



Stuff. Daniel Miller, 2010. Malden, MA: Polity Press. 220 pp.

DANIEL Miller could not have chosen a more unremarkable title for his book. Miller started declaring his reticence or even refusal to define “stuff,” except to say that it was about “things.” He reasoned that “stuff works just fine.” While Miller might have his reasons for choosing his title, I believe that he should have made the title more interesting. I would not have paid any attention to his book if it were not a required reading for one of my graduate courses. Despite the nondescript title, Miller’s easy-reading prose yet graphic description, unorthodox but deeply nuanced analyses made the mundane very interesting.

Miller said that he does not subscribe to the conventional notion of “knowledge as best conveyed through clear definitions.” He lamented the tradition of “cleverness” in academia, which places much premium on debunking previously established interpretations and arguments. Miller argued for “understanding” rather than “cleverness.” He added that the “best way to understand, convey and appreciate our humanity, is through attention to our fundamental materiality.” His main objective here was to come up with a theory of things. He eschewed the overemphasis on representation, semiotics, linguistics, and metaphor, at the expense of the material. He exhorted anthropologists toward a refocusing on the materiality.

He acknowledged his gratitude for the provenance of his theoretical orientation mainly from Hegel, Marx, and Simmel, as well as from Levi-Strauss and Bourdieu. When trying to explain the ideas of these theorists, he seemed to adopt an irreverent tone but made them, I believe, more understandable. At the same time, Miller employed a self-deprecating style and humor that made his “irreverence” or flippancy “forgivable.”

Among the major important points that Miller raised in the first chapter included the following: (a) industrial and non-industrial societies are both material cultures—there may be a difference in the kinds and

volume of materials but acquisitive desire and behavior are present in both; (b) characteristic of modernity as exhibiting tendency to both universality and particularity; for Miller, among the purposes of anthropology is to reconnect these two and bring them back into dialogue; (c) dialectics of the relationship between stuff and a people—that we create or constitute things, but things also constitute us; (d) agency of individuals as well as the agency of stuff; and (e) a focus on function is not sufficient to capture the complexity of stuff.

He focused on common and taken-for-granted stuff, which were salient elements and aspects of the quotidian, such as clothing, housing, and new mass media and communication technology, among other things. He wanted to call attention to what he believed as neglected albeit important aspects of materiality. Four chapters of Miller's book are devoted in exploring materiality of various aspects of everyday life. For purposes of this review, I will focus on the Indian *sari* and on new communication technology.

The chapter “Clothing: Why Material Culture Is Not Superficial” is devoted to a critique on the conventional view of superficiality of clothing. Miller took issue with the semiotic approach to clothing—the view that the clothes merely represent the human subject, thus superficial and inconsequential. Miller argued that clothes are among an individual's most personal possessions, among the few objects that “know” our bodies intimately. Clothes, according to Miller, “are the main medium between our sense of the world and our sense of the external world.”

Miller provided a very nuanced, detailed and in-depth description and analysis of the Indian *sari* and the *pallu*. For Miller, instead of the conventional analysis of how the Indian woman wears the *sari*, he focused on how the *sari* wears the Indian woman, or how the *sari* makes the wearer both a woman and Indian. Miller deconstructed the *pallu*, which is the highly decorated end of the *sari* that falls over the shoulder.

Miller described the many facets of the *pallu*, which include the following: (a) it is used by the mother as a “multi-purpose nursing tool”

and thus becomes instrumental in the mother-child bonding, and (b) it serves as a symbol for the child of the physical embodiment of the mother's love. Moreover, the pallu also serves as the woman's third hand when she goes about her household chores and daily routine. The sari and pallu can be used for many gestures that could be deemed either as modesty or as erotica. These characteristics are used to great effect by Bollywood and television soap operas.

The pallu's character of taken-for-grantedness is that which enables it to be deemed an extension of the woman's body. Miller argued that things are more powerful when they have been taken for granted. However, the pallu could also be the very object that betrays the Indian woman. It could be the thing that catches fire in the many cases of dowry killings and stove deaths in India. Sometimes, it is also the pallu that a desperate and unhappy Indian bride uses to hang herself with.

I have been familiar with the phenomena of stove deaths and dowry killing, but only after reading Miller did I begin to realize and associate the exoticized Indian sari or the pallu with the horror of stove deaths. Only then did I truly appreciate what Banerjee and Miller meant by the sari making the Indian woman. Indeed, no other piece of clothing clearly defines the wearer as much as the sari and pallu.

Another theme explored by Miller had to do with mass media and new forms of information and communication technology (ICTs) such as the Internet and mobile phones. New media technology gave rise to the possibility of mobile phone relationships and virtual relationships. The technoscapes, mediascapes, and ideoscapes (Appadurai 1996) have impacted profoundly on the ethnoscaping, agency, subjectivities, and the everyday life of people. A poor country like the Philippines has been heavily influenced by the new communication technology. Studies suggest that approximately 30 percent of the population has Internet access, and almost 50 percent has a mobile phone. The findings also suggest that Filipinos are among the most active users of social networking sites in Asia. The Philippines is also considered the world's leader in text messaging,

with Filipinos sending an average of 200 million mobile phone text messages a month (Agence France-Presse 2010).

Miller found out that an important purpose of mobile phone use by the poor in Jamaica is to maintain vast network of social relationships that could be possible sources of support for future financial and social needs. Miller cited Parreñas (2005) whose findings about Filipino diaspora and ICT showed as not very positive. Parreñas relates that mobile phones did not substantively contribute to fostering better communication and social ties between Filipino migrant workers and family left behind. In turn, this is contradicted by McKay's (2006) findings on Filipino migrant workers in Hong Kong who, with the use of mobile phones, participate in "remote" micro-management of everyday life in Al-alinao Norte, La Union.

What is missing in Miller's accounts about media technology, such as the Internet and mobile phones, is the alarming rise in sex crimes related to these technologies. I eschew making direct correlation between crime and mass media consumption. I believe that primary socialization agencies like the family mediate the effects of ICT and mass media. However, I am convinced that mass media and ICTs have become influential socializing agencies that have profound effects on social and intimate relationships, including sexual violence. These new ICTs afford anonymity, which in turn gave rise to new forms of sex crimes against the trusting and naïve. Pertierra grants that there is a need for new notions of trust in the context of new forms of encounters under these new forms of communicative technology.

The National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) of the Philippines has issued a warning against dating people met via TV chat rooms and random texting (Santos 2007). Unlike in previous years with a high incidence of incest rape, stranger rape has increased in 2010. The police partly attribute this to the Internet and social networking sites. Sex predators use Facebook and Twitter to find prospective victims (Kwok 2010). The NBI has several cases of sex video being uploaded by sex crime perpetrators who victimized women they met via the Internet and texting (Santos 2007).

Miller advocates for an anthropology “devoted to the comprehension and welfare of people in society.” Communicative technology is not something benign. It may have initially been created from good intentions but had evolved and is now being used for crimes. I argue that Miller and other media technology scholars should not neglect the increased incidence of sex crimes attendant with the new forms of communicative technology.

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