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Roderick G. Galam

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RODERICK G. GALAM

Communication and Filipino Seamen's Wives
Imagined Communion and the Intimacy of Absence

Seamen's wives know absence very well. Their lives are striated by it. Based on interviews with seamen's wives conducted in Ilocos Norte, this article investigates the communicative practices obtaining amid absence and separation, and the wives' activities that bring their husbands home and bring "home" to their husbands. It examines how new communication technologies, particularly the cellphone, have engendered new ways of becoming present and intimate. For seamen's families, cellphone-mediated intimacy creates a space of imagined communion, which becomes the locus of the reproduction of family and affective ties and is itself the result of these emotional and material activities.

KEYWORDS: SEAFARING · MOBILE TELEPHONY · TRANSNATIONAL COMMUNICATION · FAMILY · INTIMACY · IMAGINED COMMUNION

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Seamen's wives know absence very well. Their lives are striated by it. They prepare for and live this absence and its consequences. It is in this sense that I talk of the intimacy of absence in their lives. This article attends to this absence by looking at the ways by which these women have tried to lessen its presence and to the means that have helped them ameliorate it. In so doing, it relocates these women from "home" to a space of imagined communion. I look at this space, which incorporates both their home and their husbands' ship (which is both their home and place of work), as one that has its origins in the home (or in making home) but which is not, however, analogous to it. It exceeds the physical, temporal, and spatial boundaries of the home in that this space extends to that which is outside of it, but which it attempts to incorporate and so in a sense domesticate and embrace. I dwell here on the wives' activities that bring their husbands home and that bring "home" to their husbands. These activities enable them to become intimate despite the absence, separation, or distance, and to make the absent present. This space of imagined communion then becomes the locus of the reproduction of family and of affective ties and is itself the result of these emotional and material activities. To the extent that this work is not limited and contained in the home, although the home (or a sense of it) is ultimately the recipient of this work (and also its outcome), the space is simultaneously both foreign and domestic. It is a space produced by and in the overlapping of the internal and external locations of members of the family and to which their ties are extended.

This article investigates the communicative practices obtaining in this absence and separation, and which produce that sense of home in an "elsewhere." I do not so much listen to the content of these communication activities as analyze the functions to which these practices and events are put to use. I therefore "listen" to the speech acts of these women that serve to keep the family together in the context of this separation. The first part gives a brief description of the methodology used for the research from which the data used for this article are drawn. The second situates the predominance of mobile phone (or cellphone in the Philippines) communication among the women in this study within a consideration of the "political economy" of telecommunication in the Philippines and in the context of migration. It also briefly looks at the wives' use of prepaid phone cards that, together with the mobile phone, have made communication between them and their husbands affordable. The third part examines communication designed to foster family and affective ties, including father-children relationships. In a sense, these are communication events and practices in and through which husbands are made "present." The fourth examines how intimacy is mediated by communication technologies and focuses on how wives and husbands remit affection to each other.

By focusing on the case of Filipino seamen's families, this article aims to help address, if not redress, the peripheral status of this specific group in Philippine migration scholarship, which is dominated by research into the lives and experiences of land-based workers. There are very few studies of Filipino seafarers (e.g., Lamvik 2002; McKay 2007; Ruggunan 2009, 2011; Swift 2010; Terry 2009) and their families (e.g., Cruz and Paganoni 1989; Galam 2011; Lamvik 2002; Swift 2010), and they remain marginal in migration scholarship. Filipino seafarers comprise the largest number, as high as 30 percent, of seafarers in the whole world (Lane et al. 2002; Wu 2005). In 2009 more than 330,000 Filipino seafarers served in international ships (POEA 2009) and, although Filipino seafarers on average make up less than 4 percent of the estimated 10 million Filipinos living and working overseas, they contribute more than 20 percent of total overseas Filipino workers' remittances. Figures released online by the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP 2011) show that for 2010 they contributed more than US$3.8 billion out of the total US$18.76 billion remitted by overseas Filipinos. Even more peripheral in migration scholarship are the families of these seamen. Where migration research has examined the lives and experiences of those who stay behind, it has focused mainly on the families of land-based workers.

Methodology

This article draws from a larger study of the lives and experiences of Filipino women married to seamen (see Galam 2011). The empirical data presented in this work are derived from the semistructured interviews I did as part of my PhD fieldwork, which was conducted from February to September 2010 in the town of San Gabriel (a pseudonym) in Ilocos Norte province in northern Luzon. I interviewed forty wives based on purposive sampling with the following parameters—based on different circumstances, points in the life cycle of the seamen-husband and wife, and seafaring career of husbands—used to select interviewees:

- wives in full-time paid employment
- wives without paid employment

- wives with dependent children
- wives with adult children
- wives with no children
- wives who live with their in-laws
- wives whose husbands have risen to the rank of chief engineer or captain

These parameters were set to ensure that interview data could be collected from a wide spectrum of backgrounds, situations, and conditions that bear upon the experiences of seamen's wives. They would also help ensure that diverse insights, understandings, and perspectives arising from different circumstances and experiences were collected. Or, in case of similar insights and perspectives, such similarity could not be attributed solely to a lack of diversity in the backgrounds of the sample respondents.

This sample is not representative of any population. There is no sampling frame from which to select interviewees and the composition of the small sample is not aimed at generalizing about a whole population. However, the "strategic" selection of the interviewees based on a range of circumstances identified above helped minimize bias, that is, the possibility that interview data would come predominantly from a narrow or restricted set of interviewees and the "world of experiences" they inhabited.

I conducted all the semistructured interviews, most of which were done from March to July 2010. Most of these interviews were held in the residence of the research participants. Because of this arrangement, I also managed to conduct conversations with ten husbands who were on leave from work at the time of the interview. These conversations provided me with access to the husbands' own perceptions of their family's lives and experiences as well as insights into how they themselves were involved in addressing many of the issues their families faced. Two wives were interviewed at their children's school's waiting areas while four were interviewed in their place of work. These provided me with opportunities to observe women in the different locations of the performance of their various roles as wives and mothers. I also encountered some of my interviewees in hospital emergency rooms; while taking my own children to school and waiting for them to come out; on jeepneys on the way to the provincial capital, Laoag City; and at different fast-food stores, which provided me with some opportunities to have conversations with them—informal and outside the context of a research interview.

I interviewed again a few of the wives in September 2010, two of whom gave birth in August, and one whose husband was a new seafarer who finished his first contract in July 2010 and returned to sea after only less than four weeks of leave. These follow-up interviews aimed to inquire into how they were coping with new responsibilities (one was a first-time mother) without their husband around and to find out more about how the return and then departure of a husband was experienced from the perspective of a wife who was going through it for the first time. In contrast to the recollections of wives who had gotten used to the cyclicality and chronicity of departure and return and who, it might be said, recounted a composite of years of experiences, this particular wife provided an account of her experience as someone who still had to get used to a routine of return and departure.

The shortest interview lasted just under forty minutes; the longest almost two hours. The average length of the interviews was one hour and twenty minutes. All of the forty interviews were conducted in Ilokano except for two, which were done in Filipino. All interviewees, however, mixed Ilokano, Filipino, and English languages. I transcribed all the interviews, identified emergent and recurrent themes upon which I prepared an indexing and coding frame. This article is based on one such theme, communication.

Here I focus on communication enabled by and dependent on mobile phones, the discussion of which I frame within the context of the state of telecommunication in the Philippines more broadly, and in San Gabriel more specifically. This contextualization underscores the vitally crucial role played by mobile phones in the lives of these seafarer families. It shows how mobile communication has helped them overcome many of the limitations obtaining in the unevenness of the distribution of telecommunication infrastructure and facilities in the country. Moreover, this will help us better appreciate the role played by mobile phones in the lives of transnational families as illustrated by the experiences of seamen's families.

Framing Mobile Phone Communication

In the Philippines access to the Internet remains, by global standards, at a low 25 percent. In contrast, 60 million Filipinos (of 90 million) are mobile phone subscribers (Pertierra 2010). This scale of penetration and acceptance of the mobile phone has been attributed partly to Filipinos' "strong cultural orientation for constant and perpetual contact" (Pertierra 2006, 1).

Rather than merely attribute the Filipinos' need to keep in touch to an essentialist cultural trait, it makes more sense to see it, among other factors, in the context of migration, and hence in the separation of family members and relatives. This would put the Filipinos' need to communicate within a more historicized political-economic context. The pervasiveness and (the now) mundanity of migration necessitates communication and the exploitation of the technology that allows them, in the most affordable way, to maintain family ties and relationships. I therefore take the position of Manuel Castells and his colleagues (2007, 125) who have argued that "[p]eople shape communication technology, rather than the other way around. Yet, the specificity of the technology reflects onto the way in which people conduct their lives" (cf. Arminen 2009; Horst and Miller 2006; Miller and Slater 2000; Wilding 2006). This position offers a sounder and more nuanced way of looking at the social consequences of new communication technologies than the perspectives provided, for example, by Ito et al. (2005), who have argued in the context of Japan that mobile telephony leads to individualization and atomization at the expense of sociality or social relationships. Rather than see new communication technologies as giving rise to brave new worlds, as Wilding (2006, 126) says, it makes more sense to see how they "have been incorporated . . . into the familiar, ongoing patterns of everyday social life." We turn below to a historical contextualization of the mobile phone's place in the lives of Filipinos.

The Liberalization of Philippine Telecommunication

The deregulation of the Philippine telecommunication industry, which gathered momentum during the administration of Pres. Fidel V. Ramos (1992–1998), opened up to at least eight other players a sector that had hitherto been a monopoly of the Philippine Long Distance Telephone Company (PLDT)—which, despite its name, was a private business whose majority stake was "owned" by the family of Antonio Cojuangco, allegedly the favorite nephew of Ramos's predecessor, Corazon Cojuangco Aquino. A report on the political economy of reform during the Ramos administration described the Cojuangco family as "politically well-connected" whose influence extended "across the three branches [executive, legislative, and judiciary] of government" (Bernardo and Tang 2008, 18). In 1992 around 800,000 Filipinos, 75 percent of them in Metro Manila, were waiting for a telephone line. But "instead of expanding its network to meet service

demand" (ibid.), PLDT, which had over 90 percent of the entire country's telephone lines (ibid.), spent heavily to protect its market share (Tiglao 1993 cited in ibid.).

In 1995 only 1.4 million telephone lines were available. By 2000 the number dramatically rose to 6.9 million, which improved telephone density —the number of fixed-line telephones per 100 population—from 2.01 in 1995 to 9.12 in 2000. However, there was a heavy urban bias to the roll out of telephone service. Of the 6.9 million lines, 4.9 million (or 72 percent) went to 36 urban centers. Metro Manila, where only about 14 percent of the Philippine population lived, had 47 percent of the total, equivalent to 3.2 million lines. Countrywide, by December 2001, only 844 of the 1,609 towns and cities (52.4 percent) had fixed line coverage. Only 654 (or 40.6 percent) had cellular phone coverage (Salazar 2007, 280–82). Salazar (ibid., 282) writes that "despite about 4 million fixed lines lying idle, [765] cities and towns were still without fixed line local exchange services."[1]

The liberalization of the Philippine telecommunication industry was pursued following a Service Area Scheme (SAS), which divided the market into eleven areas that were distributed to eight international gateway and cellular telephone operators. Each operator was assigned a profitable and an unprofitable area "to ensure both operational viability and the provision of rural telephony" (ibid., 243). The SAS was drawn up in 1994 based on consultations involving the National Telecommunications Commission (NTC), the Department of Transportation and Communication (DOTC), and industry players. When the new players' plans were examined by the NTC, it became clear that they were all targeting highly urban areas such as Metro Manila, Cebu, Davao, Baguio, and Subic where there was a high demand for telephones (ibid., 242–43). The SAS was meant to correct this urban bias "by allowing a company to earn profits but at the same time, ensure that part of those profits was channelled to serve less profitable areas" (ibid., 243). However, rural telephony seemed to have been condemned from the beginning since operators were directed, at minimum, to install one rural exchange line for every ten urban lines installed (ibid.). Moreover, there was a decline in the demand for telephone line connections precipitated by the 1997 Asian financial crisis. With the decline in incomes and the consequent instability of the economic and financial situation of many Filipino households, prepaid cellular phones became the alternative, which had the advantage of mobility (ibid.). Text messaging, introduced

in the Philippines in September 1994 by Globe Telecom, has also made communication cheaper. The Philippines has become "the texting capital of the world" with the volume of text messages sent placed at ten times the per capita world average (Lallana 2004 cited in Pertierra 2005). It is estimated that Filipinos send two billion texts daily (Office of the Press Secretary 2009 cited in Aguila 2008–2009).

The data below on cellular mobile subscribers in selected ASEAN countries, 1990–2005, show the spectacular growth in mobile phone use in the Philippines, a growth best appreciated comparatively within the Southeast Asian region:

Cellular mobile subscribers in selected ASEAN countries, 1990–2005

	TOTAL NUMBER OF SUBSCRIBERS (THOUSANDS)						AS % OF TOTAL NUMBER OF TELEPHONE SUBSCRIBERS		
COUNTRY	1990	1991	1995	1999	2001	2005	1999	2001	2005
Malaysia	54.6	70.9	872.8	2,990	7,480	19,545	40.3	61.6	81.7
Philippines	9.8	33.8	492.7	2,750	11,700	34,779	48.5	77.9	91.2
Indonesia	21.0	24.5	218.6	2,220	6,520	46,910	26.8	47.5	78.6
Singapore	51.0	81.9	291.9	1,630	2,990	4,385	46.5	60.6	70.4
Thailand	66.3	210.0	1,087.5	2,340	7,550	27,379	31.0	55.5	80.1

Source: Salazar 2007, 363.

The access of low-income groups to mobile phones reversed what initially was the trend in 1991, when only those in high-income groups could afford a mobile phone. By the end of 2005, around 34.8 million Filipinos were mobile phone subscribers, whereas only 3.4 million were fixed line subscribers. This number represented 91.2 percent of telephone subscribers while the remaining 8.8 percent were subscribed to fixed line phones (Salazar 2007). By 2007, the number had risen to 57 million mobile phone subscribers (NTC 2007). Mobile phones, due to their affordability and accessibility, became a rational and logical alternative to fixed line phones (Salazar 2007).

The mobile phone's penetration into ordinary Filipino lives may also be accounted for by how its cost was later built around the (weak) purchasing power of many Filipinos. Two marketing strategies, for example, of Smart, the country's leading cellular phone service provider, illustrate this point.

The first, electronic load (or e-load) enabled users to purchase phone credit (or "load," hence the name "e-load") for as low as P30. Previously the minimum cost of a phone card was P300 (Nagasaka 2007). E-load enabled many Filipino users to acquire phone credits depending on how much they could afford at the time of purchase. The second, *pasa* load, enabled users to share (pasa, pass on) their phone card credit or load "to their friends' or relatives' cell phones by sending to a designated number their text messages that include the cell phone numbers of beneficiaries and the amount they want to give" (ibid., 103). Initially the minimum amount that could be "passed" was P10 but this was later reduced to one peso (ibid.). Globe Telecom, Smart's closest competitor, later provided similar services: "auto-load" and "share-a-load" (ibid.). I would argue that the business model for these two strategies was based on the Filipino *sari-sari* (convenience) store and the selling of goods through the *tingi* (retail) system.[2] This further embedded the mobile phone in systems many Filipinos knew well because it was partly through these systems that they negotiated and transacted their daily lives.

To summarize this section, two fundamental reasons might explain the mobile phone's ubiquity in the Philippines. The first is its "leapfrogging" of the physical infrastructure that is the requisite of landline phones and the Internet. The mobile phone opened many remote towns and villages that were not attractive enough to the profiteering eyes of telecommunication companies owned by rent-seeking oligarchs. The second is its affordability not only in the sense of the cost of a mobile phone unit but also equally in terms of how its cost was adapted to the economic power (or weakness) of the general Filipino populace. The combination of these two factors enabled many rural and urban poor households to become linked to physically distant family and kin both in the Philippines and overseas. The landline phone, which previously had seemed so essential, became simply dispensable.

Telephony in San Gabriel

The mobile becoming an alternative to the landline phone might be demonstrated by the experience of San Gabriel. The town's first household telephone lines were installed in 1992. People who wanted (and had long waited) to have telephones at home recall with good humor the excitement generated by the announcement asking people to register their names if they

wanted a connection. People remember the rush going to the municipal government office to have their names listed, which was also actually a way of determining the demand for telephones.

Installation was initially limited to the poblacion (the town proper covering only eighteen of a total forty-three villages), where, according to San Gabriel's annual state of the local government report for 2009, only 30 percent of the town's population of 32,345 (as of 2007) resided. However, three villages outside of the town proper but which were near the poblacion and lay along or traversed by the national highway were included. Later, however, residents of a village farther from it (it is in fact a village that served as San Gabriel's border with the next town) but bisected by the national highway requested that telephone coverage be extended to their area. Because the national highway passed through it, the village's distance from the poblacion was neutralized by its accessibility. The request was granted since enough number of households were going to subscribe and therefore justified the extension of the telephone area coverage. The telecommunications company manager whom I interviewed explained that enough people could afford to pay for the subscription since from that village there were many overseas migrant workers and, even more crucially, Hawaiianos, that is, Ilokanos who migrated to Hawaii and had become either US permanent residents or citizens but kept close ties with their families and relatives. In this wise, it will be useful to provide a brief account of Ilokano migration to Hawaii.

From 1909 to 1946 almost 126,000 Filipinos went to Hawaii to work in sugar plantations (Sharma 1987, 16 citing Dorita 1954, 131). They were recruited by the Hawaiian Sugar Planters' Association (HSPA), whose officials conducted aggressive recruitment missions in the Philippines beginning in 1906. Japanese workers had hitherto comprised the majority of Hawaii's sugar plantation labor force but, with Japanese workers increasingly becoming militant and with restrictions to Japanese immigration to the United States as a result of the signing of the Gentleman's Agreement in 1908, plantation owners looked for alternative sources of workers (Ngai 2004). The Ilocos provinces became the dominant source of workers for Hawaii. From 1915 to 1931, a total of 100,371 Filipino workers migrated to Hawaii, 67,279 of whom came from the Ilocos region (Abra, Ilocos Norte, Ilocos Sur, La Union, and Pangasinan provinces). Ilocos Norte alone contributed almost a third (30,641) of all these workers (Sharma 1987, 17–18).

This labor migration would become the conduit for later Filipino and especially Ilokano migration to Hawaii and mainland United States beginning

in the mid-1960s. The 1965 Immigration Act abolished the national origin quota system, which restricted immigration from countries in the eastern hemisphere (prior to this legislation, there was discriminatory preference for European immigration to the US). The 1965 law allowed family reunification and Filipinos already in Hawaii took advantage of this opportunity to file formal petitions for the immigration of family members. From 1960 to 1964, before the liberalization of US immigration policy, only a little more than 15,000 Filipinos entered the US, compared with the 215,000 who did in the period 1980–1984. Between 1970 and 1976, almost 27,000 Filipinos entered Hawaii through the law's family reunification provision (Teodoro 1981, 30). Ilokanos have become the dominant Philippine ethnolinguistic group in Hawaii, comprising almost 80 percent of the Filipino population there (Aquino 2000).

To go back to the discussion of the installation of telephone lines in San Gabriel particularly the extension of the coverage to the village bisected by the national highway, the telecommunications manager's explanation for why the residents' request for coverage was granted adverted to the source of funding for these households, that is, that the monthly bill would be paid for with money sent by the residents' relatives living or working overseas. The manager also identified the coordinates of this telecommunication. The telephone, it would seem, was meant to enable communication between residents from the village and their relatives who now lived in Hawaii or who are working in other countries more than communication between village or even town residents. This point resonates with Vertovec's (2004) argument that improvements in telecommunications infrastructure have significantly been driven and will continue to be driven by transnational migration practices.

Out of 6,289 households in San Gabriel, 765 or 12 percent had landline telephones. Of these, 720 or 94 percent lived in the poblacion (inclusive of the three adjacent villages) and 45 in the border village (including a neighboring village). Overall, 23 out of 43 villages (53 percent) had landline phone connections. The concentration of landline telephones in the poblacion was inversely related to San Gabriel's population distribution. According to San Gabriel's annual state of the local government report for 2009, only 30 percent of the town's population lived in the poblacion.

Residents who had no landline phones and access to Internet at home had recourse to the mobile phone. Even those who had landline phones also had mobile phones. The mobile phone was particularly welcomed by those

who lived in villages and who did not have landline phone connections either because they could not afford one or could not get one because their village was not covered by the roll out. An antenna, with a 5-kilometer coverage radius built around 1998 or 1999 atop a hill has greatly improved mobile phone signal in San Gabriel, at least for subscribers to Smart cellular phone service. Based on figures provided by the Smart Wireless Division in Laoag City, as of June 2010, there were around 2,800 subscribers from San Gabriel of mobile phone broadband Internet from this provider alone.[3] Of the seven wives who had home Internet access, two used their mobile phones to access the Internet. Both lived in villages not served by landline connections due to their distance from the poblacion.

Cheap International Telephone Calls and Prepaid Phone Cards

Steven Vertovec (2004, 219) has written that processes of global linkage particularly "among non-elite social groups such as migrants" are facilitated more by "the boom in ordinary, cheap international telephone calls" than any other technological development. He noted that cheap calls, which enable and facilitate "everyday" transnational connectivity, have become these migrants' main connection to their social networks, particularly in their source communities. For Filipinos, of whom 40 percent or so live below the poverty line, these cheap international calls have been truly a windfall, if not manna from communication heaven. To illustrate, based on 1989 exchange rates, a three-minute landline call cost US$13.40, way beyond the reach of ordinary Filipinos who earned on average a daily wage of US$8.25 (Paragas 2009). The liberalization of the telecommunications industry both in the Philippines and abroad has considerably brought down the cost of a three-minute mobile phone call from the Philippines to anywhere in the world to US$0.50, or 5 percent of the 1996 average daily income of Filipino workers (ibid.).[4]

However, in San Gabriel (and in the Philippines generally), it is not just that international calls have become a lot more affordable but the availability or accessibility of telephones has facilitated transnational connectivity and communication. Prior to the installation of landline phones in San Gabriel in 1992, residents relied on two public phone booths standing near the municipal government building (and one other in a village served by the national highway) if they wanted to make or receive phone calls. One can thus imagine the jubilation felt by those who had long waited for a landline phone when it finally arrived. Yet the arrival of landline phones excluded many, even those who could afford one, on the basis of where they lived. One interviewee who lived in one such village went to the extent of renting a house in the town proper just so she could get a landline and be better able to communicate with her husband. For the rest who did not have the financial wherewithal to do the same, it was the mobile phone that gave them connectivity—local, national, and global—as with many others in San Gabriel and in the entire Philippines.

All of the wives in this study use a mobile phone to communicate with their husbands, either through text messages or calls. Although only about seven have home Internet connection and a few others occasionally communicate with their husbands through the Internet at cafés or at a relative's house, the mobile phone is the most pervasive communication device they use. Most of those who have home Internet connection and a landline phone also have mobile phones. Only a few have home access to several ways of communicating with their husbands, such as video calls (Skype), chats, emails, landline phone calls, mobile phone calls, and social networking sites (such as Facebook). Access to these media is simply not available to most of the women. To many of them, the mobile phone is all they have. With their reliance on mobile phones, these wives have become consumers of another communication innovation, the prepaid phone card, which has made calls cheaper and hence contributed to the expansion of international communication through telephones (Mahler 2001; Vertovec 2004).

None of the wives in this study has a mobile phone with a payment plan (or postpaid). All rely on prepaid phone cards and many of them make extensive use of the ways by which mobile phone service providers have made it possible for phone card credit or "load" to be shared with others (such as through pasa load) or how a prepaid phone card's call time can be prolonged (such as through "unli-calls" [unlimited calls]). This suggests that many of the wives have found the mobile phone not only as the one available to them but also as the one that requires a financial outlay that can be flexibly suited around the financial needs and expenditures of the family. It has been noted by Fortunati (2002) that mobile phone calls are used sparingly because they cost substantially more than landline calls. However, many of the families have no other alternative but the mobile phone. The availability in the Philippines of prepaid phone cards that allow for unli-

calls, for example, has made mobile phone calls originating from the wives relatively cheap and affordable. All that is required for these wives to be charged the local rates for overseas phone calls (and text messages) is for their husbands to have a roaming SIM (subscriber identity module or subscriber identification module) card; however, a roaming SIM card does not allow husbands overseas to call or text at local rates. For example, whereas a wife is charged P1 for a text message she sends to her husband, the husband is charged P20 for every text message he sends.[5]

Phone cards are an important item in the family budget. The use of prepaid phone cards has given the women a sense of being in control of money spent on their mobiles as they always know how much phone credit they have left, and they can have a record of how much money they spend on phone cards. This is unlike using a postpaid mobile phone plan, which enables one to find out actual expenses only at the time when the bill for the month is received.

All of the seamen's wives recognize how mobile phones have greatly improved their communication with their husbands. Those already married during the "phoneless period" say that, because of the mobile phone and other communication technologies now available and to which they have access, they have become "lazy" at writing letters. They describe a process by which the need to write letters to their husbands has lost its force of necessity. However, although writing letters is now a thing of the past, some "traditional" or asynchronous ways of keeping in touch have persisted, such as the sending of children's or family pictures, a request that husbands would text to their wives. These seamen's families show that their use of new technologies is contingent on their capabilities, needs, and the sophistication with which they can use these technologies.

All of the wives talk of how, because of better and faster means of communication, they are able to deal with separation more easily, specifically with worrying about their husbands' health and safety. Most importantly, family relationships have benefitted from constant or more regular and frequent, because cheap, communication. Yet, as Vertovec (2004, 223) has noted:

> For migrants and their kin in distant parts of the world, telephone calls can only provide a kind of punctuated sociality that can heighten emotional strain as well as alleviate it. This mode of intermittent communication cannot bridge all gaps of information and expression endemic to long-distance separation. Nevertheless, cheap international telephone calls join migrants and their significant others in ways that are deeply meaningful to people on both ends of the line.

In the following section we turn to a discussion of how telecommunication, particularly through the mobile phone, has enabled and shaped possibilities for (re)producing a real and imagined sense of family in the context of lives dominated by absence and separation.

Copresence: Bringing the Absent Father Home

To better appreciate how new telecommunication technologies have facilitated and fostered family relationships, this section begins with a discussion of husband-wife/family communication prior to the mobile phone becoming easily available in San Gabriel. Succeeding parts provide a short description of the dynamics of communication between the seamen and their families and with the ways wives have utilized communication to help their absent husbands experience an absent presence (Gergen 2002; Licoppe 2004) in their families.

Wives aged at least 40 years old at the time of the interview describe communication with their husband through the postal system as excruciatingly slow. One wife, who has always lived in San Gabriel, some 500 kilometers away from Manila, where all letters bound for and sent from the Philippines first make their stop, recounts that in one year she received four letters only from her husband. This, she clarifies, was not due to her husband's lack of interest in writing back. Another wife, married to a cruise ship crewman and who lived for a couple of years in Manila and hence got her letters relatively quickly, reports receiving a letter once a month. A younger wife, who also lived in Manila for a few years, says she received two letters in one month, documenting some improvement in postal delivery.[6]

It might be argued that wives and husbands communicated "about the past." This is due to the nature of letters as a communicative practice and to the postal system's unreliability and slowness. What was recreated was a sense of, for example, what happened during the previous month, events that husbands would get to read about with even more time lag because, as the wives put it, of their having to move from port to port. Letters narrated events

that had "long" happened and therefore removed any sense of immediacy from their narration. Laura, for example, looks back and compares her letters before her husband became a chief engineer to *telenovelas*, a popular television genre known for their extremely convoluted and drawn-out plots. The comparison is to the length of her letters because in the intervening time she would have accumulated so many things to share with her husband. Husbands and wives were thus at a spatial and temporal remove from these events.

In contrast, because of instantaneous communication, a few of the wives say that it is as though their husbands were with them. Arlene states: "Kasla everyday kam' met lang nga agkadkadua, everyday nga tawag, text, email kasdiay" (It is like we are together every day, calls every day, text, email, like that). Dina also talks about this sense of presence.

> Itatta nga adda cell phone any time adda communication dikad haanka unay nga . . . agpinpinnadamag kay latta, di adda latta communicationyo. Kasla adda met laeng inta sibaymo latta.
>
> Now that there are cell phones, we have communication anytime, you are not that . . . you update each other, so communication between the two of you is there. It is like he is beside you.

This sense of copresence is a consequence of husbands and wives being able to get in touch quickly, share news, and for the husband to even take part in family activities despite being physically absent. This copresence was not possible when wives and husbands relied on letters. In contrast, telephone conversations enable the family to "share affects and emotions, allowing their non-present partners access to the experience on the spot" (Arminen 2009, 98). Through these new telecommunication devices, Filipino seamen and their families not only "retain a sense of collectivity" (Vertovec 2004, 222) but also negotiate relationships in new ways. Through them, as Sarah Mahler (2001, 584) has said about transnational Salvadorans, although "they are still physically distanced . . . they can now feel and function like a family."

Fostering Father-Children Relationships

When wives and husbands talk on the phone, wives make sure their husbands also talk to their children.[7] Bearing in mind that many of the wives

gave birth without their husbands around and that their husbands saw their children for the first time when they were already many months, sometimes more than a year, old, wives make a conscious effort to "introduce" father and child to each other. Or, because their husbands are not around to see their children grow, wives try to establish emotional ties between children and their father so that when they are home they already have something to start on. Equally importantly, wives do this so that children will not see their fathers as strangers. As to why wives ask their husbands to speak to their children, Maricel explains:

> Tapnon uray awan ni daddyda, at least makuada saan met didiay closeness da ngem didiay communication, tay mangngeg da met ti boses na tapno no sumangpet a ket ammoda met ti kua . . . kaslang . . . closeda . . . kasdiay.
>
> So that even if their daddy is not here, it is not their closeness but their communication, at least they can hear his voice so that when he comes home, they know . . . it's like they are close . . . like that.

Wives also show these children pictures of their father to reinforce their phone talk. Despite this strategy, the wives know that the emotional bond a child has with his or her father cannot be forged through voice and aurality; there is no substitute for the physical, tactile, aural, and visual that their presence simultaneously enables. Rosario talks about how pained she was during the first few days of her husband's coming home when she saw her children behave toward their father like he was alien to them, as though they were not his own children. Yet the wives know that without those phone conversations mediating their relationships, ties between father and children would be so much more fraught with estrangement and awkwardness.

Maintaining or developing father-children ties through telecommunication technologies is a complex undertaking. However, most of the wives share how they have been able to forge these relationships mainly through mobile communication. Wives, particularly those with young children, talk about how fathers are pleased and buoyed by their phone conversations with them (with some children even singing to them). Others, such as Maricel, coach their children to tell their fathers not to sleep with other women. Some wives point, however, to the impossibility

of catalyzing father-children emotional bonds particularly from children. Their experiences show that communication cannot always fully bridge the physical and emotional gap caused by the separation (cf., e.g., Parreñas 2008). Gina shares that, although her husband wants to talk to their children, the children find it difficult not only to express warmth but also, more fundamentally, to even want to talk to their father:

> yung mga bata parang hindi masyadong ano sa kanya. . . . Pilitin ko muna bago nila kausapin yung papa nila. Mahirap ano, medyo yung loob. . . . Kasi nakasanayan na mula noong pagkasilang, yun na. Pinipilit ko sila malayo kasi loob nila.

> the children are not that [close] to him [their father]. . . . I have to really insist otherwise they would not talk to their father. It is difficult, the ties. . . . Because they've gotten used to it since birth. I have to force them since they are quite distant.

However, Gina clarifies that it is different when her husband is home. Although it takes time for the children to adjust to their father's presence, because the husband would do things to win their affection, the children eventually warm up to him. Nevertheless, this does not lead to warmer phone conversations later on. Josefa shares her husband's comment that their daughter would take the initiative to talk to her father only when she fancied something, which she would then ask him to buy for her.

Wives are aware that distance and separation can have negative consequences on relationships (Fortunati 2002; Sahlstein 2004). They use the affordances of telecommunication technologies to ameliorate and mitigate the negative consequences of this separation, consequences that have implications for the work they do as mothers and wives. For those whose situations have been more complex and circumscribed (by factors such as whether their children were already growing up before the era of affordable mobile phone communication in San Gabriel), even the inadequacy of telecommunication technologies to facilitate warmer father-children ties still communicates to both wife and husband the need to do something about these strained relations. In this sense, communication conveys its own limits. Although there are mothers who have not facilitated warmer father-children relationships through communication technologies, more mothers

in this study say that their children and husband have succeeded in having meaningful emotional relationships through mobile phone communication. Mobile phone communication has enabled fathers to lessen the emotional gaps caused by separation due to migration (cf. Aguilar 2009, ch. 11).

Creating a Space for Husbands in the Lives of their Children

One of the ways by which wives bring a sense of home to their husbands is by keeping them updated with their children's activities and accomplishments. For husbands whose wives gave birth without them around, stories about their babies they have yet to see enable husbands to "see" the growth of their children. Husbands ask whether the baby is already eating solid food or walking, has grown teeth, or is beginning to utter words. For husbands with school-going children, such updates enable them to imagine a place for themselves in what is going on in their children's lives and make meaningful attempts at inserting themselves in these moments. By knowing what is going on or what has recently happened, fathers can engage their children beyond formulaic "how are you" questions. By knowing what their children are up to, husbands, according to the wives, feel as though they are home. And because they learn of these things quickly, sometimes while these are happening, fathers are afforded more meaningful participation. These phone conversations help "in generating a strong sense of shared space and time that overlooked—even if only temporarily—the realities of geographic distance and time zones" (Wilding 2006, 133). They allow husbands to "bilocate," that is, be on his ship yet also experience a sense of being home.

Mildred's husband, apprised of the fall in his children's school quarterly marks, told his children of his disappointment:

> apay nababa ti gradesyo kunana ket. Dayta lang ti daw-dawatek kaniayo kunana ket di yo pay maited kaniak kunana ket. Amin nga kayatyo ket gatgatangek met kunana. Nga uray no nangina ket gatgatangek met. Dakayo ket dayta la ti dawdawatek ket di yo pay makua. So haan met agun-uni dagita ubbing nukua. So bagbagaanna met nukua. Lalaingenyo ngamin met a a ket nag-sui ni papayo kunak nukua. Ilalaingmi met mama kunada met nukua.

why are your grades low? he said. That is all I am asking of you, he said, and you could not even give it. Everything you want, I buy it, he said. Even if it is expensive, I buy it. You, that is all I want from you, you can't give it. So the children will not say a single word. So he talks to them. Give your best, see your father is upset, I would say. We are giving our best, mama they would answer.

Her husband then devised a reward system to motivate them to apply themselves harder.

no adda perfect ket bayadak . . . Isu adu nukua, urnungenda nukua . . . Isu nga no sumangpet ket iruarda amin daytay perfectda nukua bayadanna met nukua. Isu maay-ayo dagita ubbing nukua, isu nakaad-adu ti perfectda. . . . manu ngarud nukua papa. Ibaga met nukua ni papada ket sangagasut ti maysa. Ti ay-ayatda, no sumangpet ni papada ket nakaad-adu ti kwartada . . .

if you get a perfect [score in a quiz, homework, project], I will pay. So they have many, they collect and keep them. When he comes home, they bring them out and he pays them. The children like it very much, so they have many perfect scores. How much, Papa? Their father would say, one hundred pesos each. How they love it, when their father is home, they have plenty of money.

When wives make their husbands aware of what is going on at home particularly with respect to their children, they make it possible for them to become more involved in their lives. Michael Billig (1995) has advanced the concept of "banal nationalism" to refer to the routine and everyday practices in which people talk, express, practice, and experience nationalism and national identity. We may speak of a banal sense of family and intimacy arising from the wives' attempts to apprise their husbands of what their children are doing (cf. Christensen 2009; Licoppe and Heurtin 2002). These frequent telephone conversations enable fathers to make their presence felt not only through establishing emotional ties with their children but also, as Mildred's case demonstrates, in disciplining their children. In the next section we turn to a discussion of how fathers are involved in disciplining children.

Disciplining from a Distance and Vitiated Authority

When couples talk, the wife "reports" to the husband their children's misbehavior and asks him to talk to them. Wives thus enable husbands to exercise parental-paternal authority from afar. However, although telecommunication devices help these fathers exercise what Raul Pertierra (2005) has called "a post-corporeal agency," this authority is vitiated by the fathers' absence.

When talking about husbands' involvement in disciplining children, we need to have a firm grasp of the nature of the disciplinary issues raised by the wives. These issues are age-related or linked to stages in the life course. The first is behavior associated with growing-up children, that is, when children become more difficult to handle and the problem is exclusively behavioral and part of growing up. This situation allows fathers to simultaneously exercise authority and tighten emotional bonds with their children. Because husbands are away, wives say that their husbands tend not to scold their children but to talk to them in a tone that is gentle yet firm, and in a manner that strengthens their relationship. Teresa, for example, says that sometimes it is not just her voice but also her blood pressure that is raised by her son's stubbornness. Her husband, who would ask their son if he had been spanked by his mother (who had in fact told her spouse she spanked the child), would tell him:

sobrang makulit ka siguro siempre hindi naman magagalit ang mommy mo. Para matulungan mo naman siya magpakabait ka rin. Para yun lang naman ang maitulong mo sa kanya.

maybe you are just very stubborn otherwise your mother would not get angry. In order that you can also help her, be good. That's all you have to do to help her.

These children will say yes to their father, promising to behave better. But because they are young children, their mothers say they go back to being stubborn once the conversation is over.

The second type of discipline-related issue poses more challenge in terms of how fathers exercise their authority to discipline their children, particularly in instilling in them a sense of responsibility. This concerns

adult or approaching-adulthood children whose behavior is a worrying concern because of its consequences for their future and the situation of the entire family. Dolores, for example, recounts one conversation between her husband and their eldest son:

> Agsingsingpetka barok. Haan kayo nga agbarte-bartek, kasdiay.
> Aggaggagetkayo, tulunganyo ta bagbagiyo . . .
> Denggen met dagitay ubbingyo?
> "Wen, wen," kunkunada met. Ayna Apo!
>
> Be good, my son. Do not drink too much, like that. Work hard, help yourself . . .
> Do your children take heed?
> "Yes, yes," they would say. My God!

"'Yes, yes,' . . . My God!" makes it clear that this paternal advice is not really taken to heart. Without the father being physically there, his recalcitrant children can say one thing to him and do another. In trying to discipline children, fathers can only advise and encourage their children. They can perform the role but not exercise authority to ensure that what is said is also done. To be sure, even in families where fathers are around, grown-up children may still misbehave. Compared with fathers who are physically present in the home, seamen-fathers arguably are more constrained by their distance because they do not want to strain further their relationships with their children, which are already affected by their absence.

Breaking and Withholding News

For seamen who are away from their families, relatives, and other kin and social relations, knowing about what is going on in their lives and about what is happening in their neighborhood, village, and town helps them retain, as one interviewee puts it, a sense of "still being there." Consequently, they will have little difficulty participating in family, neighborhood, and village "talk" and affairs when they are back for their shore leave. Most importantly, knowing about what is happening to their families gives them a sense of still being responsible for the family, and it is also an expression of the respect due them as husband, father, or family member. Precisely because they are a member of the family and an important one, being given access to news and

information countered any feeling or sense of being excluded, which would have heightened their separation.

Breaking News

Most of the wives prefer to tell their husbands positive news about their families or about their children's activities. As much as possible they do not want to give their husbands any cause for worry. When they relay news of illness or death, it is mostly about neighbors and other people, which wives think will not impact negatively their husbands' well being while on ship. However, one wife says that she does not keep things from her husband because the less she tells him, the more worried he gets. For a few others, telling their husbands eases whatever burden weighs on their minds. However, they assure their husbands that it is not something they could not handle and so the husbands should not worry. Two other wives assert, however, that there simply is no point in withholding something that their husbands will eventually know about.

For those who regulate the news they share with their husbands, there are instances, however, when they are impelled to break bad or serious news about their families. These instances involve them dealing with certain dynamics that shape the breaking or embargo of news. Some wives tell their husbands what otherwise they would have withheld, worried that their husbands would ask why they had not been told right away. This suggests that husbands believe they have the right not only to be told of these things but also to be told of them right away. Others do not want their husbands to know of these things from other people—which their husbands dislike particularly—something that, because of available telecommunication devices, wives cannot monitor, let alone control.

News Embargo

For many of the wives, it is precisely their husbands' living and working on a ship that sometimes make them hesitant to break certain news to them. Some wives fear their husbands might think of jumping off their ship, a fear reinforced by reports of their husbands' behavior upon hearing about family circumstances. These reports reach them through vacationing seamen with whom their husbands work on the same ship or through these seamen's wives. To be sure, most of the wives say that their husbands prefer knowing everything to being kept in the dark. Some wives describe their husbands as

"becoming restless" (*maburiboran*, *di makatalna*, *di makaidna*) when they are told something happened but only get bits and pieces of information. Sketchy news makes them suspect that something more serious than what they have been told has happened. Some husbands, knowing that their wives choose the news they share, in fact ask their wives to tell them about "bad" news. Of forty wives interviewed, only one, Maricel, has "instructions" (*bilin*) from her husband, with whom I also talked informally, not to tell him anything about incidents or illnesses "that are not that emergency" (meaning serious). If she can still deal with them on her own, then it would be best that she keeps the news from him so he can concentrate on his work. When the situation is serious, and wives are duty-bound to let their husbands know, such as when a child is in the hospital, wives resort to lessening the severity of the situation. In such instances, wives intend to give their husbands the full version once things improve. Dina's case demonstrates this dynamic.

Dina's son suffered from a kidney infection and was in the ICU for eight days. She merely told her husband that their son was in hospital. Whenever he called to inquire about him, she simply said that he was getting better. It was only a month after their son's discharge that she told her husband what really happened. She explained that she did not want him to become too worried that he might injure himself while working. Although the husband understood her concern and conceded that his son's illness would have distracted him, he insisted that she should have told him everything from the start.

It is not just wives who try to spare their spouse of worry. Janet, for example, learned about her husband falling ill only by asking her husband's work mate about how he was. She also knew about the injury he had on-board ship through this same person. She knew her husband did not want to add to the things she had to think of, but as his wife she expected her husband to tell her of these things. Janet's husband faced the predicament many seamen's wives have to face, which is that they are no longer their husband's only source of news and information.

Missing Husbands

The preceding sections have looked at wives as agents using telecommunication devices to facilitate family ties. This section focuses on spousal ties. It begins with a discussion of quarrels, and then moves on to how wives and husbands encourage each other. Although the section heading points to an absence (that of the husband) and alludes to issues of intimacy, I am expanding the semantic field of intimacy to encompass spousal arguments conducted over the phone. Although they are arguments, they nonetheless produce the sense of proximity and dynamic characteristic of couples who live in the same house. Although they are not "positive" intimacies narrowly defined, they speak to the strains of separation and the ways lives are negotiated and conducted across different space-time locations. Finally, I discuss briefly intimacy between separated couples.

In Good Times and In Bad: Phone Spats and Encouragement[8]

Living apart exacts a toll and it is during telephone conversations (and even in text message exchanges) when tensions, which have lain dormant, can erupt. In these events pent-up emotions and fears get ventilated. A single word, uttered in a particular way, can be taken by the other as implying more. Or a question, intended as a joke, albeit expressive of one's insecurities, can be interpreted as "fishing for something" and become a source of an argument, resulting in "a period when couples do not speak to one another" (*tampuhan*).

Josefa and Raquel recount phone quarrels caused by their questions about other women, which the husbands took as accusations of infidelity. Three other wives say they do not like their husbands' questions about where they put their money, offended by what they perceive as accusations of profligacy. One wife's phone arguments with her husband stemmed from his "jealousy." Because of the time she finishes work, she gets home late and sometimes gets a ride from her male officemates. For her part, Leonora recounts a phone argument in which she gave free rein to her anger, repeatedly calling her husband "useless" (*awan serserbim*). About to give birth at the time of this recounted argument, she explains that she was under a lot of stress: she had not received any allotment for at least two months and she worried about how she was going to pay for a likely caesarean delivery. Finally, Aida, who has a successful commercial business but one that has taken so much of her time and energy, admits that she is presently (that is, during the time of the interview and a few days before it) not in good terms with her husband. As she puts it, "we are not friends" (*saankam nga agfriend*).

> ta no . . . tumawag, isu met ti orasko, makatur-turogak unayen. Isu tay bagsakan nak nukua. . . . Sigawannak nukua kunana nukua, ngayon lang tayo mag-uusap tapos inaantok ka na!
>
> when he calls, that is also the time when I am very sleepy. So he slams the phone. He'd shout at me saying, it is only now that we can talk and you are already sleepy!

Although they sometimes exchange harsh words, couples do encourage each other. Acknowledging her fault, Leonora, cited above, apologized to her husband for having seen her own predicament only and forgotten her husband's own situation. Reminded by him that at least she was surrounded by family and relatives whereas he did not have that kind of immediate kin and social support, she encouraged him to be strong and bear his situation with perseverance. Karen helped her husband, who had wanted to come home even before his six-month contract ended, to endure the separation. Indeed, he even extended his contract for two and a half months.

Sometimes, wives encourage their husbands by communicating to them both a sense of their obligation and their central role in the future of their family. Rosa provides an exemplary illustration. She says there have been times when her husband, a cruise ship crew, has come close to giving up.

> Ket makaib-ibitak nukua met a. Ibagbagak nga agan-anus ket babassit pay dagita annakmi. Narigat ti agpabasa no awan ti kwartam. Awan sabali nga tumulong kaniami no di sika kunkunak.
> [. . .]
> Isu nga tay patpatatagek latta ti nakemnan. Pakatawaek kasdiay.
>
> And I would be close to crying. I tell him to endure because our children are still small. It is going to be hard to send them to school if we did not have any money. No one is going to help us except you, I tell him.
> [. . .]
> That's why I just keep on encouraging him to be strong. I try to make him laugh.

Husbands also give their wives emotional and moral support. Most of the wives say that when they tell their husbands of their difficulties, their husbands encourage them and are sorry for not being with them during such times. Lilia and her husband talk about trusting each other, with Lilia emphasizing that just as she exercises self-control so does she expect her husband to do the same. Finally, Lourdes and her husband, both devoted Christians, have drawn courage and fortitude from their shared faith. Lourdes says that they always encourage each other through, and find strength in, prayer.

The Intimacy of Absence

When couples encourage each other, they are simultaneously expressing and communicating concern and love for each other. They are invested with their selves and made to conjure up their physical presence. The words they utter and the text messages they compose and send to each other substitute for what they lack in physical intimacy. To the extent that what they say is also meant to convey themselves, their words simultaneously evoke their absence and presence.

Intimate Conversations and the Joy of Text

Understandably, most of the women are quite hesitant to let me "listen" in to their spousal conversations.[9] When I asked Norma, in her midforties and the owner of an Internet cafe, about how she tells her husband she misses him, she replied: "LOL, yun na lang!" (Laugh out loud, that's all!). However, a few do not mind giving me an answer. Lourdes readily says that her conversations with her husband always include him asking her never to lose heart, followed by expressions of his love for her. She narrates that he says "I love you, too" even though she has not yet said anything. Similarly, Rosario recounts her conversation with her husband a week after Valentine's Day, an occasion widely observed by Filipinos. Having failed to greet him, she asked him what he did, to which he responded: "Awan a. Inim-imagine ka" (Nothing really. I imagined you).

Rosario's response to my question—"If you miss your husband and he calls, what do you say to each other?"—allows us to have a glimpse of how husbands and wives who are apart may have intimate moments of conversations:

> Ay kua met a. Ana't ub-ubram. Adda met dagiti parte na nga antianna ti yanmo? Ana ti badom? [laughter] . . . Ana't badom kunana nokua. A siempre a ket nakashortsak [talking to husband] ata napudot ngamin aya met a. Ala im-imaginen ka latta ngaruden.

> Well. What are you doing? There are times [my husband asks me] where are you? What are you wearing? [laughter] . . . "What are you wearing?" he'd ask. Naturally, I am wearing shorts because it is very warm [explanation for my benefit]. I am just going to imagine you then.

Rosa, whose house does not allow for much privacy, says that when she talks to her husband through webcam, she bravely says she misses him a lot despite everyone else in the house overhearing it. "Even if they all hear it" (*uray dengdenggenda latta*), she says.

The mobile phone is considered "the communicative instrument that, potentially more than any other, can influence the traditional management of intimacy and distance" (Fortunati 2002, 48). Given the physical space available in many of the wives' houses, which frequently precludes intimacy between wife and husband, the mobile phone has enabled the couples to "strengthen personal intimacy inside family intimacy" (ibid., 50). Raquel, for example, shares that her husband sends her naughty and sexually charged text messages that, she says, "excited her" (*mai-exciteak met nokua*). Text messaging, more than phone or voice calls, enables wives and husbands to express longing for each other, expression constrained by speech and physical environment. The orality and aurality of the expression of intimacy for many of these couples are replaced with visuality: rather than said and heard, it is read. Communicating spousal intimacy contrasts with wives' efforts to foster father-children intimacy, particularly between father and children who have not seen each other. Whereas facilitating father-children intimacy utilizes voice calls (orality-aurality) and visuality (mothers show children pictures of their fathers), spousal intimacy within family intimacy relies on what cannot (or must not) be overheard: the written. Intimacy thus becomes "textographic" or "scribed" (Pertierra 2005). Mobile phones not only enable mediated intimacy but also "discursive intimacy" (Pertierra 2008).

The Persistence of Absence

The long absences of their husbands require the women to deal and live with their longing for them.[10] A few of the wives give indication of their sexual longing and recognize that those whose spouses are away are closer to "temptation." As Leonora said:

> Wen aya kasi human being tay met lang aya. [laughs] . . . adda latta met diay riknam nga kasdiay ngem [laughs]. Kunam ket . . . agaramidak ti kastoy-kastoy [laughs] . . . tapnu lang pangkastam lang diay rikriknaem aya. Ngem adda met didiay talaga nga butengmo, nga kuaennaka ni Apo Diyos. Kasi mostly nga makaar-aramid di ba ket dagitay mapanpanawan, haan met nukua kaniak. Ken diak itulok [laughs] ta narigat no maperdi ta pamilyak.
>
> Yes, because we are only human beings. [laughs] . . . that desire is there. I say, "I am going to commit this [laughs]. . . just to [satisfy] what you are feeling. But you have that fear, God strikes you with it. Because those who [have affairs] are mostly those who are left behind, I haven't done it. And I am not going to allow it to happen [laughs] because it is hard if you destroy your family.

How then do the wives cope?

Displacing Longing: From Eros to Agape?

When asked, "What if you longed for your husband?" (no ngarud mailiwka kenni lakaymo?), three wives say they busy themselves and use work to deal with their longing for their husbands. Maria, one of these three, combine work with going out, which I understand to mean as going to neighbors for chats and visiting her relatives who live in another village:

> Ikuak lattan adingko ti panagtrabaho. Ikuak ti panagtrabaho ken nukuan kasdiay. Ammom a no adda luganmo agpaspasiar ka lattan kasdiay. Didiay latta ti pangikuaakon. Trabaho kaslang awan panunotko lang kenni lakayko kasdiay nukuan a. Trabaho lattan.
>
> I deal with it through work. I deal with it through work. You know, if you own a vehicle [she owns and drives a tricycle], you go out. That's how I deal with it. Work so that my mind is taken away from my husband. Just work.

On the other hand, fifteen of those who have children say they forget about their husbands by focusing on their children.[11] Agnes's response encapsulates what these women say:

> Awan, ang-anguek latta diay anakkon a. Awan, isu latta ti ar-arakupek. Kasdiay lattan. Isu latta ti pangipappapasakon kasdiay. No tumawag a ket isu ti pangipapasak ti iliwkon. Siempre awan met sabali nga outletko no di lang diay anakko. Isu ti pangifocusak diay attentionko.
>
> Nothing, I kiss my son. Nothing, it is my son who I hug. That is what I do. It is to him I express (satiate) my longing. If my husband calls, then it is to him I express my longing. Of course, I have no other outlet except my son. I focus my attention on him.

How do children ease these wives' longing? Two wives may offer illumination. Linda looks back to when she did not yet have a child:

> Ket makasangitka met a. Ngem idi adda anakmin a, kasi nagka-anak kami met nga kua eh. Kumbaga diay attention ko kenkuana, napan yantay ubing isu. Idi awan pay anakmi ket permi nga mail-iliwak ngem itattan ket masanayak metten. Diay attentionko, diay ubing.
>
> You cry. But when we had our daughter, we did not have to wait long for a child. My attention for my husband went to our daughter. When we did not yet have her, I missed him terribly, but now I am used to it. My attention is focused on the child.

Alicia, who fostered a child without first discussing it with her husband, provides a description of how children may serve as conduits for rechanneling feelings and emotional needs meant originally for their husbands to meet. She also clarifies how children can be both a source and recipient of material and practical work—care work—that keeps her busy and occupied. This also generates a relational context in which the act of caring (including the emotional investments it entails) enables her child to become someone who can both love and care for her.

> Ket mas medyo maikuam ti iliwmo kenni lakaymo ata adda tartaripatuem nga ubingen. Dita no marigatankan a ket, tay ubing met ti kuamun. Malpas ka nga agubra tay ubing ti aw-awirem metten. Pumasyar-pasyar kayo met ti kaarruba a. Isu dagidiay met lang, kasta met lang idi kua a ngem deta lang adda ubingmo nga pang . . . maibsan bassit detay iliwmo kaniana. Adda met mangar-arakup kenka, mang-anganggo kenka [laughs].
>
> You can deal with your longing for your husband more easily because you have a child to look after. If you are finding your husband's absence difficult, well you've got the child. After doing housework, you take care of the child. You go to neighbors with her. It is those things, you still miss your husband, but you have your child to . . . ease your longing for him. There is someone to hug you, kiss you [laughs].

These women's physical and emotional longing for their husbands are rerouted and "translated" and the children are the medium through which this work is accomplished. They are also its recipients. Yet, Alicia also indicates that this only helps to ease her longing for her husband; it does not make it go away completely. Lilia talks about how she expects her husband not to gratify his needs with other women because she, too, has to control her own.

Conclusion

With over ten million Filipinos living and working overseas, separation has become warp and woof of the fabric of many Filipinos' lives. It is a paradox that what connects Filipinos with many others is this shared experience of separation due to migration. With international communication becoming more affordable and accessible to many Filipinos through mobile phones, separation has become easier to deal with. Mobile communication technology and also Internet-enabled communication, such as video calls, emails, chats, and social networking (Facebook), have enabled those separated from their families to experience virtual copresence in place of physical copresence.

Filipino seafarers and their wives and children have tremendously benefitted from these developments. Compared with land-based Filipino workers, however, communication between seamen and their families is less frequent, affected by the movement and geographic location of the seamen. Although it is possible to call their families using their ship's satellite phone while at sea and when they cannot pick up a mobile phone signal, the prohibitive cost of satellite phone calls militates against its frequent use. Nevertheless seamen's wives have benefitted from the affordances

particularly of mobile phone communication. It has made it possible and easier for them to foster ties between them and their husbands despite absence, separation, and distance. It has enabled husbands to experience copresence, and wives have facilitated the possibility for their husbands to experience meaningful interactions with their children. In this wise, we can see how mobile communication has enabled coordinated presence (Aguilar 2009) and connected presence (Christensen 2009; Licoppe 2004). It may be argued that no longer are these seamen mere disembodied voices, which their children hear only so often. Because mobile phones have made communication a lot more frequent (which partly accounts for intimacy), although wives and children still experience the seaman husband and father as a voice, his talk might be said to be experienced with a sense of his physical corporeality. Thus, seamen can have more than "spectral presences" (Rafael 2000) especially in the lives of their children.

Through instantaneous communication events facilitated by mobile phones, wives and husbands are now able to experience intimacy despite being away from each other. Encouraging each other, for example, is a vital work performed by husbands and wives. It is a work that constitutes part of the intimacy they are able to demonstrate to each other. Nevertheless, a life of separation is never easy and is always fraught with anxiety, tension, and misunderstanding. Telephone conversations (and even text message exchanges) are not simply communication events through which family members may be drawn closer together. These are also times when the messy aspects of maintaining a family become visible and audible. Wives and husbands can now have "domestic spats" in real time. Mobile phone communication has enabled Filipino seamen's families to create "narrative and imaginary spaces" (Pertierra 2005, 26) that help reproduce family and affective ties.

This has important implications for lives lived in different spacetimes (cf. Campbell and Ling 2009; Castells et al. 2007; Katz and Aakhus 2002; Licoppe 2004; Light 2009; Ling and Yttri 2002; Mante 2002) and the case of seamen's families demonstrates how separation and distance no longer preclude the involvement and participation, particularly of the seamen, in the daily lives of their families. In this sense, as Pertierra (2008, 176) has argued, these communication technologies are *techne* in that they are "a way of dealing with others in the world" and in that they enable "new ways of being in the world."

This article demonstrates how new communication technologies particularly the mobile phone has strengthened social bonds in the face of separation and distance. My findings resonate with other studies that have shown that generalizations about the atomizing consequences of these technologies are untenable (see, e.g., Aguilar 2009; Castells et al. 2007). Instead, seamen's families have used this technology not only to bridge space-time differences but also to build human relationships despite differing geographies and locations. For seamen's families, these opportunities for intimacy have enabled them to actively imagine communion.

Notes

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1 Salazar gives the figure of 745 but this might be a typographical error. If we deduct 844 from 1,609 (the total number of Philippine towns and cities), we get 765.

2 A *sari-sari* store (from the root word *sari* [variety] is a small store selling a variety of goods such as cooking oil, eggs, soap, soft drinks (like Coke and Pepsi Cola), cigarette, crisps, tin food, and so on. The *tingi* system is better explained by illustrating it. A seller of goods, say, a sari-sari store owner, repacks a liter of cooking oil into smaller quantities the cost of which is easier borne by buyers. Or a cigarette vendor sells cigarettes by the stick rather than by the pack.

3 Figures provided by Engr. Roger Butay (2010), head of Smart Wireless Division, Laoag City.

4 Salazar (2007, 296 n. 75) explains that "US companies cited increasing global competition and the availability of cheaper options such as Voice over the Internet, callback, and international simple resale as the reasons behind this reduction in rates." Furthermore, "the collection of termination rates from international calls, a traditional source of profit and cross-subsidisation for less profitable operations such as fixed line operations, have been declining due to the US-imposed reduction on accounting rates for incoming calls from the United States and terminating in the Philippines" (ibid., 282, 284). Cf. Klopfenstein 2002.

5 In using "unli-calls," wives dial an access number, followed by the mobile number. Prepaid phone cards for unli-calls cost P100 and have to be used within five days. Each call lasts only for five minutes and wives would have to redial. I thank the editorial staff for calling my attention to the significance of the roaming SIM in transnational mobile communication and to make this more explicit in my discussion.

6 Writing and receiving letters were important to both wives and husbands, but particularly more so the husbands, partly because of the dynamic obtaining on ships. Wives I interviewed and husbands I had conversations with talked about seamen being mercilessly teased by others

if they did not have a letter among the post delivered. Apparently, the delivery of letters was a "public" event as letters were "dumped" on a table by whoever was in charge. Seamen described how they would rush to fish out theirs, and whoever left empty-handed was easy to spot. Those who expected not to have one chose instead to stay in their cabin to spare themselves of the teasing. One wife, who had a period during which she rarely wrote to her husband (this was caused by her discovery that her husband was having an affair with another woman, a discovery she made because the other woman was also at the airport to send him off), recounted how other seamen in San Gabriel, who worked with her husband on the same ship, visited her to ask her to write to her husband as he "could no longer think properly." For his part, one husband recalled buying a bicycle to use to send letters as post offices were far from where they docked.

7 Although the focus of the discussion is on the agency of wives, this should not be taken to mean that the wives wholly determine the communication behavior of their seamen-husbands. To be sure, when they call they ask to speak to their children. My focusing on the wives is not meant to draw a link between wives and kinwork, "the work of maintaining family relations," which Michaela di Leonardo (1987) has demonstrated, as "generally the work of women in households" (cited in Wilding 2006, 135).

8 The discussion presented here is based on only eight interviewees who provided responses to this sort of phone conversation. However, it is safe to assume that more women have had, at one time or another, an argument with their husband over the phone.

9 I find "listen in" quite appropriate. When wives answered, and most often in narrative form, they recreated the conversations they had with their children, their husbands, or whoever was involved as though they were addressing these people and not me. In that sense, I was "transported" to those conversation events and provided with a subject position as though I was listening to them. Nevertheless, these were not the exact conversations, but dramatizations of past conversations, hence inflected by the narrator. The "listening in" happens in relation to these reconstructed conversations.

10 Given the sensitivity of the matter, answers to my questions were frequently oblique. Understandably, there are personal and cultural reasons for the inability to talk openly about this matter. I provide here a composite account.

11 It is well to remember that my discussion here of what wives do to deal with their physical and sexual longing for their husbands relies on what these wives could realistically share with me, given personal, cultural, and various other reasons, not least of all the research dynamic obtaining in the interviews. There were suggestive responses but I have chosen not to speculate, primarily because when wives did talk about them, they referred to other wives. Because I interviewed most of these women in their houses, there is also reason to believe there was little possibility for mediated sexual intimacy (cf. Aguila 2008–2009; Pertierra 2006). In the first place, only seven of the wives had home Internet. Also, just as Leonora's case demonstrates, there are spatial requirements for it. It is more likely that when husbands and wives do share to each other their longing, it is in the manner suggested by Raquel whose husband sends her sextexts. More importantly, the point of this section has not been to investigate how telecommunication technologies have enabled, and how the reality of separation has necessitated, the exploration of mediated sexual expression and agency (cf. Pertierra 2007). In this, the mobile phone has particularly been vital as it provides a means to privacy; the mobile phone becomes a space to which only the owner has access (cf. Pertierra 2006, 77–95). Instead, my interest is in finding how couples rationalize their situation. More specifically, in one of my prepilot interviews, a seaman's wife described her life using the Christian imagery of bearing a cross. This led me to think of this issue in terms of how they would have worked through the absence of physical and sexual intimacy within a discourse of sacrifice (that I thought might potentially be informed by religious discourse), that is, whether this deprivation would be understood as a necessary part of providing for the lives and futures of their family or children.

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Roderick G. Galam is a researcher at the University of Southampton, University Road, Southampton SO17 1BJ, Hampshire, United Kingdom. He obtained a Ph.D. in Social Science from Cardiff University where he was a recipient of a Nippon Foundation Postgraduate Fellowship. He has worked in research at the Seafarers' Rights International in London. He is author of *The Promise of the Nation: Gender, History, and Nationalism in Contemporary Ilokano Literature* (Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2008), a finalist in the 2009 National Book Award, Literary Studies category. <GalamRG@cardiff.ac.uk>