maximize their sales. When a new shipment arrives in town, the opening is much like a feeding frenzy as Hansen (2000b: 169) has similarly noted about the used clothing trade in Zambia. "When I post signs that announce 'New Arrivals,'" a trader explains, "everyone crowds around the open box or bale to secure first pick of the contents; at this time I do not discount items. But then the customers are fewer and fewer until there is another new shipment to open." Traders agree that they earn a large percentage of their profit within the first hours following the opening of a new box or bale; and that they depend upon the strength of their informal networks to spread the word when new stock arrives.

In late 2001, a small group of female Baguio City traders, primarily those at the frontier of the *ukay-ukay* industry who had made early substantial gains, forged an international linkage with Hong Kong suppliers in order to assume more control of this trade. Taking advantage of Hong Kong's geographical proximity, and thus the ease of securing travel visas, as well as of personal connections with kin and community members working in the city as domestic helpers, these traders began direct negotiations with charitable organizations such as the Salvation Army, a major source of secondhand clothing.[6] At the outset of this initiative, these traders would travel to Hong Kong every four to six weeks to choose, sort, pack and ship the garments back to the Philippines. To store the stock that relatives and agents had assembled for them, prior to their arrival, traders rented warehouse space in Hong Kong on a weekly basis. By late 2002, their enterprises had grown to such an extent that many of these businesswomen renegotiated their warehouse leases to a yearly rental arrangement and hired family or former community members already living in Hong Kong to oversee the warehouse operation when they are in the Philippines. During their time in Hong Kong, traders supervise the job of packing the assorted garments that have been assembled in their warehouses into standard-size *balikbayan* boxes; they then address the individual boxes to different Filipino residents, indicating the contents as personal possessions of returning Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) as such personal goods enter the Philippines duty free. The ongoing debates over the law prohibiting the importation of secondhand clothing into the Philippines for resale seems to leave loopholes, however risky, that some traders are willing to navigate (Baguio Midland Courier, 2001: 6).[7] This means that periodically when government officials decide to enforce the law, some shipments are stopped and held indefinitely at customs, but the majority of boxes continue to enter the country. Traders explain that to facilitate safe shipments, it is to their benefit to maintain good personal relations with their shipping and custom agents in both Hong Kong and the Philippines—relations that entail customary gifting or favours.[8]

Through their hands-on engagement in sourcing clothing directly from Hong Kong suppliers, these female traders gain access to the quantities and quality of stock they seek; and in so doing, some have opened branch stores both in Manila and in smaller towns throughout the Cordillera. In each instance, they employ primarily family members to operate these outlets. As Baguio is renowned as the "home" of *ukay-ukay* (Cabreza, 2001a), these branch shops, even the ones in Manila, proudly advertise that their stock of clothing comprises the best that Baguio City *ukay-ukay* has to offer, conveniently overlooking the fact that these are imported garments. The growing prevalence of such promotions visibly demonstrates the extent to which this group of female traders has succeeded in indigenizing or instilling a locally rooted provenance into this globally traded commodity. By extending their reach to encompass a global arena of personal, business and commodity networks, these traders, in effect, connect institutions or social structures that pre-

viously existed as unarticulated segments of different societies and politics (Bestor, 2001: 77).

Hierarchies of Preference

Cordillera traders agree that an important part of their business success depends upon keeping up with the latest fashion trends and familiarizing themselves with the changing tastes of their customers.[9] Consumers take pride both in finding a bargain and in dressing in accordance with their personalized style sense. Traders state that their customers know the type of items to purchase, whether they are looking for contemporary styles or durability. As Hansen (1999: 356) points out about secondhand clothing consumers in Zambia, most shoppers look for "value for money" in terms of both quality and fashion, regardless of their income status. Those with low incomes or women shopping for functional garments for their families look for "durability and strength" while adolescents, boys and girls, are most concerned with seeking the most up-to-date styles (Hansen, 1999: 356). Indeed, in Banaue, the word "bargains," the more common term for secondhand clothing, captures the feeling of pride and the skill consumers exercise when shopping for and obtaining a good deal.

Consumers insist, moreover, that it is not only that the cost of "bargains" is often as much as one-third to one-quarter that of retail prices, but that the quality of *ukay-ukay* is more likely to be good because the garments are "coming from other countries and thus they are better than clothes manufactured here in the Philippines." In the course of my conversations with both consumers and traders, the women and men with whom I spoke would sometimes comment on the T-shirts that I wore confirming that the colours of my shirts will not run when washed as "these shirts are from your place." Philippine manufacturers are certainly aware of this "allure of the foreign" (Orlove and Bauer, 1997) as many of the products they manufacture in the Philippines proudly sport their own slightly revised versions of labels such as Levi's, Wrangler and Reebok. By altering only a single letter of these world-renowned brands, Philippine manufacturers succeed in closely aligning their products, labeled Levy, Rangler and Reeboc, with the former signature names. *Ukay-ukay* thus encapsulates the close association between "foreignness and progress" the latter associated with North America and Europe. As such, used clothing in the Philippines emerges, across the economic spectrum of households, as a key "token of modernity" that people use to situate themselves at the forefront of their changing world (Hansen, 1999: 344; see also Orlove and Bauer, 1997: 13; Langer, 1997: 16).

Consumers are aware of the newest styles as they see them advertised on television and worn by their favourite actors. When students, who have attended urban universities in Baguio City or Manila, return to visit relatives in smaller Cordillera towns, they bring with them knowledge of the most contemporary fashion trends and, indeed, return wearing the newest clothes they can afford to purchase often sourced from Baguio City's extensive *ukay-ukay* markets. Traders point out that, "Our customers look first for "signatures, Levi's, Nike, Adidas, and the alligator symbol [Lacoste] are always the most popular. They want a bargain and they want to wear garments that are widely recognized, but they also want to assemble these in accordance with their personal style." Traders confirm that they can always charge higher prices for garments that bear brand names, and these are the hidden treasurers for which they search in every box and bale of secondhand clothing.

Young adult consumers, especially, patiently dig through the mounds of clothing displayed at periodic markets or through the racks of clothing in town shops in order to find just the right item. Coordinating colours, finding the correct fit and combining the right mix of garments is a priority for teenage shoppers (see also Hansen, 1999: 356). One teenage boy patiently explains that this season he is looking for cargo pants with six pockets, especially a pair from Japan as these are a style that many of his friends have already purchased.

I also accompanied many teenage girls on their fevered quest from stall to stall hunting for short, fitted tops that expose their midriffs. "This year," (2003) one female teenager points out, "we are all asking for fitted blouses and the 'hanging top' or the 'topper' with three-quarter length sleeves. We are also looking for black tops, a colour that is often difficult for us to find; gray and khaki are also colours we prefer, but most desirable are the tops with signatures." Another young women states that she likes straight-leg pants, but "I am also looking for denim jeans that are fitted at the top and flare out at the bottom." Shops in Baguio City and in outlying towns often devote special racks to the display of blue jeans that have decorative finishes added to the lower sections of each leg of the pants; such embellishments include embroidery, fringes, buttons and pieces of traditionally patterned Cordillera cloth. In 2002 and 2003, the capri-style or three-quarter length pants were especially popular. Indeed, in Baguio's larger shops, owners periodically hire sewers to alter long pants into this saleable shorter style. In the Cordillera, however, such tailoring contracts remain the individual initiative of larger businesses; tailoring secondhand clothes into specific localized styles has not yet

developed into the thriving spin-off industry that Hansen (2000b: 177-179) has identified in Zambia.

Most traders try to follow the rapidly shifting trends in taste in order to maintain their marketing edge. They explain that they always try to purchase bales of pants from Japan as the garments are small in size and thus the best fit for the Philippine body. One trader points out:

> The sacks of garments from the U.S. are of variable quality and many items are often too big for Filipinos. My customers complain if I only have these oversize items, but women might buy the American T-shirts and use them as a dress or a nightshirt.

The consensus among traders and consumers is that the best quality T-shirts are from Australia, especially for teenagers, both girls and boys (although sizing remains a problem), while the best quality children's wear is from the United States; and Australia and the United States are known for their fine bed linens and blankets. When shipments arrive from particularly desirable locations, some retailers leave the empty bales conspicuously displayed in the corner of their shops proudly declaring their labels of origin, (e.g, Japan, Washington, DC). Unlike the situation that Hansen (1999: 357) notes for Zambia, in which people want to dress in style, but are not particularly concerned about designer labels or the garment's origin as long as it is not Zambian, in the Philippines, the provenance of *ukay-ukay* is very much a part of its caché.[10]

Consumers exercise their preferences by choosing and manipulating goods to construct messages about themselves. By assembling selected garments into a style that either displays their knowledge of wider clothing practice or subverts the received meaning of such goods, they assert "local authorship over the West's used clothing" (Hansen, 1999: 357), thereby effecting personalized visual statements. Globally traded commodities such as secondhand clothing then do not mean any one thing. "They 'mean' only because they have already been arranged, according to social use, into culture codes of meaning, which *assign meanings to them*... (Hall and Jefferson, 1976: 55, emphasis in the original).

Women selling *ukay-ukay* also explain that because consumers now have more choice in the quality and quantity of secondhand clothing available to them, they are increasingly purchasing these goods as gifts for special occasions such as birthdays or weddings. Instead of cash or new ready-to-wear garments, *ukay-ukay* is often the gift of choice. Godparents and grandparents, for example, give items of secondhand clothing at the baptisms and birthdays of their god- and grandchildren and in June, just before the beginning of school, parents buy *ukay-ukay* as presents for their children before the latter don their school uniforms. Indeed, the growing popularity of *ukay-ukay* among middle- and high-income families, as well as for those with less income, demonstrates the positive association of secondhand clothing with customary giving and receiving. *Ukay-ukay* is in no way regarded as a second-class gift, because both givers and receivers pride themselves on their skills in sleuthing out bargains and proudly tell stories of the hunt for their fashionable, yet reasonably priced outfits.

The meaning of secondhand clothing in the Philippines has shifted from its humble origins as an inexpensive, functional commodity that fulfilled the clothing needs of the "poor," to a commodity desired and actively pursued across class and space. The stories of consumers' experiences and triumphs in regular "shopping junkets" organized from Manila to Baguio City for the well-to-do are repeatedly reported in major Philippine newspapers (e.g., Cojuangco 2001; Subido 2003). The recent publication of the *ukay-ukay* shopping handbook, *What To Do In Baguio When You Have Seen the Sights*, guides consumers through Baguio City's sprawling *wagwagans* (Cimatu, 2002; Masadao, 2002) testifying to the revaluing of this commodity. Newspaper headlines such as "Wagwag Tourism" (Cimatu, 2002: A14) and "A Guide to the Ukay-Ukay Safari" (Subido, 2003: H2), along with Baguio City's mounting of a yearly *ukay-ukay* street festival (Cabreza 2001b: B1), increasingly draw lowland consumers to the Cordillera in pursuit of shopping bargains and adventures. Cordillera traders and consumers, and indeed government officials, have thus carved a variety of channels through which to transform and claim this transnational commodity as their own.

Conclusion

By operationalizing new opportunities in the trade and consumption of secondhand clothing, women in the northern Philippines situate their actions within economic and cultural processes that are central to globalization itself (Freeman, 2001: 1009). Their indigenization or localization of the West's used clothing needs to be understood then not merely as a result, but as a "constitutive ingredient" of the changing configuration of global commodity movements (Freeman, 2000: 1013). By recontextualizing global trends with regard to local custom, Cordillera traders and consumers establish pivotal positions to craft how commodities such as imported secondhand clothing are actually used and understood in on-the-ground practice.

Female traders, in particular, maintain continuity with past practice by marketing used clothes through estab-

lished paths that utilize kin and community networks and customary credit relations in rural and urban settings. At the same time, they employ innovative business strategies to expand their operations beyond the national level. Traders' cross-border trips to, and capital investments in, Hong Kong, for example, firmly link their activities to this Asian hub for the collection and distribution of secondhand clothing securing them a place in the network of this global flow of goods. That some women, many of whom are related, are increasingly using this international business option means that there is an opportunity for a small group of elite traders to dominate the supply of secondhand clothing to vendors throughout the Cordillera. Such a situation makes smaller vendors vulnerable. The parameters of cultural practice, however, keep these globally engaged traders tacking back and forth between social and economic systems. The community expectation of redistributive gifting, obligations to employ family members in business expansion, as well as the specific debates, in this case, over the legality of the *ukay-ukay* trade, in fact, constrain traders' actions and limit opportunism.

Similarly, consumers construct multifaceted statements of identity by wearing locally manufactured garments side by side with imported secondhand clothing and decorating the latter with local embroidery or pieces of traditionally patterned cloth. They demonstrate their agency and ability to expropriate, as well as to appropriate, the social meanings that *ukay-ukay* may have 'naturally' had in the West, by combining the West's discarded garments with other elements that may change or inflect their meaning (Thomas, 1991: 83). Consequently, acquiring such globally traded clothing does not necessarily mean adopting the ideas and meanings embedded in them at the moment of production at the beginning of their life history. For goods such as secondhand clothing to retain their relevance over time and their appeal amongst diverse groups, they must "allow those who employ them to supply part of their meaning" (Guibernau, 1996: 81). Philippine consumers ensure that *ukay-ukay* maintains its porous borders and thus its relevance as an identity marker by reconfiguring any constraints of uniform meaning that the adoption of such commodities might initially imply.

The variety of channels through which Cordillera women engage in *ukay-ukay* makes visible how local-to-global practices of consumption and trade are sorted out "in the contingent and compromised space" between market demand and the "cultural intimacy" and expectations of family, community and customary practice (Li, 1999: 295). As both traders and consumers, they establish some kind of agency in a process that has otherwise been used to identify them as passive recipients of Western initiatives. These women's actions clearly demonstrate that understanding the changing dynamics of global commodity chains, complexes and regimes means placing cultural factors, gender and everyday practice at the centre of analysis.

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Acknowledgments

Field research for this paper was conducted over several periods in 1995 and 1998, but particularly in 2000, 2001, 2003 and 2004. Financial support for this research was provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Doctoral Fellowship (1993-1996), Post-Doctoral Fellowship (1997-1999) and Standard Research Grants (2000-2003, and 2004-2007). In the Philippines, I am affiliated with the Cordillera Studies Center, University of the Philippines Baguio, Baguio City. I thank my colleagues at CSC for their generous support of my research. I also wish to thank the anonymous reviewers and the Journal's guest editors for their thoughtful comments on this paper. To the Cordillera residents, I owe a debt of gratitude.

Notes

1 Recent studies clearly demonstrate that understanding contemporary global economic transformations means making "room for a host of alternate scriptings" [e.g., other than "capitalist"] of economic relations (Gibson-Graham, 1996: 147), and considering each of the different channels through which actors (men and women) carve these relations (Tsing, 2000: 327, 330; see also Marchand and Runyan, 2000).

2 For research on Philippine women's out-migration see, for example, Chant and McIlwaine, 1995.

3 *Balikbayan* is the pan-Philippine term used to identify returning Overseas Filipino Workers. The term is commonly applied to the boxes that returning Filipinos use to pack their personal belongings and gifts after out-migrating for work. The size and weight of the box corresponds to that allowed by airlines for standard check-in luggage.

4 All figures are in Canadian dollar amounts. In mid-2003 the exchange rate was CAN $1.00=37 Philippine pesos.

5 All personal names of individuals are pseudonyms.

6 From approximately the late 1980s, Filipina women working in Hong Kong as domestic helpers would send back to their Philippine relatives boxes of used clothing that they had sourced from their employers or from Hong Kong charitable organizations such as the Salvation Army. Courier services such as Door to Door, that Filipinos had used in the past to send back personal belongings or family gifts, facilitated deliveries of these new shipments. As the trade in

secondhand clothing increased dramatically through the 1990s, the limited shipments that individual women were able to pack and send, given that they had only one day off work each week (Sunday), proved insufficient for suppliers' need for larger quantities of stock.

7 The Philippine Republic Act No. 4653 (June 17, 1966) states that it is "unlawful" to import "textile articles commonly known as used clothing and rags." Yet, Baguio City municipal officials issue daily vending permits to street vendors selling secondhand clothing—a new move to control this growing trade; and Baguio's numerous permanent *ukay-ukay* stores routinely obtain their business permits to sell dry goods, which are quite visibly used clothing. Presidential Decree No. 2033 (February 6, 1986) seeks to clarify the earlier Central Bank Circular No. 1060 (May 22, 1985) that outlined some exceptions to the commercial importation of used clothing. Although, in theory, the importation and resale of used clothing is illegal, the on-the-ground parameters of the *ukay-ukay* trade continue to be negotiated and debated throughout the Philippines.

8 The character of this development in the secondhand clothing trade is part of my current research project. I am exploring the new avenues of collection and distribution within Hong Kong and between Hong Kong and the Philippines, specifically, and Southeast Asia more generally. I am also examining the extent to which Philippine traders can negotiate the constraints in their expanded business dealings in Hong Kong given the debates over the legality or illegality of this trade that currently employs a large number of men and women. The size of this trade is indicated in the volume of shipments as reported by respondents in mid-2004. In the busy season, December to May, traders might ship one container every four to six weeks. One container holds 270 to 290 *balikbayan* boxes, the number depending upon how full the boxes have been packed. The group of women running businesses at this level, both as retailers and suppliers, number about ten to twelve, the majority of whom are originally from Sagada, Mountain Province and share a kinship connection.

9 Some parts of this section draw upon previously published material and expand upon its insights (see Milgram 2004b).

10 Hansen (1999: 357 notes, however, that this lack of attention to brand name clothing may change as evidenced by the 1997 display of designer clothing in one man's speciality shop.

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