**Plastic masculinity: How everyday objects in plastic suggest men could be otherwise**

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**Abstract**

Material things always make statements about people’s identities. For indigenous Filipino men, making baskets asserts identities rich in culture and in non-market values. This article examines basketry backpacks that were part of the pre-colonial material culture of ethnic groups known as Igorot. When made from rattan, these baskets are recognized as tribal art or heritage items. When made from plastic by contemporary artisans, they are problematic objects that subvert dominant constructs of masculinity. Featuring bright colours – pink, red and yellow – from the detritus of goldmining, these basketry forms point to the plasticity of masculinity itself. By working in plastic, their makers appropriate the cultural history of plastic to subvert the constructions of authenticity, class, ethnicity and gender, suggesting how masculinity could be otherwise. Here, plastic has a cultural potency of its own, with important implications for initiatives to manage or recycle waste materials or create innovative design. Because plastic carries its problematic history and malleability into the objects made from it in ways that reshape categories of meaning and subjectivities, plastic is never just a neutral substrate for artisans’ self-expression but the active co-producer of dynamic distinctions between sacred and profane, global and indigenous, that fold back in on each other.

**Introduction: problematic plasticity**

Plastic materialises alternative ways of valuing the world that define minority ethnic groups in the Philippines. Plastic, for Filipinos, is both a taken-for-granted material, but also a trickster. Plastic’s essential malleability calls into question what stuff is, its authenticity, history, and thus class and individual identities (Drazin and Küchler, 2015). Plastic can be salvaged, repurposed, and deployed as a material metaphor for global economic exclusions while acting a site of self-transformation. Making artefacts in plastic both emphasizes the adaptability of people’s cultural traditions and the ways they can envision their culture could be otherwise (after Povinelli, 2012). This article seeks to understand the everyday political salience of plastic objects and their materiality for Filipinos to give us new ways of thinking about a now-ubiquitous and global material. It draws together Filipino indigenous ontology – the way one can know categories of subject and object or sacred and profane - and the history of one plastic object – the *pasiking* backpack – as tribal art. It explores the etymology of plastic in the Philippines and then examines the ways indigenous men use plastic to comment not only on hegemonic Filipino masculinities, but also on their own perceived economic and social marginality. By making traditional objects in plastics that would usually be classified as waste, indigenous Filipinos subvert expected ethnic distinctions and attempt to bring into being a more equitable future. Reciprocally, the fact that people can remake waste plastics into culturally potent and desirable forms then opens new possibilities for recycling, reuse and waste management strategies for plastics. That vibrant indigenous cultures refigure waste plastic as valuable ‘not-waste’ suggests new avenues for research and new ways of thinking about the entangled politics and histories of materials.

Indigenous Filipinos who create plastic artefacts experience themselves as being on the margins of a global consumer world. They experience that world as increasingly made of plastic. Plastic is omnipresent in the stuff of their everyday lives. It is lightweight, easily transportable, easily replaceable and easily disposable. It’s the quantity and quality of this stuff that differentiates them as poor. Rich people can afford ‘real’ materials, while poor(er) people consume plastic replicas. The rich consume plastic where they find it convenient, the poor do so out of necessity. Where the rich may have wealth and a steady stream of replacement objects, the poor and indigenous often must repair and improvise with plastics, and, when they do not, go without. So, the material properties of plastics may be more familiar to the poor because they also retain skills and cultural knowledge to innovate with and repurpose their everyday stuff (Miller, 2001). Even when considering inexpensive plastic items, indigenous culture can give poor people a sense of potency and abundance when it comes to their stuff. Thus, when marginal indigenous groups repurpose plastic, they use the materiality of their daily lives to express resistance to elites and question the social hierarchies and relations of power that sustain inequality.

By working in plastic, artisans are taking a material widely denigrated as waste and considered as opposed to art, authenticity and depth and elevating it into traditional forms. In doing so, they are also redeeming aspects of themselves, their culture and their history that they may feel is likewise considered superficial or unappreciated. Analysing plastic craft and producers’ identities in parallel, we extend debates on the ontology of the object (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell, 2007; Holbraad and Pederson, 2014), not just to construct accounts of how things come to be what they are, but also to examine what the materiality of things and the histories of their materials mean in the daily lives of those who make, use, retain or collect them (Miller, 2008). In the Philippines, debates over what ‘traditional’ is - or ought to be - intersect with contests over the definitions and boundaries of categories of cultural property and the appropriation or ownership of indigenous forms (Leach and Aragon, 2008) as the limits of the sacred. By exploring plastic backpacks, this paper shows how objects’ identities, histories of ownership, and ritual meanings are cultural constructs that indigenous artisans and users/collectors challenge by playing with plastic - a material that is never what it seems and thus carries its own subversive agency.

*Everyday Objects* – an exhibition

The data we discuss here were collected in during the preparation and staging of museum exhibition of plastic craft, put together in collaboration with Filipino academics, activists, artists and indigenous craftspeople. Our curiosity was piqued by plastic craft when two members of the research team, Padma and Ruel, began documenting plastic crafts on the streets of Baguio City in 2009. Indigenous Igorot men had begun to wear plastic accessories which expressed a kind of social critique. Most prominent among these artefacts were plastic backpacks made in the traditional *pasiking* form. Our team organized an exhibition, *Everyday Objects*, that explored the role of these objects in Baguio’s popular culture, held at the BenCab Museum in May-June 2012 (see Figure 1).

In interviews with exhibition visitors, we learned it was not the form of the objects that challenged audiences and potential collectors or consumers, but their material composition. Visitors thought ‘traditional’ forms should be made in traditional materials: wood, bamboo, and rattan. To them, plastic signified ‘garbage’. By playing with plastic, artisans, artists and indigenous craft consumers were making statements about indigeneity, ownership of cultural history, and their own cultural identities. *Everyday Objects* thus condensed and displayed a material argument that was being staged by our collaborating artists and artisans in their daily lives. Their traditional craft objects in plastic were simultaneously making something useful from the detritus of the global world and pointing to a potential space beyond that world - a place where traditional skills and knowledges sustain people.

<Insert Figure 1> Everyday Objects Exhibition poster, featuring Hector’s backpack

Our *Everyday Objects* collections came about when team members acquired accessions from people they met in the street or at community events. Our data were gathered the same way. We recorded stories and reflections from the craftspeople contributing to our accessions and making items for the exhibition. We collected traditional *pasiking* form basket backpacks in bright plastic, straw brooms (*walis*), small bottles with woven covers (*tabayag)* that were repurposed to hold the lime *(apul)* for betel-nut chewing *(moma*), all bound in yellow and pink plastic.

We learned that this distinctive bright plastic trim in pink, yellow and red originated in the gold mines beyond Baguio City where it had originally wrapped electric blasting caps. The first artisans to make use of blasting cap wrappers were miners who wove baskets in the mine tunnels. They stored their crafts on-site and accumulated the material for their making bit by bit, then walked them out of the mine. These plastic-trimmed items – bottles, brooms, and backpacks - circulated as part of an indigenous gift economy in the Baguio region. Such items couldn’t be produced on a commercial scale, so had no fixed market prices. Demand for these crafts came from the miners themselves, their extended families, and those who wished to show solidarity with them and the indigenous communities from which they originated. The items of ‘street style’ we collected had usually come to their eventual owners in barter or exchange. They thus represented a day’s labour in rice-planting or some decorative work done on a passenger vehicle – a *jeepney* [public mini-bus]– and revealed the extend of the region’s non-cash economy.

Miners made their plastic crafts by re-purposing the waste produced by global capital. The gold mine in Padcal, Tuba - a municipality bordering Baguio City, but located in Benguet Province - produces gold, copper and silver for smelting in Japan. The pink and yellow plastic from the blasting cap wrappers really stands out against an Igorot indigenous craft tradition that features the soft beiges and browns of rattan and bamboo. This meant our plastic craft items spoke about the skills, nous and cultural potency of a group of male labourers doing dirty, dangerous and poorly paid work. When they made plastic crafts in traditional forms, they positioned themselves not just as poor workers in a global commodity chain, but as bearers of a proud Igorot culture that gave them the knowledge and skill to make something desirable out of global garbage. These items then asserted an indigenous identity in which other indigenous people - particularly men - wanted to share. It was because their plastic trim was garish and ‘feminine’ - pink, red, and yellow, that these items were ‘cool’ accessories for indigenous men. To understand why, we need to unpack both the history of the *pasiking* backpack form and the category of plastic itself.

***Pasiking* - the basket backpack**

The *pasiking* form is one of many basketry forms found in the Philippines still made – and used – by people now recognized as indigenous (Anderson, 2010; Capistrano-Baker *et al*., 1998; Laya, 2003). While it is among a set of distinctive forms that have been conserved over time, it is also not well known. The craft traditions of the Philippines have tended to fall off Asia’s cultural map. As a former Spanish and American colony and being predominantly Christian, the Philippine archipelago has been sandwiched between apparently much richer and more authentic East and South Asian cultural traditions. Even among Filipinos, there are persistent misperceptions that Filipino culture is colonial and derivative. The broader invisibility of Filipinos as bearers of culture, even to themselves, points to gaps in the popular understanding of indigenous peoples in Philippine colonial history. A tendency to then relegate indigenous Filipino culture to ‘the past’ reveals how problematic understandings of ethnicity, cultural change and temporality together marginalise indigenous groups.

Art historians, antiquarians and anthropologists all acknowledge that Spanish, then American, colonialism means the distinctiveness of Filipino culture only becomes apparent when indigenous traditions come to the fore (Anderson, 2010). These traditions – among them the crafts that became 20th century tribal – have commonalities with those of upland ethnic groups across South East Asia, connecting a broad swathe of first peoples from Nagaland in India through upland Indonesia to aboriginal communities in Taiwan. When Filipino indigenous crafts are placed within this wider regional history, it becomes difficult to dismiss Philippine material culture as simply defined by colonial influences. Generations of Filipinos have nonetheless been educated to think of indigenous communities, not as un-colonized versions of themselves, but as older and un-related populations (Anderson, 2010). In the popular Filipino imaginary, the metropolitan mainstream represents a civilizing settler society. Indigenes - particularly the groups called Igorot, from the uplands of northern Luzon and dwelling in the mountains north of Baguio City - are positioned in much the same social and cultural space as American Indians. Igorot craft/art objects thus not only contribute to artisans’ livelihoods but are sites for the expression and conservation of indigenous identities and for debate over contentious claims to indigenous political autonomy and land rights.

Local livelihoods for Igorot communities are sustained through barter, exchange, and the circulation of gifts as well as cash from wages, salaries and sales of goods. Baguio City and the provinces comprising the Cordillera Autonomous Region (CAR) – Benguet, Mountain Province, Ifugao, Kalinga, Abra, and Apayao - have a large informal and exchange economy, while several of these provinces regularly top the various government indices of deprivation. The National Statistical Coordination Board (2014) reports that, in 2012, 17.5% of households in the CAR region fell below the poverty threshold of PHP 19,483 (£262) per capita per annum. Many households engage in craft production to supplement their income from agriculture and labour, including waged work in the mines and artisanal mining (Milgram, 1999). The craft industry has seen demand for traditional materials such as rattan create such a decline in supplies that many craftspeople can no longer access free materials from the commons in their communities. Rattan has instead become a commodity. Artisans who require rattan for home consumption, exchange and small-scale sales can rarely afford to purchase sufficient material for traditional basketry forms. They compete with enterprises producing for the global market. Even as mobile work camps chase supply across the mountains, there is rarely enough rattan to support contracts for bulk rattan craft and novelty items.

So, plastics may appeal to producers because of the scarcity of raw materials, but frustration with artisans’ position in global supply chains only adds to plastics’ new cachet. Craft producers found foreign buyers and middlemen demanded huge job lots of goods in basic, non-local, patterns or forms. Several of the producers of plastic craft interviewed by our team had made commercial rattan products for export in their youth, but had disliked the experience. Conditions and pay were exploitative and the work had been periodic and unstable (Milgram, 1999). Mining offered them higher wages and more job security, if not a career for life. The miners who produced the first plastic *pasikings* thus did not do so for income, but as a kind of social commentary, making interventions craft and commodity histories. Our miner-artisans considered themselves veterans of the global rattan commodity chain because they had previously woven rattan *pasikings* intended become both authentic Igorot crafts and, sometimes, fake tribal art.

The *pasiking* form itself was a colonial-era collectible. It has been at the forefront of cultural exchange within both the Philippines and beyond, engaging global aesthetic standards and a politics of authenticity (Baradas and Anderson, 2010). Colonial collectors first recognized *pasiking* baskets as art in the early 20th century. Concerns over the preservation of cultural heritage saw examples of *pasikings* used for ritual purposes (called *takba* and used to store items for domestic ritual practice*)* enter museums and private collections. These collections popularized notions of heritage based on the premise that market economies necessarily eroded local culture. Collectors classified objects as antique or collectible based on their use as *takba* in indigenous rituals. Collectors then caused these objects to be withdrawn from the sphere of ritual use to prevent their eventual destruction. Collectors were convinced that, if left to their own devices, their Igorot ritual users would eventually allow these valuable objects – records of culture – to fall into disrepair or ruin. By conserving *pasikings*, collectors sought to preserve them as artefacts of Filipino history. Their withdrawals were thus acts of sacrifice, intended to stabilize Filipino identities in the colonial and post-colonial (1946 -) period. In this way, a series of rattan *pasiking* backpacks entered global art networks and became revalued as tribal art (Myers, 2002).

For producers, the process of making art out of *pasikings* created demand for more ritual objects that would then become art objects. After that was met, demand shifted towards additional replicas for heritage-themed home décor. These shifts in demand meant that, by the late 1970s, the production of *pasikings* had been expanded and redirected away from every day or ritual use. *Pasikings* were instead being woven and seasoned to meet the demands of tourism-driven commodity chains, creating a market in ersatz antiques. In Igorot homes, *pasikings* were replaced with plastic: buckets, baskets, and snap-top Tupperware containers. Meanwhile, more baskets were being woven in the same forest camps where young men – heading towards eventual labour in the mines - were making tedious rattan soap dishes, plant holders, and novelty items for export. ‘Antiquing’ a basket and selling it to a dealer was a way to supplement their wages and more of a challenge.

The museum, private collection, tourist and heritage décor markets sought out antiques, not newly woven baskets, but the distinction was always a fragile one. The formal properties of a basket that acquired its patina through years of use as *takba* were little different from onesmeared with animal blood and smoked over a fire for several months. Producers in the forest camps were themselves confused by the demands of the market as explained to them by middlemen and dealers.

It seemed to producers that distinguishing a tribal art *pasiking* from one that was merely a craft item was never about the skill of the producer or the aesthetic form of the object. Instead, a *pasiking* became tribal art only when made by a craftsman who had never intended to make art at all. True tribal art arose from an everyday object intended, unselfconsciously, only for its ‘real’ cultural purpose.  In the logic applied by dealers and collectors, for a producer to self-consciously make something as a piece of art, or as a commodity to be sold into the tribal art value chain, disqualified that object from the art and heritage market. Collectors assumed any ‘authentic’ indigenous tribal artist would only make something for their own ritual use, or that of their wider family or community. Artisans resented this logic because it did not respect their own distinctions between sacred and profane. Instead, collecting antiques imposing a non-Igorot ontology onto artisan’s craft production and ritual practice.

Underpinning the collection of antique *pasiking* was a problematic imperative to save indigenous culture from indigenous people themselves. Dealers marketed these objects to collectors as collectible antiques on their origins as vessels or media of ritual and spiritual connection between indigenous people and their cosmologies. These spiritual connections were assumed to inhere in the tribal art objects as aspects of a living past, whereas artisans saw that the sacred lay in the rituals themselves. Somehow this living past imagined by collectors was contemporary with, but outside and untouched by the concerns of contemporary metropolitan Filipinos. For collectors, owning tribal art became a way of touching a history – and belief system - untarnished by the commodity form (Fabian, 1983). These objects, dealers needed to claim, instantiated Fabian’s allochrony (other-time) through material properties acquired in ritual use: patina, worn grooves, smoke damage etc. *Pasikings* became tribal art through what Foster (2012:3, after Philips, 2007) describes as ‘processes of acquisition and exchange’ drawing together an unequal network of ‘mutually defining objects, people and places’. Craft produces experienced this mutual definition as their relegation to the margins of the contemporary economy and polity, yet again. Artisans perceived they had lost control over their own culture and were being exploited by antique dealers, buyers and other middlemen. Their response was to inundate dealers and collectors with well-smoked, worn and seasoned fakes until the Philippine tribal art market declined.

Backpacks in *Everyday Objects*

The *Everyday Objects* exhibition revealed this network of shifting relationships in which *pasiking* backpacks were embedded and from which they took their social meaning (Foster 2012:3; Gell, 1996; Myers, 2002). It did this by juxtaposing utilitarian objects with multiple purposes – e.g. gongs *cum* gold pans – alongside craft objects and the tools used to make them, and against the BenCab museum’s own collection of tribal art pieces. The exhibition tried to make room for ‘impure and/or hybrid objects’ (Foster 2012:3, citing Clifford 1988) and to make a space where people with different relations to these objects and expectations for them could come together to engage in a coeval dialogue about their forms, material and values. The materiality of plastic allowed the exhibition to deal directly with public anxiety about fakes.

For non-artisan, non-indigenous visitors, *Everyday Objects* sought to instantiate Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s (1998: 51) ‘museum effect’ – the dual process through which museum presentation makes ordinary things special and the experience of viewing such objects in the museum itself becomes a model for the experience of life beyond the exhibition. Being asked to consider plastic crafts as art requires what Kirschenblatt-Gimblett (1998:50)calls a ‘turn of the head’ which ‘bifurcates the viewer’s gaze between the exotic display [of the museum exhibition] and her own, everyday world’. The intention was that people who visited the exhibition or saw media reports on it should pause to reconsider the next plastic backpack they saw in the street, evaluating it as expressing a vibrant culture, and potentially carrying the sacred, rather than as being recycled waste and simply another commodity. Here, it is the materiality of plastic that turns the viewer’s head for her. Plastic challenges the viewer to confront received ideas about indigenes and poverty, suggesting that the plastic-bearing poor could be culture-bearers and that the tribal other – Igorots – could also be ordinary, everyday poor people.

The response to the exhibition was very positive. After closing at the BenCab Museum, a selection of works and objects were displayed at the University of the Philippines Baguio and the Yuchengco Museum in Manila. The Philippine press (Lolarga, 2012) and comments from museum visitors spoke of ‘important’ and ‘ground-breaking’ – in part because of the combination of plastic with text and the museum’s tribal art collection. Mainstream Filipino audiences were surprised to discover that these plastic objects, presented in their historical context, were valuable, desirable and attractive and even ‘cool’. It was the materiality of plastic itself that brought up powerful questions of authenticity.

Exit interviews revealed that members of the art-viewing and collecting public tended to see questions of authenticity and indigenous identity as more closely tied to material, rather than form. This was the inverse of the views of our craft producers. Producers were much more interested in exploring Igorot forms in new materials. The difference emerged because these two groups were positioned very differently vis the cultural category of plastic. Artists and artisans sourced their plastic materials from domestic and industrial waste or liberated them from commercial enterprises, while art-viewers and collectors sought out not plastic, but natural materials in authentic forms for their own personal consumption and collection. The history of *plastik* as a cultural category in the Philippines explains why their approaches differed.

***Plastik*’s etymology**

The English word plastic comes from the Greek *plassein*, meaning ‘to mould’, and describes a synthetic material made from a wide variety of organic polymers or, used as an adjective, means artificial or unnatural. Plastic is a subversive substance because it is not just one thing, but can be shaped, and reshaped again, into many kinds of objects (McKay, 2015). In the Philippines, this English word has been taken up and given new meanings to carry as *plastik*. *Plastik,* in the post-colonial Philippines, carries possibly even stronger messages about social class and distinction than in English-speaking countries (McKay, 2015). In the Philippines, *plastik* is closely aligned to the category of *peyk* (fake) – as opposed to *jinwayn* (genuine). Something fake can thus perhaps never be genuine, even if indigenous artisans made the item and use it for ritual purposes. However, in Filipino, *plastik* carries even heavier baggage, the idea of:

being a substitute, *yung pagkahindi tunay* [not genuine]--- not really glass, not really leather--- [it] entered Tagalog and seems to have nudged out *balat-kayo*, or the act, thought, feeling, sense of hypocrisy. More specifically, it dislodged *doble-kara*[two-faced], which describes a person’s hypocrisy: saying one thing but not really meaning it; acting friendly although one really carries smoldering hatred; showing concern, love and affection although one is really just interested in the person’s bankbook. It runs the gamut of situations. *Plastik*in Filipino now captures that behaviour (thought, act, feeling) which is quite the opposite of what one truly feels. It carries more than the sense of being not just “not really,” but more --- it also signifies “not truly”. (Anon, 2008)

For Filipino audiences, seeing any craft object in a traditional form but made of plastic suggests insincerity and fakery. Behind the fake stands the figure of the trickster-producer, himself lacking in the non-market values that would make him authentically indigenous, i.e. the basket-weavers described earlier. The *Everyday Objects* exhibition thus asked the audience challenging questions: Does someone who lives a metropolitan life, has a Facebook account, details cars for a living, wears clothes with a distinctive ‘global’ style, qualify as an indigenous Igorot artisan? Can a craft item be authentic and even ritually potent when it is made in plastic appropriated from mine waste?

The problem of plastic in the Philippines is thus far more than simply the propensity of the poor to steal it when the rich have refused or discarded it, or to throw it around and ruin the landscape aesthetic. The material itself is intimately linked to Filipino critiques of character and social relations (McKay, 2015). In Filipino, *plastik* is not just a noun – a substance – but also an adjective that denotes insincerity, inauthenticity and unreliability. As well as being the cheapest, most accessible material – the material of the poor, which clogs their living areas, underpins their squatter shacks and figures strongly in their purported preferences for bright, kitsch and easily-disposable home and personal decorations – *plastik* describes hypocrisy.

*Plastik* denotes at once both a problem of morality and of pollution. For wealthy Filipinos, plastic is the detritus of colonialist globalization. It threatens the air with toxins when the poor burn their garbage, blocks the waterways and results in flooding, and fills the streets when discarded by sidewalk vendors, or thrown away by passengers eating snacks on public buses. Plastic blocks national progress and marks a kitsch popular aesthetic. The educated elite are thus reluctant to buy plastic and unlikely to decorate with it, preferring authentic Filipino natural materials like wood, rattan and bamboo, worked into objects by authentic artisans who have been specially commissioned by designers trained in both local heritage forms and the latest European and American designs. They aspire to store their fresh fruit and vegetables in fridges, rattan baskets, or ceramic bowls. Plastic is something they accept, perhaps grudgingly, but usually wish to transcend. It is difficult to dispose of thoughtfully, challenging to recycle, and part of garish aesthetic that is *baduy –* cheap or tacky – that speaks of a lack of history and forethought. A pink and yellow backpack takes that *baduy* aesthetic to its extreme.

For the poor, plastic is convenient, lightweight, durable and/or easily replaced. It is a pragmatic material, reflecting short-term thinking about livelihood security. Its many colours cheer up their dark, poorly lit houses. Plastic is a pragmatic choice; plastic containers and bags are not so badly damaged by the leaking roof and flooding that characterize rainy seasons. Plastic bags of produce hang from the walls in their kitchens while plastic jerry cans hold their cooking oil and water. Plastic’s very malleability means it can be repurposed, while its weight makes it easily transportable. Plastic sheeting can be a raincoat, then part of a roof, or the walls of a makeshift bathhouse or toilet. For the poor, plastic is usually cheap, but often free, or freely available for appropriation. Because it is widely despised and derided, bits and pieces of plastic lying about can be easily liberated and repurposed. It is often easier for an artisan to source webbing from discarded ‘factory seconds’ garden chairs, lifted from an export-processing zone factory, or blasting-cap wrappers from the gold mines than it is to purchase rattan. Because poorer people with craft skills are often underemployed, their ‘free time’ is available to adapting their traditional skills to repurpose waste plastic.

People repurposing plastics innovate within in a wider regional history of recycling and reuse. In the CAR region, plastic has been extracted from the waste stream and used to make replica trade beads since the 1950s (McKay, 2015) and people have remade traditional forms and created new objects from baby oil bottles, plastic ties, plastic webbing, and empty plastic bottles since at least the 1970s. Their colourful plastic versions are not intended to be sacrificed, nor to become antiques. These crafts are precisely the obverse of tribal art, being for the here and now. Craft producers sacrifice their time and effort to make use – not let go to waste – materials at hand, often trying to remain true forms that come from their indigenous heritage, and which fit into their already materially-restricted living spaces. *Pasikings,* for instance, are flat-bottomed, so easily stored on the ground or the floor where shelf and hanging space is limited or flimsy, suited to simple housing and forest campsites. Producers’ plastic crafts thus mark them as creators and innovators – as canny and potent – at the same time citing and reworking heritage. For people, like Igorot miners, who are close to sites of capital investment, the find they can experiment with a larger array of found and re-appropriated materials. The etymology of *plastik* in the Philippines makes any plastic craft or art object they make suspect by extension. Where heritage crafts may somehow misrepresent the social position of their creator or make a fool of the viewer/purchaser, plastic addresses that suspicion head on. Artisans then appropriate the dubious qualities of the material itself to play with tropes of inauthenticity and resistance.

Our *Everyday Objects* artisans came from recognized Indigenous Cultural Communities (sometimes called ‘tribes’) in the CAR who speak Kalinga, Kankanaey, Ibaloi, and Ifugao languages and belong to those same ethnic groups, but share Igorot as a regional identity. As Igorots, they find themselves at the margins of a national Filipino imaginary dominated by the Tagalog language spoken in the region surrounding Manila. Though Igorots usually speak some Tagalog, they do not think in it, or conduct daily life in it, and thus have a bit of bemused distance when it comes to Tagalog trends and slang, and gender identities, too. When an Igorot man wears a plastic *pasiking,* his personal aesthetic marks him out as distinctively and unapologetically – even genuinely - Igorot against Baguio City’s cosmopolitan backdrop. Pink and yellow are not combined with ultra-masculine clothing in conventional performances of Tagalog masculinities.

**Minecraft and masculinity**

Contemporary, mainstream Filipino masculinity is heteronormative, consumption oriented and dominated by Tagalog cultural norms. In it, markers of material success are privileged in measuring men’s accomplishments (Johnson, 2015). People look to watches, clothing, cars, jewellery, housing and the like to see how potent a man may be. Men from indigenous areas marginal to the national economy find it is difficult to acquire these markers of status. Jobs are not plentiful and the salaries or wages they offer are insufficient to provide a comfortable living for a household. Working class men thus increasingly struggle to make ends meet and take on work that is low-paid and physically taxing. Just as across the rest of working-class Southeast Asia, the extent to which a man has had to engage in the formal, waged economy to become a good provider has changed enormously over the last five decades (Thompson, 2014). As McKay (2011) argues, it is ‘providership’ that is the key theme of Filipino masculinity and this theme is shared across the country, but interpreted differently.

Igorots agree on ‘providership’ but are sceptical about mainstream Filipino norms for gender (McKay, 2012). Igorot masculinity diverges from more mainstream ideas of Filipino masculinities in important ways (Lewis, 1985; McKay, 2012). It is the extent to which a man can provide without extensive access to the cash economy through salaried work that defines Igorot masculinity. Igorots understand a good man to be a good provider, virile lover and strong father, like the masculinity that features in the neighbouring Ilocos region (Pingol, 2001: 8.) Pingol’s (2001) research with Ilocano men found that, where men could not participate in the formal economy in a way that let them support their family as they expected, they nonetheless wanted to express an identity that showed them to be ‘in control’. One way men expressed control was to earn others’ respect through one of self-management, independent earning, self-discipline, leadership, and endurance of suffering. This disposition shaped a *kinalalaki* form of virtuous masculinity. The other route to masculine control was through physical domination, risk-taking, and displays of ‘macho’ culture – *malalaki* ‘bad boy’ masculinity. Igorot masculinity, however, resists this dichotomy of good boy/bad boy approaches.

Plastic backpacks instead express a playful combination of these two masculinities by appending the macho ‘bad-boy’ queering of gender norms to the *kinalalaki* conduct of ‘knowing what to do’ that enabled miners to make something from mining waste. Displaying mastery of manual skills has long been a working-class approach to performing masculinity (Maynard 1989, cited in McKay, 2011), but making plastic backpacks is about more than the usual *diskarte* (creativity) and know-how. Plastic backpacks subvert dominant Filipino masculinity with materiality and colour because they are both plastic and ‘read’ as feminine. Our exhibition visitors puzzled over the ways the *pasikings’* garish colours could fit with the evident machismo displayed in the photographs of the men who wove and wore them. It was self-evident that any man traversing a cosmopolitan city like Baguio wearing pink and yellow plastic had to have enough self-control not to succumb to the *malalaki* provocations of others – he had to be ultra-macho, so that he would be able to deal with any negative comments, but with a soft side he was happy to show. The thrill of queering these accepted distinctions in masculine self-presentation turned up in our interviews with artisans and wearers.

Ferdy – *pasiking* producer

One *pasiking* in our collection, acquired during a roadside interview, was woven with a heart design (Figure 2). As the maker/seller, a fifty-seven-year-old former miner called Ferdy, explained:

It seems it’s really more suitable for a woman, so I’ll sell it to you. You – you know what it is already, so I like that. It’s our reminiscence of mining. This small one… I made it there in Philex, maybe seven years ago. I have a larger one, that one’s better for a man. This is just the small one – it suits… It fits a woman. With the heart design on the front. I made it for myself, though… And, still, I’ve used it all these years. There won’t be any trace of the mine – the explosives or the dust – left on it, don’t worry. It’s always good to carry a memory of that work with you. What’s there, in the mine, you can make something of it, so there’s always something you can do, to create again something that is going to last. And it did. But I don’t need two, so one is for you, now. So you can tell this story, the story of us Igorots, what we can do.

<Insert Figure 2> Ferdy’s heart backpack, as modelled by the producer

Ferdy may have been compelled to use pink and yellow by the materiality of the blasting caps, but the heart shape was his own addition. There is a powerful, implicit parallel drawn here between malleable Igorot masculinity and plastic’s materiality.

Ferdy’s plastic *pasiking* refuses, point blank, the usual processes of categorization and assessments of authenticity for tribal art. On a rattan *pasiking,* a dealer would look for a patina created by sacrificial blood, smoke damage, and worn grooves, to show it had been used in authentic Igorot rituals. The plastic version does not retain these traces of use in the same way. Ferdy’s choice to remake the backpack form in neon-coloured plastic blasting cap wrappers liberated from a gold mine thus disrupts the fictions of cultural continuity and spatial hierarchy on which the antiques market depends. While our team found that some people now use plastic backpacks to store ritual paraphernalia (as *takba)*, Ferdy declined to say if he had put the heart backpack he was selling to us to that use himself, and the object would not reveal it. In parallel, his own Igorot masculinity refuses to engage the either/or choice of ‘macho’ or ‘soft’ masculinities, rejecting demands to be authentically masculine in one way or another, playing with feminine elements like colours and hearts.

Taking up these objects as Igorot street style amplified the political statement behind on this playful queering of masculine norms.

Hector – *pasiking* collector

When we met Hector, his *pasiking* demanded attention. His black jacket, black jeans and black boots set off its cheerful pink, red, and yellow stripes. This plastic backpack stood out against the typical blacks, blues, and browns favoured by other men in Baguio - sober colours to convey reliability and gravitas. Hector explained to us how he had acquired the backpack and what meant to him.

This - it’s one that I traded for… One of my cousins works down at the Philex mine, down in Tuba…, so he is the one who made it. He uses the wrappers from the detonator cables. They are left-over after the blasting, all bright colours. They just sit there in the tunnels, the miners, and they use the leftovers to make these *pasikings* [traditional Igorot indigenous backpack form]. Me, I like the way it looks. You know, it’s the colours for a woman – pink, yellow – but made by men. And mining is a hard work, you know, earning money if you have it… If not, then nothing…

You know, that they can make something like this from… just *basuro* [garbage]; it shows that they can really survive. They can survive just anything, you know. That’s us, Igorot men. We can mine, we can work in the city, but we don’t need somebody to pay us. We have the skills. We can go back to farming, build our own house, build our own… just anything. We have… Our skills let us make the things we need, without money, without shopping. That’s us. And when you see that colourful backpack, you know, that guy – with him, you’ll be just ok, whatever happens. He can live just anywhere.

Hector himself was not a miner, nor employed in and around the mines. Instead, he was working at another cousin’s auto-body shop, doing general painting and cleaning. He lived on the peri-urban outskirts of the Baguio City. Appropriating the distinctive basketry made in the mines was a way, for him, of taking on miners’ toughness and resilience. By wearing the *pasiking*, Hector showed that he aspired to this Igorot mining masculinity and appended it to himself through the backpack (which eventually joined the exhibition collection for PHP 1000 (USD 20)).

By bringing together a traditional Igorot form – the *pasiking* – with a non-traditional material, plastic waste, the plastic backpack problematized both masculinity and tradition. It held in productive tension the notions of tradition and global garbage. To this problematic, it added a second, parallel, tension, one between dominant and alternative versions of Filipino masculinity. The backpack positions Igorot men at the intersection of two masculine modes of being, revealing how masculinity is likewise plastic and responsive, but problematic in its history, just like the backpack itself. The plastic *pasiking* backpack locates its Igorot wearer as central within a regional counterpoint to a dominant culture that would marginalise him as indigenous, poor, unskilled and left-behind.

*Plastic, solidarity and gendered social commentary*

For men on Baguio City’s streets, wearing a plastic backpack expressed solidarity with miners while, in turn, miners’ craft practice expressed resistance to the norms and rules of capital’s worksites. The mines are highly gendered spaces (Chaloping-March, 2006), where a *malalaki* version of resistant and aggressive masculinity tends to come to the fore, something quite different from the more considered and diplomatic versions practiced in the traditional Igorot *ili* [village], which is closer to *kinalaki* norms (McKay 2012 and 2017.) Miners, like the seafarers studied by McKay (2011), and the migrant construction workers studied by Margold (1995), were frustrated in their ability to construct and express an assertive masculinity in their workplace (Chaloping-March, 2006). Many of the male labourers in the lower ranks of the mining workforce came from the cohorts of younger men who previously struggled to engage the formal educational system, seeing few openings in the professions for men from ethnic minorities and little mobility in the national labour market (Lewis, 1985). In an indigenous Filipino replication of the kinds of British life histories Willis (1980) described in *Learning to Labour,* these disengaged young Igorot men found work in the mines one of the few options remaining to them in the regional economy. Lacking the skills and qualifications to migrate for work, they were relegated to manual labour (McKay, 2011). Before becoming miners, they had typically been casual labourers, described as ‘standby’, waiting around for jobs to find them. In the Philippines ‘standby’ (*istambay*) is a derogatory term for under- and unemployed people, most often applied to young men (Batan, 2012). Backpack makers and wearers were typically men who have left their standby days behind and who perform the kind of hyper-masculinity associated with mining and mining settlements (Chaloping-March 2006), so it is notable to see them weaving and then wearing backpacks in typically feminine colours. To have their crafts become a regional Igorot male trend refigures them as potent, rather than marginal. Made from blasting-cap wrappers, these backpacks emphasized the risk-taking, adventure and danger of men’s work in the mines while their colours drew attention to the feminization inherent in miners’ subservient position in the global minerals workforce.

Our subsequent discussions with backpack producers from the mines suggested they wore their crafts to assert that, just as their work at Philex could not crush their spirit or make them lose confidence in their skills and intelligence, not even the bright, feminine colours could undermine their masculinity. Their backpacks assert a renewed Igorot tradition – reinvented in the terms described by Hobsbawm (1983) – against the demands of capital. These artisans were not obedient, complacent and dependent global workers but free agents who might be mining, but were not dependent on mining work. Because they had the skills, they could even leave the mine for the subsistence economy or get by with barter and exchange with neighbours and friends and the odd day of casual wage labour, so they could take risks. Their attitude extended the Igorot ‘standby’ masculinity that had typically been distinctively expressed through other subversions of mainstream gender norms (Lewis, 1985), featuring feminine elements such as long hair or a painted fingernail. Like the young ne’er do wells interviewed by Lewis (1985), contemporary Igorot standbys still wear motorcycle-inspired fashions and longer hair. Backpack-makers are older standbys made good, but perhaps only temporarily. They still stomp around in heavy boots, jeans, thick jackets, and bandanas, like Hector. By citing the broader regional history of ‘standby’ identity – young men with free time and no steady employment who make trouble in town centres – miner/artisans extend and build on youthful rebellion even as they express an Igorot craft history. The feminine colours they work in express the experience of feminization by globalization described by Margold (1995), where Filipino construction labours find they are physically smaller and too congenial and self-effacing to be taken seriously as leaders or innovators in the global workforce. Not surprisingly, they make their backpacks as hyper-feminine as possible – see Ferdy’s comment on the heart, above.

Plastic *pasiking* backpacks were not a short-lived trend, but have become a staple of regional Igorot culture. They are now associated with an emergent *taraki* (cool, trendy or attractive) form of Igorot masculinity. In *taraki* style, the plastic backpack becomes regularly used as a *takba*, holding sacred elements for Igorots’ domestic ritual practice. It’s a key *taraki* accessory alongside a distinctive leather jacket, work boots, Levi’s 501 jeans and a plastic bottle – for spitting betelnut juice – for the Baguio region Igorot man. Plastic has a powerful double-edged nature here. It shows that Igorot men are not afraid to stand out, but also makes it more likely that such men will rub up against others performing more conventional mainstream masculinities on the city streets. As a material, it’s an expression of place and a redemption of identity, refusing to accept denigration of Igorot selves and culture as fake or insufficient.

**Conclusion: Masculinity and materiality**

Plastic may be ubiquitous as a global waste material, but it is not doomed to universal denigration. Here, we have shown that it is precisely this history that makes plastic a potent material for social commentary. For Igorot artisans, plastic backpacks set *plastik’s* cultural meaningas a material against the history of the *pasiking* backpack form. That history highlights the contradictions between the masculinity of the global Filipino worker and that of the Igorot man. Plastic is to the *pasiking* what the Igorot man is to masculinity: a trickster, a ‘fake’ or a wild card. Plastic performs this role because it is malleable and given to mimicry; it cannot do anything else. In parallel, the Igorot man with his plastic backpack shows how masculinity could be otherwise. Plastic craft thus reveals the how arbitrary it is to tie a man’s self-worth or control to his employment and earnings, consumption and ‘macho’ self-presentation. It suggests a man can still be a ‘man’ in the global world without securing all that. While that may be a banal insight for anthropologists, this remains potent and compelling for Igorots themselves: rather than being fake, it is ‘real’ Igorot men who wear plastic.

Plastic’s cultural potency here arises directly from its shape-shifting abilities and associations with inauthenticity, global consumption and waste. Appropriating plastic into the backpack form and using it as a container for the sacred reveals how ‘how things are’ – the unquestioned fundamentals of existence – is always intimately entangled with how things are being socially constructed (Holbraad and Pedersen, 2014). More than this, plastic and people’s responses to it reveal not only whose social constructions dominate, but how the materiality of stuff itself contains alternative possibilities for the future. These possibilities include garbage being transfigured into the vessel of the sacred, in the form of becoming *takba.* Recognising the potency and spiritual import of plastic is thus vital not only to sustaining indigenous cultures, but to figuring out how to reuse and redirect plastic waste. Plastic is not the same stuff everywhere and to everyone. Here, it is being fitted into contemporary indigenous ontologies in new and dynamic ways that offer further openings for design innovation and re-appropriation of waste.

Nonetheless, initiatives to manage waste, create innovate designs and products, or recycle plastics must grasp that, while plastic’s material properties and provenance limit its uses, it far more than merely a material resource on which traditional skills can be exercised (Drazin, 2014). Plastic has a cultural potency of its own. It carries its problematic history and malleability into the objects made from it in ways that reshape categories of meaning and subjectivities. Plastic is never just a neutral substrate for artisans’ self-expression but the active co-producer of dynamic distinctions between sacred and profane, global and indigenous that fold back in on each other. Likewise, the Igorot men who make and wear these backpacks bring plastic’s uneasiness to bear on their own economic and social marginalization, questioning the boundaries of ‘man’ in mainstream Filipino culture and the materiality of the sacred in their own Igorot tradition. Wearing pink and yellow plastic, they perform themselves as bearers of a resilient and dynamic culture that exists in the constitutive margins of global capitalism. Plastic positions the *taraki* Igorot man as someone who knows how to make a livelihood from the edges and detritus, prepared for the worst-case scenarios under global capitalism; he is a man who can figure out how to live otherwise.

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