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Negative Productions during Fieldwork in the Hometown

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Through autoethnographic writing, I reflect on “negative productions”—the “nonproductive” events that initially seem to create frictions against the disciplined acts of data gathering. Locally valued concepts such as *supog* (shame) and *ginakanan* (place of origin, genealogy) could materially press on our academic creative projects. In my discussion, I provide two examples from my field work in my hometown in Nabua, Philippines: the nonscreening of my film *Baad ng Pauno* (Restless) and my eventual retreat from the filming of events involving retired U.S. Navy men to which I already had access. I push for the reconsideration of what initially appears to be “negative” as productive, while also thinking about the inevitability of our participation in the messy work of knowledge production. While negative productions might unsettle our academic ambitions, they open doors for rethinking self-reflexivity, empathy, and our ethical commitments. **Key Words: autoethnography, field work, methods, migration, Philippines.**

“Home again,” I thought, as the bus slowed down to stop briefly at Nabua’s centro. This unassuming town in the Philippines where I trace my roots is in fact known by its townspeople as the “Town of Dollars.” Approaching it, my feelings of relief over our safe arrival were mixed with hints of stress and anxiety. Along with stirrings of nostalgia, returning to Nabua evoked memories of loss and separation. While riding his bicycle, back in 1994, my father was run over by a bus on this same highway. The accident happened at a time when my father was burdened by the feeling of smallness that we “did not make it” in the city, and that we had to accept material support from the maternal side of the family so we could rebuild our life in Nabua. Following the accident, my mother prohibited us, her children, from going anywhere outside the centro. All throughout my stay in Nabua for my high school education, the farthest I was able to go (without being accompanied by my family) in what I now call my field site, was the cemetery, which is a mere 1.3 km from our home. Fast forward to my research in Nabua, when I finally broke my mother’s prohibition to explore the rest of our hometown. My first

purchase was a cheap bicycle and on it during the cool hours before sunrise I began to explore the parts of Nabua outside of my grieving mother's imposed comfort zone. The realization slowly dawned on me that the town to which I was returning, and where I imagined I would be gathering data, and photographing and filming the "intimate" everyday, was quite unfamiliar to me. How could I research at this "home," when its space and people were but distant strangers? And—equally—how could I film at this home where people are also my relations?

Inherent in the academic forms of disciplining is learning how to create one's own style of reductionist representation, a process that Spivak (2010) critiqued for reflecting "certain kinds of convictions" that render subjects of study as transparent or readable. This could occur even when the researcher intends to "do" academic labor for kin and acquaintances. The act of capturing lived experience through audiovisual technologies is not immune from this critique. Our ambitions for academic or creative productivity require serious discussion, along with our habits of knowledge production as created through what Strathern (1987) called "routine reflexivity." Using examples from my field work in my hometown, I discuss here the messy contexts that have led to what might be called "negative productions," situations during which projects that are aimed at creating, delivering, and sharing knowledge in written, visual, or other forms, become unmade, unsettled, folded up, declared failed, or unrealized.¹

I wrote in my PhD proposal that I would be audiovisually recording daily life in Nabua, as well as conversations and interviews with research participants, contingent on their consent.² I also wrote that these could be used in "fleshing out narratives, daily life, and (other) events" that are now inflected by migration. Arriving in Nabua, though, locally valued concepts such as *supog* (shame) and the respondents' ideas of self-representation, as well as my concerns with maintaining social relations, pointed to the discomfiting potential of academic creative practices, especially when involving and directed to my *kababayans* (townmates). In the following section, I provide a brief context of my hometown's embeddedness in overseas migration and the impact these mobilities have had on my academic creative practice. I then describe two negative productions from my field work: the nonscreening of my film *Baad ng Pauno* (Restless 2009), and the nonfilming of one of the many events to which I had access. In my discussion, I reflect on the "nonproductive" effects of researching in the intimate hometown on academic creative ambitions and on the ways that place-based concerns about "relational accountability" (Wilson 2001) affect knowledge production. In the conclusion, I bring up the hauntings of knowledge production (Fabian 1990) as we return to our work as authors of representation. For one researching the hometown, this crisis often includes the emotionally laborious weighing of accountability for kin and other relations.

RESEARCHING MIGRATION AT HOME

Nabua is nestled in the central riverine basin of the Bicol Peninsula, Philippines. Like many agricultural rural communities in the archipelago, it has been transformed by its multiply colonial past, followed by rapid globalization and neoliberal restructuring after World War II. Its moniker, the Town of Dollars, is linked to the historical events of 1901, when, three years after Spain relinquished the Philippines to the United States, William McKinley signed an executive order that launched the gendered and racialized enlistment of the first 500 Filipinos into the lowest sector of the U.S. Navy.³ The recruitment of Filipinos officially stopped in 1991

when the last U.S. military bases in the Philippines were closed. This United States-bound migration of Nabueño men, spurred by the emergence of the “United States-Philippine nation” (Gavilan 2012), increased and diversified beyond employment in the U.S. Navy when state-sponsored mass labor exportation of Filipinos took off in the 1970s. Generations of Nabueños have been shaped by this colonial encounter, and the United States remains the desired destination country, an impression sustained by the material wealth, as well as social and cultural capital, transported to Nabua by the navy men. This self-ascribed moniker tells us about the predispositions embedded in the local psyche and the perceived transformative effects of U.S. dollars and United States-bound mobilities on the local economy. Sustained migration from Nabua also reflects the larger Philippine condition where migration is increasingly a normative option for its upwardly mobile citizenry. Today, the Philippines has one of the world’s most mobile populations, with about 6,000 people departing the country every day for work overseas (Migrante International 2015).

My overseas education and the increased integration of many members of my kin in the urban and global economy have informed my interests centered on Filipino migration. In my larger PhD dissertation, my intention is to study the effects of migration at home, in an attempt to address the gap in the existing literature, noted by others (Glick Schiller and Caglar 2008). Our intentions sometimes do not unfold as imagined, however, and as anthropologist-turned-artist Hiller ([1985] 2001) stated, intentionality is but “an interesting fallacy.” At the end of my first year of field work in Nabua, I reported to my dissertation supervising committee, “My filming in Nabua so far has been limited to publicly held events. The filming of personal life involved in migration is tough even at this point. I am realizing that the filming of everyday family life is in some ways exploitative, and I am finding it hard to explain to my potential film ‘subjects’ the purpose of my filming.”⁴ During field work, I began to doubt my rigor as researcher. I wondered whether my retreat from plans for ethnographic documentation and creative work were simply effects of demotivation, or even laziness. Here I present a write-up of the two negative productions during my field work at home to elaborate this cryptic e-mail.

NONSCREENING: *BAAD NG PAUNO*

I returned to Nabua for research but also with plans to screen *Baad ng Pauno*, a thirty-minute film documenting my mother’s two-day preparation for her application for a tourist visa at the U. S. Embassy in Manila. The film was made before I entered my doctoral studies, and by the time that I returned to Nabua, it had already been shown in various venues in the Philippines and overseas.⁵ I hoped to bring the film home as a tool for self-reintroduction. I was also motivated by the desire to “share” my work along Rouch’s idea of “shared anthropology” (Henley 2009), by ambitions to inspire creative production at home, and to hopefully open up conversations on the prevalence of migration from Nabua. In Nabua and in other small towns where the U.S. project of “benevolent assimilation” has crafted familial goals of producing educated workers embedded in the wage economy, however, art is often seen as *uda kamutangan* (useless). It is also commonly heard that artists belong to the category of *sa kinapay* (the crazies). The plan to screen my film back home exposed to me how our academic creative work, complicated by our often intertwining subject positions (as researcher, artist, neighbor, kin, and others), could unfold in messy ways.

The film opens with my mother in a polka-dotted dress, preparing to steam rice. She stands next to the small kitchen counter of the apartment that I had been renting in Manila. My voice behind the camera is heard, “Ma, let’s practice!,” referring to our rehearsals for her visa interview. In another scene, she asks annoyed, “Why are you taking videos of my wrinkled feet?” She follows this up, laughing, “I’ll make you take videos of my vagina so others can see the scars you gave me when you were born.” A few minutes into the film, my mother begins to talk to me through the camera in a mix of sentimentality, wit, and sarcasm. In one scene, the film cuts to a photograph of my newly born niece. This transitions to a medium shot of my mother, who gestures with her hand, as if holding the photograph to show it to an embassy officer during an interview, “This is my first grandson, I don’t want to see him in picture alone, I want to see him and kiss him!” My mother looks at the space off-frame in quiet contemplation. She steps out of this moment of feeling, and practices a spiel that she would not dare say to the consul in real life: “If you don’t pass me, this will be my last. I don’t want to be interviewed by you fools!” My mother is among the many people of Nabua whose dreams about mobility have been greatly influenced by the first migrations of our navy men. The route for those who are not direct descendants of navy men is potentially a difficult one, though. As ambitions for the “American dream” are reflected in everyday life in Nabua, I imagined that the film would resonate with the experiences of many Nabueños. Rather unexpectedly, my mother retracted the consent that I received earlier to screen the film in several venues in the Philippines and overseas. It was not immediately clear to me why a film that has already circulated elsewhere could not be warmly welcomed home.

NONFILMING: FLEET RESERVE ASSOCIATION'S ELECTIONS

On April 24 2014, some of the members of the Fleet Reserve Association (FRA) Branch 127 in Nabua are gathering to elect new officers. Branch 127 was accredited by the headquarters in Washington in 1949 and is one of the 220 FRA branches, and one of only nine existing in the Philippines. Uncle William announces the opening of the nominations for the elections. Looking at me, he says, “We vote without the ladies,” referring to their wives. A retiree turns and mockingly points his finger at me (the only “lady” in the room), and giggles. After former FRA president *Manoy* Nick seconds the motion, Uncle William excitedly raises his own hand and nominates Mr. Bachiller. Amid his shipmates’ enthused ramblings, Mr. Bachiller speaks tersely, “I respectfully decline the nomination.”⁶ An uproar of “Why?” is heard. Looking dejected, he replies, “Because I have a disability.” Instead of offering sympathy, though, his shipmates erupt into laughter. “We all have disability!” Uncle William exclaims. Mr. Bachiller reasons further, “I cannot handle the position. I cannot hear well.” Somebody asks, “What do you mean you cannot hear, what is wrong with your ear?” Uncle Pio, their treasurer and youngest member at age sixty-one and who sits beside Mr. Bachiller, comically cups his ear and says, “What?!” Once again, a roar of laughter erupts in the room. Mr. Moreno, the group’s advocate for social dancing, says, “I will volunteer as your VP if you accept your presidency.” He adds, “In fact, my other ear can also no longer hear!” Uncle William gives his own advice: “Your disability does not disqualify you from being elected because we *all* have disability.”

Realizing that he cannot escape the nomination, Mr. Bachiller tries harder, “There is another physical disability. It’s a new one which the doctor just told me about.” Laughter fills the room again. Uncle Pio motions to his chest as if he is having a heart attack. Mr. Bachiller, in a serious tone, gives

one last reason for declining the nomination, “If we have a member called by the Supreme Commander, it gets very difficult.” On saying this, the teasing mood immediately fades into an awkward silence. Manoy Nick asks, “Why, it affects you?” Mr. Bachiller, we begin to understand, is anxious about being president not only because of his weakening health, but because his role would hardly ever include planning homecomings and extravagant dances that the FRA was once famous for. Mr. Bachiller replies, “Yes, it’s a very difficult job.” Trying harder to convince his shipmate, Uncle William argues, “Just imagine, you are leading eighty-three retired officers and marines. It is something to be proud of.” Mr. Bachiller says that in case the job becomes stressful, there might be no one to help him. Mr. Moreno assures Mr. Bachiller, “I will be here. If I am not here, I am just at the *bulangan* (cockfight arena),” leading everyone to explosive laughter. With their membership base thinning, the duties of the FRA president now mostly include being responsible for organizing hospital visits, or upcoming farewells for their shipmates’ voyage into the next world. They are running out of members to recruit. As Uncle William once told me during a home visit, “We are a dying breed, near-extinct, endangered species.”

Prior to arriving in Nabua, I imagined being guided by decolonizing research methods by Filipino scholars that aimed at cultural sensitivity. I thought that the metaphor of the snowball in recruiting research participants seemed unsuitable in a tropical country! I was attracted to methodological discussions about the two main kinds of researchers in the Philippines as *ibang-tao* (outsider) and *hindi-ibang-tao* (one of us) (Enriquez 1989; Pe-Pua and Protacio-Marcelino 2000). Identifying already very close to the “one of us” category, I hoped to settle comfortably within the “one of us” zone and eventually collect data more easily. During my first home visit to Uncle William’s house, he suggested that I should make a documentary film about them. He had also prepared an outline titled “For Dollar Town—Feedback.” As my research with the U.S. Navy in Nabua proceeded, I learned that the themes in Uncle William’s outline and those told by his shipmates were centered on the positive accounts of their lives. “Don’t include that,” one told me in a hushed tone after learning that I had interviewed his shipmate who had submitted fraudulent documents in their youth just to join the U.S. Navy. “Are you a communist or what?,” another asked when I asked them to clarify what seemed like frictions in their allegiance to the United States with their identities as Philippine-born retirees in Nabua (Figure 1). Uncertain how to negotiate the ways that the retirees wanted to be memorialized in my ethnography with the critical literature on empire, war, and the military, I found it increasingly difficult to take on the work of rigorous audiovisual documentation that I thought would be relatively easy as an “insider.”

How can we understand these two negative productions? In what follows, I continue to discuss forces that exerted pressure on my work. First, I reflect on how the local value of *supog* (shame) materially pressed on my intentions to screen my film in Nabua. Second, I think about authoring as inextricably linked to place-based relations. The importance of place in Nabua manifests in the term *ginikanan*, which translates as both place of origin and descent. In my two accounts on negative production discussed here, we discern ways by which the conversions of “findings into artefact” (Strathern 1987, 28) also simultaneously involve the act of making aspects of one’s research recede. In the conclusions, I discuss how the relational forces of *supog* and *ginikanan* are forms of careful and empathic sensing of other people’s concerns and predicaments. The empathic route might lead one to retreat from knowledge production, moving efforts at rigorous data gathering and sharing toward negative productions.



FIGURE 1 Entangled U.S. and Philippine flags at Fleet Reserve Association (FRA) Branch 127 being readied for a ceremony. (Color figure available online.)

THE FORCE OF *SUPOG* IN THE NONSCREENING OF *BAAD NG PAUNO*

Many scholars have deployed visuals as cues in complicating our understanding of relationships, sensibilities, interpersonal activities, and the realm of the experiential (El Guindi 2004; Pink 2006). Audiovisual production cultivates socialities between people who surround the camera (MacDougall 2006), and delivers “implicit and multisensorial dimensions” at the same time that it also enriches the process of witnessing and theorizing (Torresan 2011). The production and experience of the visual also affect people in ways that challenge the visualist mode of appreciation in the West (Naficy 2001; Edwards 2005; Marks 2007). Critique and theorization

of the audiovisual, however, often come after the production of an intended output. The kinds of relationships and the dimensions of positionalities that could undo or unsettle an intended academic creative project need to be further problematized. In particular, my retreat to negative productions leads to a culture-specific discussion of interpersonal relations that potentially broadens the discussion of empathy with our informants. This realization needs to be framed within Philippine personhood theory, to reflect on the implications that locally operating values might have on our data gathering and other pursuits during field work.⁷

My mother said, “*Nagsupog na*” (It will be so shameful), when I first mentioned to her my intention to screen *Baad ng Pauno* in Nabua. *Supog*, which is translated to *hiya* in Tagalog, has equivalence in other parts of the Philippines. My mother’s identities as a desperate seeker of a U.S. tourist visa and as a sentimental grandmother that are projected in the film starkly contrast with the unwavering spirit that she projects in Nabua as a respected elder who has a record of thirteen years of political service as head of our *barangay* (village). Bulatao (1964) observed that *hiya* is often simplistically translated as shame, but more than that, it is “a painful emotion” that has “soul-shaking” effects when it threatens to mar one’s ego and sense of self-worth (426). It “is a kind of anxiety, a fear of being left exposed, unprotected, and unaccepted” (Bulatao 1964, 428). Meanwhile, Cannell (1999) found that in the Bicol region, *hiya* is positively valued and thus to be called shameless is a very serious accusation. Tabbada (2005) grounded *hiya* differently, linking it to the value of honor. The viling of another person’s honor is injurious to the larger social world in which a person is embedded. Jocano (1997) argued that *hiya* is not a value, but is instead a dominant norm that prescribes how people should act and behave in relation to each other and therefore, it is concerned not only with the maintenance of relationships, but with care for feelings. In the context of Filipino overseas migration, Rafael (2000) found that *hiya* surfaces when self-identifying middle-class migrant workers become labelled as “Filipino,” the term used to summarily refer to “a subservient class dependent on foreign economies” (213).

In *Baad ng Pauno*, an uncle’s unsuccessful visa application was brought up. The reason for the visa rejection, said my aunt, who is one of the only two characters appearing in the film, must have been my uncle’s thick gold necklace that could get struck by lightning and that could cause fires all over America! My aunt also mentioned the case of a great-aunt’s five-time visa rejection. In relatively small towns like Nabua, it is difficult to keep secrets where residents can claim relations. Unable to empathize with my mother’s worries about the responses that the film might elicit from our relatives, her peers, and former constituents, I countered my mother’s refusal to screen the film. I told her that the film only reveals the “real,” as visa refusal is a fact of life in Nabua. During my field work in Nabua, I helped with the visa applications of my brother, a neighbor, and my mother’s two siblings—and only my brother was successful in his attempt. Also holding ideas about how artistic engagements by academics have nurtured conversations and relations, and sometimes even spur action (Rouch and Feld 2003; MacDougall 2006), I initially contested my mother’s arguments about the *supog* that a public screening of the film could engender. I doubted my mother’s worries about the gossip that a film screening would generate, especially about individuals whose local status, wealth, and prestige did not translate to an ability to cross the great American borders.

During field work, however, I saw how my mother’s position as a retired local politician granted me easy access to many events, spaces, and relations. In May 2013, my mother accompanied me to the house of the vice governor, who she said was her “best friend.” Arriving at the vice governor’s residence early in the morning, I was struck by the crowd of at least a hundred waiting at the gate

hoping to personally deliver their requests to the vice governor. A lady told me that she wanted to ask the vice governor to be the baptismal godfather of her newborn, who she held in her arms. An old woman from the town of Bula (about 15 km away from Nabua) said that it was her fifth attempt to see the vice governor to ask for money so she could have electricity installed in their home. The private homes of political figures turn into sites where the powerful and the powerless negotiate patronage. With the disbursement of public funds transacted in the realm of the politicians' homes, government transactions transform into intimate negotiations between patrons and their clients and voters. Unlike the other clients who fell in line for their names and requests to be listed on the visitors' logbook, my mother and I quietly slipped into the wooden door that led us to the living room of the politician's home. There we were met by the vice governor himself, who greeted my mother with a friendly kiss on her cheek. Village captains like my mother are often mediators between high-level politicians and the ordinary villagers.

I thought that my mother sometimes exaggerated the weight of her political influence and the intimacy of her relations with others because, after all, she held only a local political position that had little power outside the bounds of Nabua. Pioneer of Philippine psychology Enriquez (2008, 57) wrote that one's self-evaluation might be "puffed up with self-importance," sometimes clashing with how society evaluates the person. As my mother's responses to my proposal to screen *Baad ng Pauno* at home showed, her desire for self-representation became more pronounced with the prospect of her story becoming re-embedded in her social world at home. In one scene, my mother practices her interview at the embassy by answering questions that she imagined might be asked by the consul: "How much do you earn?" She follows this with, "Ay, very small, but I want also to serve!" My mother received a monthly honorarium of only about US\$90 during her service as village captain. The power that one derives from holding village leadership loses its relevance when converted to monetary benefits. My mother also knew, though, that her income was often redistributed to her contingents as donations to wakes and funerals, festivals, and hospitalization, among others. Just as I initially undervalued her self-understood importance, I also undermined her worries about her expressed "dangers" of *Baad ng Pauno* when screened at home—home being a relational space where her consanguineal and ritual ties are strong and stable. I failed to realize that my mother's worries about *supog* that could injure the ego, hurt other people's feelings, or disturb local social relations, were her preferred modes of self-representation that are linked to her valuation of herself and others' valuation of her status in Nabua.

My mother's desire to protect her self-evaluated status by shielding it from *supog* also clashed with her ambitions for her children to continue to accumulate social capital through their education and rural–urban–overseas mobility, however. In fact, she decided to run for village office to avail of the benefits stipulated in Republic Act No. 7160 of the Local Government Code of 1991, under which the dependents of public officials can take advantage of exemptions from tuition and matriculation fees in state colleges and universities. She also calculates the ventures of her four children spread out in Manila and three countries, who she raised by herself after the untimely death of her husband, as linked to her own retirement prospects. In the film, she says that in New Zealand (where one of my sisters lived during the time of filming), she was "happily bored, simply enjoying life." Resting from practicing her lines to be delivered to the consul, she turns away from the camera and says, "I have been so poor. Now that I have grown old, and my children are all abroad, I want to reap the fruit of my labor. I want to reap the fruits!" My mother is aware that becoming an artist-scholar has become increasingly disassociated from the category of the "crazies" as it manifests increasingly in Nabua as a step into the

world of the educated and cultured elite. My mother recognized *Baad ng Pauno* as a material that represents to the world a Nabueño story crafted by her own daughter who has some exciting adventures to share, just like the well-traveled U.S. navy men.

Calculating the degree of support she can offer to me while diminishing her own concerns, she began to negotiate or compromise *supog*. Evaluating her position and succumbing to my arguments made no longer as a disobedient child but as a scholar, my mother let her worries about being subjected to *supog* recede, and finally agreed to my proposal. Her agreement, however, came with conditions.⁸ I was to censor the few seconds when the names of those whose visas had been rejected were mentioned. In her opinion, a public screening would be insane and she suggested that I invite only about twenty guests to our apartment for an intimate screening. Perhaps wanting to escape unwanted attention, my mother asked for the event to be held after she departed again for California. I began to realize that for my mother, the stories of migration and the anxieties and insecurities imbued in them, need not become objects of spectacle in Nabua. For my mother, it is better that my academic creative output, especially when intended for consumption at home, not mirror the real.

I began to understand that when carried back home, *Baad ng Pauno* is potentially an injurious liability. Reflecting on her responses, I decided to back out from our negotiated “exclusive” screening of the film in Nabua (Figure 2). It was my responsibility to care for my mother’s

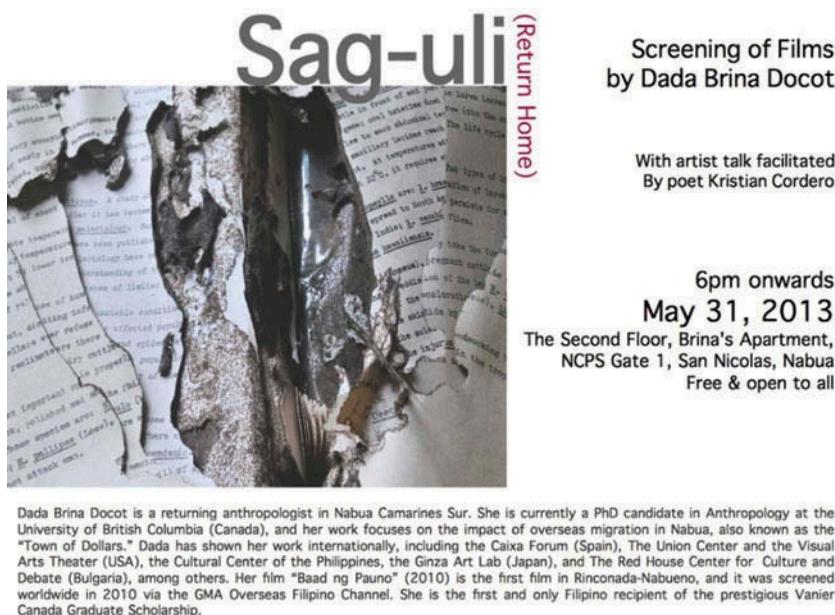


FIGURE 2 Unused invitation to a film screening during field work at home. (Color figure available online.)

concerns, but it is also part of my self-reflexive work as a postcolonial researcher to continuously learn how to be attentive to the ways that emotions press on my work—sometimes to the point of negative production. Beyond an empathic understanding of her predicament, I argue that the process of understanding the events surrounding the plans to screen *Baad ng Pauno* in Nabua must involve a reflection on the intermingling of *supog* (or other values) with the very work of knowledge production. Brough (2011) wrote that film, like phenomenology, is not merely descriptive; rather, it privileges what is deemed by the author to be essential. He said that as a “prepared particular,” film works as a “richly complex image created precisely to present something” (198). This is related to visual anthropologist MacDougall’s (2006) view that film must be contemplated beyond serving as a tool for documenting communities. MacDougall proposed to investigate the “multidimensionality of the subject itself” and to consider film in the “realm of interpersonal relations” (50). Brough’s and MacDougall’s approaches to film are useful in reflecting about how narratives—the trope of the “American dream” depicted in *Baad ng Pauno*, for example—become solidified in our work. Listening to our subjects’, respondents’, and collaborators’ multiple responses to our work might tell us how *supog* and other values could be felt and expressed in different degrees in various times and spaces. As I have learned, as long as the film is circulated outside Nabua, my mother sees the film harmless to the honor that she protects and projects in our hometown.

With these lessons in mind, my suggestion is that we look at retreats to negative productions as empathic routes for being and becoming in relation with others. Negative productions open spaces into which we could roll back from individualized Western subjectivity to an axiology that considers our relationality with others. For Strathern (1987), the kind of author that one “becomes” is not determined by an act of will, but in part by the kinds of representations that researchers end up producing. This means that intentionality becomes displaced by the researcher’s constructivist reading of culture. Further, the researcher’s rendering might end up being unreadable by the people from whom data had been extracted. Strathern observed that authors eventually end up writing not so much for those they study, but for their academic colleagues who are the audience of highly specialist accounts. In the light of this disjuncture between intentionality and end product, Strathern (1987) wrote that what is significant is the way the writer “becomes *author* in relation to those being studied” (26, italics in original).

Although I initially worried that my surrender to nonscreening was leaving negative impressions on my larger field work in Nabua, I venture that the nonscreening of *Baad ng Pauno* was productive in respecting my mother’s feelings and concerns about self-representation that were oriented toward maintaining social relations. Feelings associated with shame (and other expressions we might encounter) often are not immediately recognizable as they might be articulated subtly, sometimes in nonrevelatory cultural codes. On the other hand, the dangers of *supog* are often explicitly verbalized by those concerned about its possible adverse effects. Considering autoethnographic reflections on the anxiety-inducing process of becoming authors and in sensing interpersonal relations, I finally refer to Indigenous scholar Wilson (2001), who suggested that research methods need to be constantly checked so that “I am not just gaining in some abstract pursuit; I am gaining knowledge in order to fulfill my end of the research relationship” (176–77). I continue these conversations here by suggesting that place exerts force in this process that could lead to negative productions, should we hold on to our field sites as spaces where our past, current, and future relations are grounded.

THE FORCE OF *GINIKANAN* IN THE NONFILMING OF THE FRA ELECTIONS

On the day that I first came to introduce myself to the retirees, FRA president Uncle William added that my great granduncle, *Lolo* Cleto, was a navy man and philanthropist in Nabua. With my consanguineous links to their respected shipmate, I was welcomed to observe their meetings, which none of their “ladies” are allowed to attend. Researching elders in the hometown could be a taxing enterprise, however, because of the pressure to produce critical academic work while remaining sensitive to their age, disabilities, and concerns about how to be remembered. Researchers learn individualist ways of knowledge accumulation and production through different forms of disciplining. Many scholars have already problematized their locations as “natives” returning to study their home communities (Kim 1990; Kondo 1990; Motzafi-Haller 1997; Reed-Danahay 1997; D’Alisera 1999; Moss 2001; J. L. Jackson 2004), supporting Strathern’s (1987) observation that research at home “can recede infinitely” (16). Scholars have written about how defamiliarization, unmasking of degrees of nativity, and emotional disengagement can be deployed for the purposes of data collection at home.

This brings me to contemplating how researchers of communities other than their own have resolved some of the dilemmas that they faced. Some recognized their outsider status (Gilbert 1994), whereas others hold on to their politics and intentions despite the strains that their research brings to bear on their relations and everyday lives (Katz 1994). Rose (1997) was doubtful of “transparent reflexivity” as an effective route in recognizing and situating locatedness in relation to research participants (305). England (1994) wrote of the discomfort in issues of appropriation and power that are inherent in academic production, even for those who are intent on translating their academic work into political action.⁹ Röttger-Rössler (1993) reflected on the biases carried to the field that frame data collection. Some have become suspicious of their disciplines, such as Young (2005), who experienced a falling out with her friend-informant, and who began to think of anthropology as an “impolite discipline” (209). Others have resolved to inquire into intimate stories that involve themselves and their own families and communities after many years of writing about others (Ellis 2007; Behar 2013).

Linking this kind of literature to research on the Philippines, Jocano (1997) pointed out that the difference between those who study others and those who study their own community lies in the ways that the latter “labor under a heavy psychological burden” (10). Jocano thought about the difficulty in evading the consequences of actions also as kin, neighbor, and member of the same community. Within such context, Jocano suggested that one tends to take extra care to maintain harmonious relations with others. Given these conversations, I suggest that the process of self-reflexive thinking could consider more carefully the production of critical work when we study in field sites where we trace our roots and lifelong relations. Through thinking about place, we might find new routes in bearing in mind relationships that we might want to give space for flourishing.

In documenting the stories of the elders, I felt crippled by the demands of producing a decolonizing approach to the study of Filipino migration, which Rodriguez (2016) suggested must be linked to the U.S. project of empire building. Lutz (2006), in her study of U.S. intervention in the Philippines, suggested that it is the task of anthropologists to produce ethnographies that highlight that the “empire is in the details.” The expectations of academia to produce searing analytical work often clashed with relational practices at home, for example, of kinship and generational respect. Uncle William had told me that we are kin because in the 1970s my grandfather had purchased a farm from his father. He said that one sold property only to a relative because who would want to share a community with a stranger?

Uncle Pio told me that my grandparents stood as godparents during their wedding. Clarifying my genealogy, a retiree seemed to have insights into my family's secrets, suggesting that one of my elders could have been a member of the guerilla movement during the Japanese occupation. He refused to elaborate, saying, "Oh, never mind, they might get angry at you. This might be a personal issue." At another occasion, as I handed my calling card to an FRA retiree, he excitedly grinned to tell me that his departed brother was "linked" to my mother. I exclaimed automatically the name of my mother's childhood love. "Personal" stories from the past flowed into conversations, stalling interviews but also enlivening them.

The degrees of intimacy brought up during my exchanges with the FRA elders and their kin as well as by my own hinted at a common rootedness in Nabua, but also at the fragility of relations. At a funeral rite held at the town's church, an aunt saw me perform *bisa*¹⁰ to a whole group of navy retirees all seated on one pew. My aunt passed by my apartment the same afternoon to remind me in between jokes that I should be careful in performing such displays of respect because people might think that I am fabricating kinship with the town's wealthiest elders. In Nabua, showing gestures of reverence for the elders is still very much an observed tradition, but accumulated wealth, class, and migration histories have already interceded with its public performance. I began to understand that just as I tapped into these relations to access the elite group of the FRA elders for research purposes (i.e., by recalling to them my kinship with their departed shipmate), they also built or emphasized degrees of affiliations with me and my relations. This was a form of articulating their expectations for respect to their preferred ways of memorialization. As Uncle William proudly exclaimed, "Nabua has become synonymous with sailors." Despite this, many retirees are concerned that their contributions might fizzle out as their "species" approaches "extinction." Lolo George lamented, "So every time I'm reading the papers, they always mention the overseas Filipino workers. What about the retired navy?"

In a context where age and health become perilous to life, memory making in the hometown becomes an important project. A replica of the Washington Monument flanked by both Philippine and U.S. flags stands at the heart of Nabua. Only a couple of meters across is a wall monument dedicated to the "Unknown Soldier of Nabua." Together, these monuments offer conflicting historical narratives about Nabueño–U.S. cooperation and Filipino martyrdom during World War II. Such contradictions are also reflected in the elders' assessment of their identities now as U.S. citizens who have chosen to enjoy their remaining days in their land of birth. As we sat in his brother's (also a U.S. Navy) penthouse of a building in Nabua built from dollar pensions, a retiree told me, "I am always a Filipino at heart, at first . . . But America is not my enemy." The accounts of retirees in Nabua differed from some of the expressions made by those who have retired in the United States, which focused on feelings of discontent, racialization, and feminization in the navy (Espiritu 2002, 2003). Former navy man Burdeos (2008) wrote about his experiences of political disenfranchisement by having pledged allegiance, but not citizenship, to the United States. Narratives similar to that of Burdeos also sometimes appeared in the stories told by the retirees in Nabua, but these conflicted with their celebrated status as epitomes of success in the town. The elders are glad to have escaped from tenant farming, and they wish for other Nabueños to someday have the same opportunity should their wish for the reinstallation of the U.S. Naval bases in the Philippines come true. Their "painful" experiences in the U.S. Navy that I hoped to collect—a "conviction" that I held, following Spivak—resisted coming out in their self-chronicling. Their recollections that favored the positive over critical accounts are reminiscent of the words of Augé (2004) on oblivion: "One must know how to forget in order to taste the full flavor of the present, of the moment, and of expectation" (3).

The vignette on the FRA elections described earlier is only one of the many moments during which conversations among retirees retain light-heartedness even when discussing sensitive topics such as disability and death. The jovial mood in FRA meetings also tended to eclipse tones of melancholia, however—the kind of mood that is often aestheticized and metaphorized in third world cinema (Marks 2007). Collecting “death aid” was the most consistently brought up topic in the FRA meetings that I attended. On January 26, 2014, unable to decide as a group the best way to show their condolences to their shipmates’ left-behind kin, Uncle William mediated, “I think we are being emotional with this issue.” Some wanted to donate individually to the bereaved, whereas some preferred to donate as a group because “the use of FRA is also for publicity.” To calm down the heated discussion about how to, as Lolo George said, “give a face and spirit to the donation,” they resolved that to keep talking about it is *paligsok*—a bad omen that could invite death. At a home visit, Dr. Gimenez, the only son of a Nabueño navy man who was killed during the bombing of Pearl Harbor and whose name is inscribed on the Tablets of the Missing in the Manila American Cemetery, shed a tear when I asked him if he had discussed with his mother his father’s tragic death. “One does not rub fresh wounds,” he told me softly, yet instructively. Marks (2007) wrote about the films produced in the postcolonial period as sometimes difficult to read to “acknowledge the fact that the most important things that happened are invisible and unvisualizable” (57). Although there are ways of translating the FRA elections and similar moments into film, I worried about the spectacularizing effect that it would bring, and that my rendering of their story would be incongruent to the ways that they want to “ethnographize” themselves (Chow 1995, 180).

If kinships could be fabricated in the same way that my aunt told me, they could also be disentangled. The fluidity of kinship materializes in Nabua in the use of the term *pag-iiba*, which roughly translates to “still (my) kin.” One would say *pag-iiba ta pa yan* (we are still kindred) even if not sure. Drawing attention to this is crucial because it directs us to the hard work that is put into maintaining relations at home. An identified kin, whether proximate or distant, when not acting within the relations expected of them, becomes identified as *iba* (other). It can be said the person is *iyang sa iba* (acting like other), connoting the person’s othering of the self by acting like a stranger. A person is identified as *iba* in situations, for example, when not greeting someone even during a brief encounter on the streets, or when not responding to requests for support. A film that is not compatible with the elders’ projected optimistic account would potentially render me as *iba man* (different). On the other hand, a person who remembers to care and who is empathetic is called *marinumrom*. Those who have failed, or who refuse, to remember, are described as *iba na* (has become other), which means that the act of not remembering (*lingaw na* or have already forgotten) makes them fall away from a group, family, or any kind of social organization. Those who remember are applauded through affection, speech, or commendation by members of the group and they are described as *tattao* (knowing), and are therefore *uragon* (excellent).¹¹ Considering these, I realized the rigidity of the insider–outsider binary. I was conflicted that I might inflict injuries on the collective and individual labors of the FRA retirees in regrounding themselves in Nabua during their retirement. At home, to be called *iba na man* (has become other), especially by one’s elders, will possibly create for me feelings of uprootedness from Nabua. This feeling cannot be held individually, however, as the self is often linked back to the social world of the family and the community—in the same way that my mother worried that the screening of *Baad ng Pauno* would bring *supog* and eventually affect her (and our family’s) modes of representation in relation with others.

Therefore, negative productions such as the nonfilming of the FRA elections had the effect of emplacing relations that would otherwise be rendered abstract through the individualizing process of research and academic creative production. Thinking about the field site as common *ginikanan*, research becomes refolded into a relational field. The conversations with FRA elders all point out that they returned to Nabua on retirement not only to enjoy their hard-earned pensions in a small town where these could be exchanged for a bigger value, but also because it is in the *ginikanan* that they wish to be remembered kindly. Annually, on November 1, relatives offer candles, prayers, and food to the deceased in Nabua's Catholic cemeteries. Through their savings and pensions, U.S. Navy men have built for themselves and their families Nabua's most monumental mausoleums (Figure 3). "We are all getting old at eighty-three, eighty-five, eighty-



FIGURE 3 A navy man's mausoleum in Nabua shaped like a ship. (Color figure available online.)

six,” Mr. Moreno says during the FRA elections as he points toward his shipmates of these ages. “Great if the rest could reach this age. Some will die earlier and we’d have to send you off to the cemetery,” and his shipmates giggle in response. In Nabua, stories about lives that were lived well are hoped to be circulated and remembered. Meanwhile, the idea of the field site as *ginikinan* to which I will be frequently returning, to reconnect with kin, childhood friends, and with my new kinships discovered and made, such as those with the FRA elders, looms over the research process, beckoning to be considered.

CONCLUSIONS: POSITIVELY VALUING NEGATIVE PRODUCTIONS

A brief account of the film in which my mother appears is concrete evidence of the ideas about knowledge production and sharing that I had brought with me to the field site after years of overseas education. I have discussed the discomforts and disorienting effects that an understanding of *supog* can cause to the extent that they can unmake our research plans during field work. Expectations for rigor and productivity clashed with my mother’s feelings of *supog*, leading to the reorientation and renegotiation of my previously unproblematized and individualized ambitions for sharing work in the hometown. The ethnographic vignette on the FRA elections that happened approximately a year after my return illustrates some of the many moments in which I have opted out of visual documentation, despite the kinships and other connections that could have made access possibly easy to obtain. *Baad ng Pauno*’s nonscreening in Nabua has led to this writing up on some of the film’s contents and on some of the social relations that the plans for its screening engendered, revealing dimensions that are not discernible from the film itself.

It is true that the intimate conversations brought up here about my mother’s and the FRA elders’ concerns end up in a public but inaccessible (for the people in my hometown) academic circulation. How might we think about this paradox? What happens when we finally remove ourselves from the field and return to the fact of inevitable authorship? Answering these questions requires a quick reflection on authoring the visual and the textual. MacDougall (2006) wrote that the visual’s temporality preserves experiences “more concretely than writing does” (54). Brough (2011), meanwhile, wrote that films construct the world in a “unique and heightened way.” Others have written about how films engage viewers phenomenologically by creating the effect of being drawn to the movements happening on screen (Pink 2011), as they also encode power relations between the bodies that appear in them (Marks 2007). The visual also has the quality of open-endedness such that images are always subject to reinterpretation, whereas the academic text, “despite its caution and qualifications, is a discourse that advances always toward conclusions” (MacDougall 2006, 6).

Rather than focusing on the differences between the visual and the textual, however, such as their interpretation of knowledge, how they are received by audiences, and others, my arguments here have taken the route of reflecting on the intermingling of our subjects’ concerns about self-representation, reception of our work in various geographies and contexts, and our intentions in knowledge production. I have drawn from a phenomenology of the lived experience where the investigation inquires into relationalities and socialities (Edwards 2005). By drawing my attention to the worries of my mother about *supog*, and to the assertions of the retirees about how they want to be memorialized in the *ginikanan*, I

came to think about the audiovisual not as an indispensable tool in contemporary ethnography, but as an artifact that has material effects on social relations. Although *Baad ng Pauno* was screenable elsewhere, and although a film about the elders could contribute to evocative works on aging such as those by Myerhoff (1992), centering empathy with the people whose stories are implicated in my narrative making led me to eventually let go of my initial plans involving film.

Fabian (1990) foresaw an eventual abandonment of “representationism” in academia (765) to be replaced with praxis that is based on a “dialectical conception of writing” in which “every act, every production, must contain its negation to become realized” (768). The ways of conveying such praxis, for Fabian, “would be those that transform that experience in a struggle with ‘means of production’ of discourse” (765). My idea of negative production involves this similar struggle in thinking about possible productivities in the eventuality of not doing. My retreat from filming would only be perceived as nonproductive if we were to insist on knowledge production as confined within the often meticulous demands of our disciplines. In the two cases presented here, it has been inconsequential to debate the usefulness of this text over what could have been accomplished by a screening or a new film. To do so is to misunderstand negative productions as merely a derivative phenomenon of another work or event (screening or film), and to gloss over the force of *supog*, *ginikanan*, and others. When resolving conundrums that might take us to the path of negative production, Fabian’s suggestion is to think about “not-writing as part of writing,” or we could translate this to “not-doing as part of doing.” Fabian suggested that one alternative that could be taken is to “dissociate these data from any scheme or purpose and to treat them as necessary but gratuitous, like the air we breathe” (769). For Fabian, data that are not written could “nourish” our disciplines, and like air, it could be productive as we move forward in our respective fields. On the other hand, though, Fabian also recognizes the impossibility of being allocated funding for such “gratuitous field experience,” even if much of our gathered data are nevertheless left unwritten (770). To write about not doing, as I have done here, is among the ways of reflecting on events that would have otherwise been erased from my ethnography. Fabian bitterly wrote about not writing, “To stop writing altogether would seem to be a logical consequence (for those who care), but it is hard to see how it could ever become more than an isolated, and probably temporary, act of demonstration” (767–68). Is there also a difference, Fabian asked, between not writing and remaining silent as “personal affliction” that harms one’s career, and as an “ethnographic branch to sit on” (771)? I have not taken the route of simply not writing or not doing about the messiness of doing ethnography in the hometown, agreeing with Fabian that becoming self-conscious of the power imbalance that permeates knowledge production is merely the beginning of critical work. For Fabian, the problem does not solely rest on writing in the literal sense, but on the stubborn persistence of positivism in ethnography that frames and contains the other while rendering absent “the Other’s voice, demands, teachings” (771). I hope that the two negative productions that I discussed here are productive attempts at inquiring into the canons and supposed rigors of knowledge production. The paths that I have taken while in the field led me to hold respect for, and to be sensitive to, the concerns of people whose personal lives animate this ethnography of Nabua.

Negative productions during field work led me to rethink my positionality as an “anthropologist of the hometown,” and has encouraged me to reflect on “routine reflexivity” (Strathern 1987). Self-reflexivity needs to include unsettling reflections on the eventuality of authorship. The representation that we make, for Spivak, could either be “speaking for” (proxy), or “re-

presentation” (embodiment) of, the objects of our study. Beyond interweaving theory and data, the crafting of representation also involves thinking about the audience and reach of our work. We have much to learn from autoethnographers who have become tangled up with the stresses and anxieties of producing work about the intimate. Ellis (2007) wrote of autoethnography itself as “an ethical practice” in which researchers “feel the tug of obligation and responsibility” (26). In the end, we bid our farewells to our family, friends, and informants, and perhaps assurances that “we shall meet again” will be exchanged. Returning to our desks and retreating from the face-to-face demands of maintaining our social relations with others, we put on our academic masks and go back to the task of authoring representation because it is “something that we actually do, as our praxis” (Fabian 1990, 765).¹² Should we proceed to tread on our respective professional routes, the crafting of representation of others, products of which we hope will be positively received by the community we write about, will be consistent in our everyday emotional, and hopefully productive, labor. Fabian (1990) wrote about the eventuality of praxis as “acting on, making, transforming (giving form to), not regrettably so or incidentally . . . but inevitably” (762–63). Fabian also admits, however, that his retreat to not writing came after gaining considerable security in the academic world. Would negative productions then be doubly negative or simply not an option for those who are in the beginnings of their chosen careers?

As Lambek (2005) reflected, academic work is “(relatively) unalienated,” and it is a “life sentence” (237). Leaving the field and facing the inevitability of knowledge production can spur a crisis, as it will require the inescapable transcendence of *supog* and the *ginikanan*. Different scholars have offered different advice. Bulatao (1964) argued that it is possible to transcend values such as *supog* if one is a “mature, individuated person, sensitive to the feelings of others yet autonomous in his own right” (438). Bulatao’s description of a person who will be able to transcend shame describes authors trained to be sensitive to ethics and empathic to feelings and social relations and yet, within the cultivating powers of neoliberal disciplining, individuated and autonomous in knowledge production. Cannell (1999) wrote of the transcendence of shame more positively, writing that feelings of it can be reduced, overcome, eliminated, and eventually set aside (208), leading to “almost-impossible acts of self-transformations” (223). Like Fabian, I would like to simply retreat to not writing or to what I have called here negative production, and breathe in, and be sustained by, the raw data that I have gathered from my hometown. The transcendence of shame leading to self-transformation as Cannell put it seems like a promising prospect. This transcendence, however, ends up being consistently checked with the readiness to underplay the value of the *ginikanan*.

I am transnationally located without a permanent address and I am most attached to Nabua. Constantly, I am perturbed by the prospect of facing my elders when I return home in the future. The transcendence of *supog* that I undertake through this writing carries the extra weight of obtaining what would be the family’s first “collectively earned” doctoral degree. To be in perpetual harmonious relation with my mother and with the FRA elders is what I certainly desire, but would the demands of my scholarly pursuits eventually lead to this desire’s languishing and retreat? Negative productions might have nonproductive effects on our research ambitions, but at the same time, they create possibilities for assessing our ethical commitments, for reimagining avenues that could extend the reach of our research, and for rethinking the ends of our work as intimately linked with a larger and messier social life. Therefore, following the call of scholars to decolonize research (Jocano 1997; Wilson 2001; Enriquez 2008), I suggest that we rethink relationality as a form of knowledge itself. Negative productions could unsettle

and undo our academic creative work, yet as I have hopefully demonstrated here, they could also lead to a positive and productive contemplation of feelings, values, and relations that matter.

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NOTES

1. I am not alone in drawing attention to the negative, absence, failings, silences, collapses, disappearance, and other negative descriptors. Rony (1996), in fact, pointed out that a central theme in the works by non-Western filmmakers is their “not-photographing” of subjects.
2. My larger research project is an ethnography of one of the many towns in the Global South whose residents’ experience of migration is inflected by intersecting forces of colonial encounters and global economy. Interested in looking into the entangled workings of migration and intimacies in everyday life, I look at both quotidian and spectacular events in the hometown to contribute to scholarship that pushes for the understanding of particularly local practices such as kinship, ritual, and so on, as simultaneously global and intimate (Pratt and Rosner 2012). Following phenomenological scholarship (Fabian 1990; Ahmed 2003; M. Jackson 2013) that has pushed for a nuancing of the lived experience, my initial idea was to use the audiovisual in reflecting on intimacy in rigorous ways.
3. For many years, Filipinos were only recruited to the Steward Branch where no white Americans were allowed. Ingram (1970) later called U.S. Naval ships “floating plantations” in comparison with the historical organization of slave labor in agricultural production in the U.S. South.
4. I sought oral consent from my informants, many of them my own relations. During interviews and conversations, informants would often note which parts of our conversation needed to be “off the record,” and some of them were up front in steering the direction of my research. Obtaining consent or permission is entangled with interaction processes contingent on existing, developing, and built intimacies between the researcher and members of the community that other Filipino researchers interested in “decolonizing methodologies” have already problematized (Pe-Pua and Protacio-Marcelino 2000; Enriquez 2008).
5. The worldwide screening was in 2009, under a contract with a Filipino satellite TV channel that caters to overseas Filipino subscribers.
6. I called those who have expressed kinship or other nonconsanguineal connections with my family “uncle” or “grandfather/granduncle” (*Lolo*) and those who share some connections with my family, *Manoy* (elder brother). I called members of the club Mister, Sir, or Doctor if we have not mutually established direct kinship ties or other connections. I also called the navy elders I met through old and close friends *Lolo*, following what my friends already call their beloved elders.

7. I am aware that some critics have dismissed indigenous psychology for carrying the dangerous card of nativist essentialism. I am more inclined to follow San Juan (2006), who wrote about indigenous theorizing in the Philippines as “a Filipino response . . . to continuing U.S. interference in Philippine society, culture, and politics . . . it is not equivalent to nativization since it involves a radical political program to democratize the social structure and its undergirding fabric of norms, beliefs, and constitutive behavioral elements” (52–54).
8. I am limited by space in further deepening my discussion on the tensions in researching family and others. Autoethnographic works provide many compelling accounts, but I would like to highlight Ellis’s (2007) proposition for “relational ethics” in researching and negotiating with “intimate others,” which include not only our immediate family members, but also informants who became our friends, and so on. In her occasionally unsettling piece, Ellis wrote about the different routes she has taken in negotiating with others and herself about what and how to write. In her account of her lifetime work, Ellis wrote about the different shades of negotiations with her intimate others to suggest that figuring out what could be written or revealed is always in process.
9. Both Rose and England have reflected on “failure” in their research. Rose (1997) suggested that anxieties arising from self-reflexivity could weigh down academic work, leading to what she called knowledge production from a “sense of failure.” In her research about lesbians in Toronto, England (1994) understood the community leaders’ nonresponse to her queries as cues to their disinterest in participating in her project, leading her to call her project “failed research.” In my discussion here, I take interest in the notion of failure by proposing to reevaluate negativity as not necessarily leading to a dead end.
10. *Bisa* is a gesture of respect for elders that includes a younger person taking an elder’s hand to bring it to touch their forehead.
11. The concept of the *wagon* as used in Nabua as well as in the larger Bicol region, is a value that alludes to one’s excellence in several aspects of life. Excellence here might be related to skills, technical abilities, intelligence, interpersonal relations, and so on.
12. Many have written about the blurriness of the boundaries between the field site and the spaces where we write. Katz (1994), for example, wrote of the “field” as “multiply determined” and in these, “we are everywhere, always in” (72). Kim (1990) told us how the “emotional weight” of collected data from the field is transported to his writing desk. It could also be that even “natives” returning to their own communities might find it difficult to locate the “field” (D’Alisera 1999). Nast (1994) reflected on the “field” as space that is “in-between,” writing of it as “always politically situated, contextualized, and defined and that its social, political, and spatial boundaries shift with changing circumstances or in different political contexts” (60). My “field” is clearly separated from my “desk,” and I call up these works to recognize the persistence of questions about the field and home that researchers continue to struggle with.

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