

BOX POPULI:
A SOCIO-CULTURAL STUDY OF THE
FILIPINO AMERICAN BALIKBAYAN BOX

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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***BOX POPULI: A SOCIO-CULTURAL STUDY
OF THE FILIPINO AMERICAN BALIKBAYAN BOX***

by

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Abstract

In this thesis, the *balikbayan* boxes that Filipino Americans bring with them when they visit the Philippines are viewed primarily through the lenses of material culture and customary studies. It provides the historical, political, and economic contexts which have led to the immigration of Filipinos to America and the emergence of *balikbayans*—the returning natives—and their boxes. It also contains descriptions of *balikbayan* boxes, their contents, and the practices involved. This study indicates that *balikbayan* boxes are indices of *balikbayans* themselves. These packages are metaphors for the dislocation of Filipinos resulting from their immigration to the United States. These boxes are also sites, in which *balikbayans* are positioned as neo-colonizers and perpetuate American cultural hegemony. This examination suggests that *balikbayan* boxes are connected to a host of complex issues, including kinship ties and obligations, politics and economics, colonialism and postcolonialism, immigration and diaspora, globalization and commodification, exchange and reciprocity, travel and tourism.

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List of Abbreviations

CIA	Central Intelligence Agency (USA)
DOT	Department of Tourism (Philippines)
DSS	Department of Social Services (USA)
DTD	door to door (shippers)
EVP	Exchange Visitor Program (for nurses)
FMG	foreign medical graduate
FNG	foreign nursing graduate
FOB	fresh off the boat, or recent immigrant
GNP	Gross National Product
HPEAA	Health Professions Educational Assistance Act (1976, USA)
HSPA	Hawaiian Sugar Planters Association
Huk	HUKBALAHAP, or <i>Hukbó ng Bayan Laban sa Hapón</i> ("Movement of the Country/People Against the Japanese")
IIRIRA	Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (1996, USA)
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IMFA	Immigration Marriage Fraud Amendments (1986, USA)
INA	Immigration and Nationality Act (1965, USA)
IRCA	Immigration Reform and Control Act (1986, USA)
LAX	Los Angeles International Airport

MCIA	Mactan-Cebu International Airport
MNC	multinational corporation (also TNC)
MNLF	Moro National Liberation Front
NAIA	Ninoy Aquino International Airport (Manila)
NPA	National People's Army
OCW	overseas contract worker (also OFW)
OFW	overseas Filipino worker (also OCW)
PAL	Philippine Airlines
SSI	Social Security Income
TNC	transnational corporation (also MNC)
TNT	<i>tago ng tago</i> ("hide and hide"), or illegal immigrants
USAFFE	United States Army Forces in the Far East
WB	World Bank
WRA	Welfare Reform Act (1996, USA)

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

In May of 1998, my family and I went back to the Philippines to attend my brother's wedding. It was the first time I returned to my native land since we immigrated to the United States thirteen years before (in 1985). I enjoyed the whirlwind of activities: I had fun with my relatives, travelled within the country, and got together with old friends. While the rest of my family could only stay for two or three weeks, I was in the Philippines for about five weeks. Once back in Los Angeles, I was supposed to do some preliminary work on my thesis, but I was no longer excited by my initial, broad topic on the experiences of Filipina immigrants. Invigorated by my trip, I was interested in doing something that had more to do with the Philippines. One day, I was talking to my sister about it, and she offered a few ideas for a new topic. One suggestion in particular stood out: *balikbayan* boxes.

What are *balikbayan* boxes? They are large, brown or white boxes, which almost all Filipino Americans bring with them when they visit the Philippines (see Figure 1.1). Named after the *balikbayans*, or returning natives, who carry them, these cartons mostly contain *pasalubong* or gifts for relatives and friends. When my family went home, we had eleven *balikbayan* boxes, in addition to nine suitcases and assorted carry-on luggage. While the suitcases contained our clothes and supplies for the trip, our boxes were, indeed, laden with *pasalubong*. This seeming largesse is by no means out of the ordinary: in fact, these packages are staples in the transglobal existence of many Filipinos.



Figure 1.1 Woman at LAX with *balikbayan* boxes

My sister's idea was inspired. Though the transportation of *balikbayan* boxes to the Philippines is a prevalent practice among Filipinos in America, not much thought or analysis has been given to it. I thought that the topic was full of possibilities, and a few questions immediately came to mind. Why are these boxes so ubiquitous? What is the story behind them? Why do *balikbayans* keep bringing them even when they can be so inconvenient? I also had some vague thoughts about colonialism, transnationalism, and commodification. The subject matter seemed ideal because of its specificity. It involved Filipino immigrants to the United States, as had my original topic, yet it tied them more closely to the Philippines. It also promised to be fascinating since it raises the connections between the Filipinos who reside in both places. In addition, the nature of

the topic would require my return to the Philippines to do some of the fieldwork, and that was a bonus for me. Thus was the genesis of this investigation.

Relationship to Literature on Filipino/Filipino American History and Culture

The phrase “*balikbayan* box” evokes certain ideas to most Filipinos and Filipino Americans. For example, when they hear those words, both Alicia and Rex immediately think of “corned beef” (T7; V1). Dulce, on the other hand, feels “that I’m really going home, that I’m now ready to meet my relatives back home again, and I feel happy to be with them again” (T10). For Isabel, “that means there’s a lot of surprise for them in the Philippines” (T8). In this thesis, I study the objects that elicit such responses and which obviously connote a variety of things to different people. These packages and the surrounding custom occupy center stage, as I explore the *balikbayan* box phenomenon and analyze its socio-cultural significance.

At its core, my thesis is primarily concerned with Filipinos and Filipino Americans, their history, their culture, and their beliefs as they are manifested in the *balikbayan* box practice. It augments the existing literature on Filipino history and culture.¹ It builds on the nationalist historiographies by Teodoro A. Agoncillo, Renato Constantino, E. San Juan, Jr., and Samuel K. Tan and continues the deconstruction of the distorted version of history authored by the Philippines’ colonial masters and which is

¹ Many of the books on the Philippines and Philippine history that I came upon tend to be outdated, written by foreigners, and/or provide a general and conventional overview (see Corpuz, Krieger, Nelson, Ostelius, Peters). Exceptions are Scott and Steinberg, *Philippines*. Informative works on aspects of Filipino culture, include those by Enriquez, Jocano, Lynch, and Mulder.

still taught to its people. By exposing the inaccuracies in and the enduring effects of such traditional accounts, I hope this study will contribute in some way to the loosening of the manacles of colonialism and to the intellectual development of Filipinos in a more independent and favorable direction. This approach corresponds with the current move in Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia towards liberation history, postcolonialism, and decolonization, as evidenced in the works of such scholars as Arjun Appadurai, Homi Bhabha, Partha Chatterjee, Lily Rose Roxas-Tope, and Trinh Minh-Ha (also see Ashcroft, et al. and Hidalgo and Patajo-Legasto). Because nations with colonial pasts tend to internalize the teachings of their colonizers, these authors question and dismantle historical and cultural constructs, with an eye towards the retrieval and/or revision of history on the road to the creation of authentic national and cultural identities. While many of them achieve their aims by studying subaltern subjectivities and examining the language and content of their literature, I do so by demonstrating that the personal views about and activities surrounding a particular tradition are tenacious and oppressive consequences of colonialism. My hope is that such an examination might create greater awareness and eventually lead to the rectification or elimination of such colonial vestiges.

My research also supplements a lacuna in the area of Filipino-American history and culture and assists in promoting the visibility of a largely “forgotten” population.² In

² In comparison to other groups in the US, there are not too many publications dedicated to the history of Filipino immigration to the United States or the Filipino American experience. Fred Cordova’s *Filipinos: Forgotten Asian Americans* and Antonio J. A. Pido’s *The Pilipinos in America: Macro/Micro Dimensions of Immigration and Integration* are considered to be standards. In recent years, there has been a spurt of titles in this area, the best of which include works by Posadas, Root, and San Juan. Also,

the same vein as the works of Almirol and Espiritu, this study combines the chronological details of most of the available works on Filipino immigration to the United States (e.g., Bautista, Mayberry, Takaki) with ethnographic material that is often only found in literary, fictionalized renderings. However, the personal narratives and oral histories in this thesis not only give insight into the experiences of Filipino immigrants but also narrow down the focus to a heretofore-neglected subject—*balikbayans*. While publications about Filipino migrant workers to other countries are gradually being released (e.g., Go, Osteria, Pertierra) in the Philippines, I know of no publication solely dedicated to *balikbayans* from North America or their culture.³ Though the beginning of Rafael's essay, "'Your Grief Is Our Gossip': Overseas Filipinos and Other Spectral Presences," carries the seeds for a meaningful discussion, it quickly shifts its lenses to overseas contract workers (OCWs). Otherwise, references to *balikbayan* boxes and their

Almirol and Espiritu provide data on and narratives from Filipino communities in California, Salinas and San Diego respectively. In addition, personal accounts of immigrant life can be found in biographical works about Carlos Bulosan and Philip Vera Cruz (see Bulosan, San Juan, and Scharlin). They can also be gleaned from the predominantly exilic prose and poetry of such Filipino American authors as: Cecilia Manguerra Brainard, Manuel Buaken, M. Evelina Galang, Jessica Hagedorn, Bienvenido N. Santos, Linda Ty-Casper, and José Garcia Villa, as well as in literary collections (see Brainard, Eng and Hom, Francia and Gamalinda, Hagedorn, Lim-Hing). Finally, community newspapers are good sources for Filipino American current events and stories (see Bonus).

³ Very little literature deals with the *Balikbayan* program, *balikbayans* (and OCWs), and/or *balikbayan* boxes. Though I obtained some materials from the Department of Tourism and Philippine Airlines, there is more useful information in Castelo and Cruz, as well as the magazine articles "Special Delivery" and "Rico Nunga." Even more insightful are the works by Okamura, Osteria, Pertierra, Rafael, and Richter.

significance are generally relegated to footnotes. Therefore, my study is unique in its emphasis.

This work is timely given the increasing globalization in trade and technology and the obscuring of national and cultural boundaries as people and commodities become freer to move across borders. At the forefront of these trends are the 4-7 million Filipinos living and/or working overseas (Okamura 387; San Juan, Philippine Temptation 92), who fill the need of developed nations and multinational corporations for cheap, skilled and semi-skilled labor (Fajardo 192, 341-345; Rafael, "Your Grief" 5). As Karl Schoenberger depicts in his 1 August 1994 Los Angeles Times article:

... women with college degrees serve as maids in Tokyo and Hongkong
 ... Semi-skilled laborers toil in Kuwait while Filipino seamen ply the
 oceans on the world's ships. Filipino business graduates dominate the
 mid-level management ranks of many multinational corporations in
 Southeast Asia, earning wages they couldn't dream of at home. (qtd. in
 Rafael, "Your Grief" 1)

However, while overseas Filipinos, in general, represent the global economy, immigrants, in particular, embody the transnationalism emerging from this trend. This is because

OCW's rarely ever expect to remain permanently in their host country. Forever consigned to positions of relative subservience and marginality by the terms of their contract and by virtue of their exclusion from the linguistic and religious communities of their employers, OCW's could only exist as sheer labor power, supplementary formations to the imagined communities of their bosses. (Rafael, "Your Grief" 5)

Filipino immigrants to the US, on the other hand, are considered permanent residents who eventually obtain the right to become citizens. Thus, unlike OCWs, they are able to participate more fully in their adopted society. Because of the increasing prevalence of border crossings, diaspora studies are becoming more relevant. In his essay, "The

Filipino American Diaspora: Sites of Space, Time, and Ethnicity.” Jonathan Y. Okamura employs the diaspora perspective, which

can be contrasted with other sociological approaches that focus on Filipino Americans as a bounded social grouping, defined either locally or nationally, insofar as it places the Filipino American community in a global transnational context that includes the Philippines and other overseas Filipino communities. A diaspora approach is consistent with recent emphases in studies of international migration on ‘transnationalism’ or the social ‘processes by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement’ (Schiller et al. 1992:1). (387)

I, too, utilize this method, but my particular focus on *balikbayans* and their boxes highlights the immediacy of these transnational connections.

Significance to Material Culture Studies

While the emphasis in this thesis on Filipino American *balikbayans* already distinguishes it from other works on Philippine history and culture, immigrant groups in the US, globalism, or diaspora, it is even more specific in that it examines one aspect of this population’s culture: *balikbayan* boxes. By itself, a *balikbayan* box is an artifact, which “literally means ‘something made by art or craft’ and may refer to any artificial product. In common usage, artifact denotes an object manufactured or modified by human hands” (Babcock 204). The underlying factor in this definition is the artifact’s connection to its makers because, according to folklorist Henry Glassie, “Try as we might to construct users out of artifacts, artifacts are about their creators” (262). Therefore, a *balikbayan* box alone is just a carton that reflects its manufacturer. Glassie continues:

But suppose the consumer in using the object in a creative act recreates it

... Use becomes creation as objects are altered radically. And use becomes creation when objects become parts of objects, when the context becomes a composition. . . . It is not the shirt bought off the rack that is you, but the shirt as a component of a composition of attire that informs on you. Sets of clothing, the environments that go near us, and sets of commodities built into domestic environments—these are the created objects, the material folk culture of industrial civilization. They are our mirrors; we see ourselves in them. They are our lenses; others read us through them. (264)

Thus, only when a Filipino immigrant takes a carton, fills it with goods, seals it, and conveys it to the Philippines does it, in fact, become a *balikbayan* box, which can then be read as a text that communicates something about the *balikbayans*. In this instance, the attendant activities cannot be dissociated from the object, as the aggregate is what differentiates a plain carton from a *balikbayan* box. Hence, in this study, the two folkloristic genres of material culture and custom come together.

The material object communicates a myriad of messages; it is a vessel of meaning and information for its makers, its users, and other interpreters. As Glassie elucidates, “The artifact is as direct an expression, as true to the mind, as dear to the soul, as language, and what is more, it bodies forth feelings, thoughts, and experiences elusive to language” (255). The study of material culture is an attempt to verbalize this complex language of the artifact. In order to begin to understand its intricate system of signification, the object first has to be deconstructed, and its simpler components examined and read. Thus, drawing on the theories and methods of material culture studies, I provide, in this thesis, detailed descriptions of the actual cartons and the processes that transform them into *balikbayan* boxes. I consider the cultural meanings of

these boxes through the perspectives of the two major characters in the performance: *balikbayans* and recipients.

Balikbayan Boxes as Customary Practice

Like the women in Bella's *The Christmas Imperative*, Filipinas in particular feel the need to perform and perpetuate the *balikbayan* box practice. Because of this imperative, *balikbayan* boxes have become a tradition with ritualistic properties. According to Roy A. Rappaport, "Ritual is understood to be a form or structure, that is, a number of features or characteristics in a more or less fixed relationship to one another" (249). While the preparation and presentation of these boxes are not acts that are specifically prescribed, as in the religious type of rituals, certain procedures have evolved and are followed with only slight variances. As is the case with other rituals, the *balikbayan* box custom conveys certain messages, the most obvious being that these packages are what Peirce terms "indexical," in that they represent the *balikbayans'* wealth and success, as well as their relationships with those in the Philippines. At the same time, the performance of the custom can be interpreted as a rite of passage (see van Gennep), which temporarily lifts *balikbayans* out of their liminality or their "betwixt and between" status (see Turner). The magico-religious aspect is also present, in the sense that, to many of the recipients, the material goods in the *balikbayan* boxes represent their "American dream" and may be considered somewhat sacred and "contagious."

Since *balikbayan* boxes are primarily used to contain and convey the *balikbayans'* *pasalubong* to the Philippines, their investigation necessarily includes a discussion of

gifts, gift-giving, and reciprocity. The fundamental assertions by such scholars as Marcel Mauss, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Claude Lévi-Strauss continue to hold true: there is no such thing as a “pure” or “disinterested” gift, for gifts are part of a system of exchange, in which material goods are presented in return for other goods, services, or rewards. Also, according to Mauss, “total prestation not only carries with it the obligation to repay gifts received, but it implies two others equally important: the obligation to give presents and the obligation to receive them” (10-11). More recent works in this area emphasize the “reproduction” that is inherent in gift-giving, claiming that each transaction not only regenerates the obligation to repay but also reaffirms the relationships that established the obligation in the first place (see Carrier, Cheal, Hendry, Weiner, Yan). As James Carrier points out, “Failure to give, receive or reciprocate threatens the relationship: repeated failure will transform or terminate it. Gregory summarizes this point when he says that gift exchange is ‘an exchange of inalienable objects between people in a state of reciprocal dependence’” (“Gifts in World” 26). This concept of reproduction is evident in the *balikbayan* box tradition. Through these packages, Filipinos who have been separated from their families, friends, and communities renew their connections and reprise their roles in these relationships.

One of the issues that surfaces in the study of gift-giving is the possibility that love is commodified in such practices. For instance, Anna Jarvis, the founder of Mother’s Day, lamented the fact that florists and other tradespeople transformed what she conceived of as a “holy day” into a “holiday.” According to Leigh Eric Schmidt,

Matters of sincerity and genuineness absorbed her, and much of her alienation centered on the way commercially produced trinkets, gifts, and cards were surrogates for real expressions of affection and closeness. To Jarvis, letters and visits were better ways to bolster and affirm one's relationship with Mother than such mass-produced gifts of the marketplace. . . . [S]uch commodities were inadequate for the task of self-expression; rather than being vehicles of intimacy, they were unauthentic and even self-serving. (270)

In this thesis, I do not directly address the topic of commodification, but I do demonstrate that *balikbayan* boxes are not "surrogates." While it is true that they are expressing their love for relatives and friends in the Philippines through their boxes and *pasalubong*, it is not the only way that *balikbayans* do so. They also visit, communicate through telephone calls, letters, or emails, and send monetary and material remittances. Thus, while economics disunites immigrants from their family and friends, consumerism provides a way for them to show that they care and helps to bring them closer to their loved ones.

As instruments for the maintenance of long-distance relationships, *balikbayan* boxes fall within the category of what Micaela di Leonardo terms "the work of kinship" or what Leslie Bella calls "reproductive labour." Though I do not have sufficient quantitative data to unequivocally make the assertion, my research also suggests that *balikbayan* boxes are predominantly the work of women. The possibility calls for further gendered analyses of these boxes.

Links to Tourism Literature

This thesis is also related to studies on travel and tourism, not only because of the way Filipinos view the US as a pilgrimage site, but also because *balikbayans* have been molded into tourists by the Philippine Department of Tourism. However, whereas

tourism research often centers on travel to strange and new places (see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Bruner, Graburn, MacCannell, Urry), the *balikbayans*' situation is complicated, as they are instead returning to a place that is both familiar and alien. *Balikbayans* are considered to be tourists in two ways. In one way, they are travellers who have come from the American "dreamland" and have brought presents from that place. At the same time, they are also tourists in their native land, to whom destinations and souvenirs are marketed. Because *balikbayan* boxes convey objects that are taken as "representative" of the US and *balikbayans* purchase "tourist art" which remind them of home, the issue of authenticity arises in this study. So does the issue of "longing" or nostalgia. According to Susan Stewart,

The souvenir speaks to a context of origin through a language of longing, for it is not an object arising out of need or use value; it is an object arising out of the necessarily insatiable demands of nostalgia. The souvenir generates a narrative which reaches only 'behind,' spiraling in a continually inward movement rather than outward toward the future. (135)

Clearly, *balikbayans* buy souvenirs because they miss the Philippines and their past intimacies with those who remain. For the recipients, who most likely have never been to the US, it could be that they are "looking back" on the travel that the *balikbayans* have made on their behalf or that they are nostalgic for the America that has been implanted in their psyches and that once ruled them "in the good, old days." *Balikbayan* boxes and their contents, therefore, bridge the past and present for both locals and *balikbayans*. At the same time, they provide a link between sacred and secular. Nelson Graburn explains:

The tourist travels back and forth, not just as an individual for his own purpose, but as a contact, a carrier between the two spheres of life,

carrying significant 'loads' in the form of symbols and material objects between these separate moral spheres. Thus the tourist is in a mediating position exactly parallel to the sacrifice between the beneficiary and the sacred as posited in the original analysis of sacrifice and ritual in general ... (22)

For locals, the United States is "sacred" and *halikbayans* bring America to them, while for immigrants who are missing their homeland, *balikbayans* provide a bridge to the Philippines. The commodities that are contained in their boxes are the tangible connections between the two places.

Therefore, my investigation demonstrates that material artifacts, "however simple and mundane, are essential elements in the production and reproduction of cultural persons and social relations" (Babcock 205). It reveals that the seemingly ordinary *halikbayan* boxes are, in fact, indices of a specific segment of the Filipino population, i.e., the *balikbayans*, and that they represent a much more complex set of relationships, based on familial ties and obligations, economics, space and place, colonialism, and hegemony. This thesis will add to existing studies in Filipino and Filipino American history and culture, immigration and immigrant groups, colonialism, neocolonialism, and postcolonialism, globalization and diaspora, material culture, custom, exchange and reciprocity, commodification, kinship work and gender roles, ritual, and travel and tourism. More importantly, it introduces *balikbayans* and their boxes to the academic world.

Fieldwork and Methodology

This thesis is primarily based on my intermittent fieldwork over an approximately two-year period. In July and August of 1998, I conducted tape-recorded interviews with Filipino immigrants in Los Angeles. I also videotaped and photographed some boxes and their contents. On November 1, 1998, on my way back from the annual meeting of the American Folklore Society and during a layover in Los Angeles. I took notes and photographs during three quick, impromptu sessions. In June 1999, towards the end of my second trip to the Philippines, I interviewed three locals on tape. I also gathered some information from an official of the Department of Tourism (DOT) in Cebu. Finally, I did two interviews with *balikbayan* box shippers: on the phone in September and on tape in October 1999; I took pictures at the latter meeting. In all, I conducted eighteen interviews with a total of twenty-six people. Of this number, seventeen are females and nine males. Also, sixteen are immigrants who have been *balikbayans*, two are *non-balikbayan* immigrants, one is a tourist, three are locals/recipients, three are shippers, and one is a DOT administrator (see Appendix B). As a whole, I was able to tap into a pretty broad spectrum in age, education, occupation, length of residence in the Philippines, length of residence in the United States, number of *balikbayan* visits, and length of *balikbayan* visits (see Appendices B and C).

Since researchers necessarily bring their own perspectives and ideas into their research, it is important to acknowledge this, instead of claiming to offer absolute objectivity (see Ellis and Bochner; Goodall; Reinharz; Stanley). Therefore, I admit to my "situated knowledge," as Donna Haraway calls it, and point out that this work is also

grounded in my role as a participant-observer. As a child, I experienced the *balikbayan* box practice whenever my grandmother or aunt visited the Philippines, thus giving me an idea of what it is like to be on the receiving end. The bulk of my empirical contribution, however, comes from more recent occurrences. When I went back to the Philippines in 1998, I became a *balikbayan* for the first time and partook in, as well as witnessed, the gift-giving process. I have since returned two more times, from January-July 1999 and October 1999-May 2000, and was again both an actor in and a spectator to the custom. On my second trip, when I travelled with my three aunts, I recorded the *balikbayan* box process through photographs—from the packing of boxes in the US to the distribution of gifts in the Philippines. When my aunts departed, I also took pictures of what they brought back to the United States. During that same visit, my cousin and her family also returned to the Philippines (in May 1999), and I snapped photos of their packages, as well. When I left in July, I took pictures of my own box of *pasalubong* for my family in Los Angeles. On this journey and the one that followed, I was able to watch more closely the workings of the *balikbayan* box tradition. In my research mode, I became more conscious of the various activities involved and was able to distinguish the different stages of the custom. As a participant-observer, I was also more attentive to the minutiae of the procedure, instead of merely going through the motions.

While a brief visit to the Philippines would have given me sufficient opportunity to observe the steps of the *balikbayan* box process and would have corresponded with the typical timeline of most returnees, my lengthy stays in the Philippines were invaluable in providing me with the backdrop for my research. As an immigrant and *balikbayan*, I can

easily provide the perspective of the *balikbayan*, since I have personal knowledge of the migrant experience and the preparations involved in the *balikbayan* box practice. I also have access to others who can give me additional information on these areas. However, though returnees are necessary characters in the performance of the custom, one cannot talk about *balikbayan* boxes without situating the custom within the Philippine context. Having been away from the Philippines for thirteen years, I could not pretend to know what is in the minds of Filipinos who live there. While my early years there (until I was fourteen) give me some idea, the passage of the years has surely changed the milieu, as well as my ways of thinking and understanding. My protracted journeys, therefore, allowed me to get reacquainted with the Philippines, its people, and its culture. With my ability to speak the language (Cebuano and some Tagalog), I was often able to assimilate and associate with different kinds and classes of people. I also had more intimate interactions with some of the locals, as I rekindled old friendships and forged new ones. At the same time, from what the locals have said to me and the manner in which they treated me, I understood more fully how they perceive *balikbayans*. Thus, through prolonged contact, I gained deeper insight into the thoughts and lives of these people and am better able to locate my analysis.

Most of the people I interviewed are connected to me in some way. Six are directly related either by blood or marriage; they include: my mother (Alicia), my brother (Allan), two sisters-in-law (Gayle and Judy), a brother-in-law (Gil), and a niece (Annie). Six are indirectly related: Gil's parents (Madrona and Onofre), three of his aunts/mother's sisters (Dulce, Harlika, and Lambert), and one of his friends (Rex). Also, three are close

friend of mine (Isabel, Rhea, and RJ), while two used to be employed by my siblings or friends (Juanita and Nene). The rest are not affiliated with me at all. At first glance, the fact that I am familiar with so many of my respondents might make it seem that I am only drawing on a narrow sample group, but this does contain diversity. Certainly, my blood relatives and I have similar experiences when it comes to migration and *balikbayan* boxes. My in-laws, however, have different migratory backgrounds and other *balikbayan* box habits. Working primarily with these families—mine and my brother-in-law’s—was also beneficial because it allowed me to compare and contrast. For instance, agreements in answers provided corroboration, while dissension highlighted points that might have otherwise gone unnoticed. When I interviewed them in groups, respondents were able to question and build on each other’s replies, making for more nuanced discussions. Upon reflection, I found working with people I know advantageous, since I had easier access to them and was able to socialize with them outside the interview setting, which meant I became familiar with their histories and practices. Thus, in more ways than one, I have an insider standpoint.

My personal home bases of Los Angeles (LA) and Cebu are reflected in my choice of interviewees. That said, these cities are particularly appropriate locales for such a study, since Los Angeles has one of the largest populations of Filipinos outside the Philippines and Cebu is the second major city in the Philippines. Additionally, it is important to emphasize that my LA respondents do not all return to Cebu (see Appendix C), and those in Cebu have had encounters with *balikbayans* from other places. Furthermore, Frank H. Denton and Victoria Villena-Denton’s book, Filipino Views of

America: Warm Memories, Cold Realities, has provided me with a supplementary source of primary interviews from other locations.

Overview

This thesis is not meant to be an exhaustive review of Filipino and Filipino American opinions about and experiences with the *balikbayan* box custom. As previously mentioned, I had a select group of respondents and, while I obtained an assortment of viewpoints from them which I believe are quite representative of the overall population, this is far from a statistical survey. Rather, in keeping with folkloristic principles, particularly as they apply to material culture and custom, it is designed to present a more personal and human perspective. Also, this thesis is intended as a general introduction, since one study cannot possibly incorporate all the subtleties and interpretations of the topic.

In order to provide a more focused inquiry, I limited the breadth of my research in two ways. First, since Filipinos today consider a *balikbayan* to be any Filipino who returns to the Philippines after an extended stay abroad, the term encompasses both immigrants and OCWs, as well as foreign-born Filipinos. However, since the label originally referred to those who permanently reside in other countries, particularly the United States, I have restricted my discussion to *balikbayans* from the US, though I do mention OCWs occasionally. Second, though Filipino migration to the US is generally divided into three “waves,” my emphasis is mostly on the last, or post-1965, group of immigrants, since this includes the most recent and most numerous arrivals. In addition,

it is the surge of immigration at the beginning of this period which inspired the coining of the word in the first place.

By its very nature, this research is transnational and transcultural in scope, since *balikbayans* inherently lie at the intersection of two nations and cultures. By definition, they have one foot on either side of the Pacific, and they traverse boundaries as they live and embrace their binational existence. Correspondingly, *balikbayan* boxes are also transnational, denoting a passage from one place to another, specifically from the United States to the Philippines (and, sometimes, back to the US). The subject matter, then, necessitates the crossing of borders and the study and inclusion of both Filipino and Filipino American culture, history, and perceptions.

I have structured this thesis in such a way as to enable the reader to understand the prevalence of the *balikbayan* box practice and to realize that these packages have come to signify the *balikbayans*, or the returning persons, themselves. Part of my goal is to demonstrate how this common artifact can be read as a material and customary text with variegated meanings and as an exemplification of socio-economic aspects of a particular culture. Thus, in Chapters Three and Four, I introduce *balikbayans* and their boxes and furnish a detailed ethnographic description of the performance of the *balikbayan* box tradition. Chapters Five and Six focus on the functions of and the symbolism in these packages, while Chapter Seven contains my conclusions. I contend that these boxes are not only indices of the dislocation—primarily dictated by economic necessity and familial obligation—of Filipinos, but also sites of colonialism and cultural hegemony. Specifically, I situate my arguments within the context of the United States' historical

imperialism toward the Philippines, the continuing legacies of that occupation, and the current and ever-expanding US dominance of global economics and popular culture. But first, since *balikbayan* boxes would not exist if there were no *balikbayans* and there would be no *balikbayans* if Filipinos had not been immigrating in droves to the United States. I begin this study in Chapter Two with a review of the historical and economic conditions that gave birth to the *balikbayan* population. I look at both the political and economic history of the Philippines, as well as the history of Filipino immigration to the United States. I also introduce the *Balikbayan* program, from which the designations for returning natives and their boxes were derived.

CHAPTER TWO

Box-stage: An Introduction to the Philippines, Filipino Migration to the United States, and the *Balikbayan* Program

The Philippines is an archipelago, situated southeast of the Asian mainland, between the China Sea and the Pacific Ocean (see Figures 2.1 and 2.2). Though located in the East, its colonization by Western powers for almost four centuries has profoundly affected its political, economic, and cultural (under)development, and, today, it is an overpopulated and economically depressed nation. Consequently, its population has often looked to other shores for better opportunities, while its government can do nothing but encourage this inclination (see Rafael, "Your Grief"). In fact, since the 1960s, the Philippines' biggest commodity has been its people or, in cultural critic E. San Juan Jr.'s words, the "warm body export" of Filipino labor" (Philippine Temptation 15). For decades, the locus of this exodus has been the United States of America, though Filipinos are now migrating to various parts of the world. By the 1970s, there was a significant overseas Filipino population, particularly in the US, and the Marcos administration took advantage of this group's political influence and financial capability when it introduced the *Balikbayan* program. This promotion, which offered travel incentives for Filipinos living abroad to visit the Philippines, was designed not so much to bolster tourism but to serve as propaganda for the benefits of martial law (Rafael, "Your Grief" 2-3; Richter 59). In doing so, it gave a name, as well as prominence, to the figure of the returning native.



Figure 2.1 Map of Southeast Asia

(CIA. Southeast Asia. *The World Factbook 2000*. Online. Internet. 20 June 2001. Available <http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/docs/ref.html>)



Figure 2.2 Map of the Philippines

(CIA. "Philippines." *The World Factbook 2000*. Online. Internet. 20 June 2001.
Available <http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/rp.html>)

In this chapter, I provide a brief history of the Philippines and of Filipino migration to the United States. I also describe the *Balikhayan* program as it was originally instituted in the 1970s and trace its evolution. In doing so, I contend that economics and politics combined and gave birth to the figure of the *balikhayan*. My aim here is to demonstrate that the lack of prospects in the Philippines propelled—and continue to propel—a substantial portion of its population outward and that the government, to serve its own purposes, capitalized on this reality when it created the *Balikhayan* program. It is the inception of this program which introduced an invented term into popular vocabulary and gave a name to a new and temporal category of the populace.

A Brief History of the Philippines

The Philippines is an aggregation of numerous islands and islets, whose inhabitants are linguistically and culturally diverse. Filipinos originally came from Malay and Polynesian stock, which was later infused with migration from China and Indochina¹ and modified by cultural contacts and intermarriages with Arabs, Hinduized Malays, Chinese, and Indochinese.² These ancient populations lived in widely dispersed kinship

¹ *Encarta* places the migrations between 7000 to 2000 BCE (“Philippines”). Peters says that they came between 1500 and 500 BCE. According to Agoncillo, Chinese colonies were established from the 10th-17th centuries CE.

² According to Peters, people in the Philippines had trading relationships with Hinduized Malays from the 9th-15th centuries CE (12). Peters (12) and Agoncillo (24) agree that Chinese traders came from 10th century onwards. According to Fajardo, trade with the Arabs started as early as the 10th century (218). Agoncillo states that a small population of Indochinese established trading posts in southern Philippines from 900-

groups called *barangays*, mostly along the coast and rivers (Corpuz, Philippines 21-22; Panopio and Rolda 28). According to historian Teodoro A. Agoncillo, “The *barangay* was the unit of government and consisted of from 30 to 100 families. . . . Each *barangay* was independent and was ruled by a chieftain” (40). They had limited contact with each other: they carried on commercial activities, arranged treaties of friendship and alliances, and sometimes conducted seasonal warfare (Agoncillo 41; Panopio and Rolda 28-30; Scott 5). However, “in spite of these inter-*barangay* relationships, there are no evidences of a supra-*barangay* organization prior to 1571 and, therefore, it is erroneous to speak of ancient *baranganic* confederations” (Panopio and Rolda 30).

In 1521, Ferdinand Magellan³ “discovered” and claimed the Philippine islands for Spain, and, in 1565, Miguel Lopez de Legazpi and his men established the first Spanish settlement in Cebu (Agoncillo 71-74). By the mid-1570s, most of the country was under Spanish rule (Agoncillo 74-75; Peters 13). The Spaniards created a political bureaucracy, resettled the *indios* (“natives”) into *pueblos* (“towns”), with the church and plaza as their nuclei, and decreed that they adopt surnames from a list provided (Agoncillo 75-79, 80, 94; Tan 63-66). The colonists brought about changes in writing, speech, housing, food, dress, transportation, and other areas (Agoncillo 91-101). Their most significant

1200 CE, but that heightened activity from more countries came in the mid-14th century (23-25).

³ Portuguese navigator Ferdinand Magellan, in the service of Spain, reached the Philippines on March 17, 1521, while trying to find a westward route to the Spice Islands. He was killed in battle in April 1521 on the island of Mactan. The last of his five ships was the first to circumnavigate the earth successfully (Agoncillo 71-72; Encarta, “Philippines”; Peters 12-13).

contribution, though, was the introduction of Roman Catholicism, which quickly took root, was localized, and became the basis for the lowland Christian culture that eventually developed.⁴

Though the *indios* remained relatively isolated from each other during the Spanish era, they eventually found certain commonalities, which centered on the injustices perpetrated by the Spaniards, especially the friars. The imposition of such decrees as direct and indirect taxes, monopolies, draft labor, and others led to regional insurrections (Agoncillo 81-91, 102-126). The awareness that these grievances were shared fostered a sense of solidarity, and local skirmishes led to more organized opposition against the Spaniards. As nationalist Renato Constantino explains, the natives'

... initial responses to foreign conquest were . . . fragmented and ranged from instinctive resistance to foreigners as such to awed accommodation within the new polity, but with resentments building up as economic exploitation and social control produced material hardship and cultural modification. Their struggles became successive quantitative inputs of experience which finally underwent a qualitative transformation—from localized revolts against inequities within the colonial order to a national political awareness of the need for doing away with the colonial order itself; that is, from rebellion to revolution. (*History* 386)

While the local elite clamored for reforms (Agoncillo 129-148, Tan 68-70), the proletariat demanded complete independence from Spain. In 1892, Andres Bonifacio and a few

⁴ As previously mentioned, the Philippines is inhabited by linguistically and culturally diverse peoples. Eighty or more, generally mutually unintelligible, languages are spoken in the Philippines. About ninety percent of the population belongs to the "eight major lowland ethnolinguistic groups" (Carroll, et al. 3), and the majority of these are Christianized. The Muslims are the largest minority; they mostly live in the Southern islands of Mindanao. Other minorities have sought refuge in the mountains and other isolated areas.

other men founded a secret organization in Manila called the *Katipunan* ("Society"), for short, which soon expanded to the surrounding provinces of Central Luzon (Agoncillo 149-166). The gentry eventually joined the call to arms and, in the process, took over the leadership. The revolt culminated in June 1898, with the declaration of independence by Emilio Aguinaldo, and was followed by the inauguration of the Philippine Republic in January 1899 (Agoncillo 201-211; Anderson, "Cacique" 9).

However, this newfound independence was pre-empted by the arrival of the Americans. Assured that the United States had no imperialist designs on the Philippines, the revolutionary leaders accepted American aide, and the combined Filipino and American forces readily defeated the Spanish (Agoncillo 187-198; Anderson, "Cacique" 10). The Americans turned out to be deceitful as, unbeknownst to the Filipinos, they made secret agreements with the Spaniards, which were formalized with the signing of the Treaty of Paris in December 1898 and which ceded the Philippines to the United States (Agoncillo 211-212). Filipinos resumed their fight for independence, this time against the US, but were overpowered by the over 120,000 American troops (Gochenour 19); "anywhere from 200,000 to 600,000 Filipinos were killed" (San Juan, Philippine Temptation 4). "By objective standards," according to historian Nelson Kloze, "the insurrection was a war of considerably larger proportions than the Spanish-American War. The war cost more in lives, money, and time" (121). With its military might, the US subdued the insurgency and achieved its imperialist objective for, according to former Secretary of Foreign Affairs Salvador P. Lopez,

The conquest of the Philippines was the second act in the American drama of the Pacific, of which the first was the opening of Japan by Commodore Perry, and the third, the Policy of Open Door in China. The acquisition of the Philippines resulted from the same impulse that brought about the purchase of Alaska and the annexation of Hawaii—a desire to share in the opening up of trade opportunities in the vast and populous continent of Asia. (9)

For the Americans, the Filipino-American War ended in 1901 with the surrender of Aguinaldo and other leaders, though peasants continued their resistance until about 1913 (Agoncillo 213-231, 247-297; Constantino, History 79-83; Roxas-Topo 48-49; Tan 73-75, 80-82). While continuing to squash the opposition, the Americans proceeded to pacify the natives and established a new order. They established hospitals, prisons, roads, telephone lines, and other such infrastructure (Agoncillo 373-374, 376-377; see also W. Anderson, Iletto, and Salman). They also introduced the democratic system of government, free trade, and universal education (Agoncillo 298-313, 371-379; Anderson, “Cacique” 11-13; Elevazo and Elevazo 26-32; Tan 78-79).

In 1934, the United States Congress passed the Tydings-McDuffie Act, which “provided for the establishment of a ten-year Commonwealth to serve as a transition government before the proclamation of independence . . .” and was approved by the Philippine Legislature (Agoncillo 346-347; Tan 83-84). In 1935, a Constitution was ratified and was followed by an election. Manuel Quezon and Sergio Osmeña were sworn in as President and Vice-President of the Commonwealth (Agoncillo 352). The Commonwealth period was interrupted by World War II. Shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Japan invaded the Philippines and occupied it for three years, from December 1941 through February 1945 (Agoncillo 390; Anderson, “Cacique” 13-14). As

early as January 1942, the Japanese Premier promised independence for the Philippines “so long as it cooperates and recognizes Japan’s program of establishing a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere” (qtd. in Agoncillo 398). In 1943, a new Constitution was drafted and a Republic established, with Jose Laurel as its president.⁵ During the occupation, harsh wartime conditions prevailed, with many of the atrocities inflicted by the Japanese military (Agoncillo 395-409). This period also saw “the rise of a new bourgeoisie,” “the democratization of the old, stiff upper-class society,” rampant poverty, and “the intensification of graft and corruption” (Agoncillo 407).

Filipino and American soldiers, as well as Filipino civilians, conducted guerrilla warfare against the Japanese (Agoncillo 410-415). The most prominent of these groups was called *Hukbó ng Bayan Laban sa Hapón* (“Movement of the Country/People Against the Japanese”) or HUKBALAHAP, based in Central Luzon and headed by Luis Taruc (Agoncillo 441-460; US Dept. of State, “Hukbalahaps” 71-77). By the time the American troops, led by General Douglas MacArthur,⁶ came to “liberate” the Philippines

⁵ Anderson accuses Laurel and other members of the oligarchy of collaborating with the Japanese (“Cacique” 13-14). Agoncillo, on the other hand, claims that “the Filipino leaders were . . . not fooled by these empty promises” (398) and complied with Japanese wishes so that they could bring the people together and “soften the impact of the Japanese occupation on the moral and physical nerves of the Filipinos” (399-404). Tan agrees with Agoncillo, stating that Laurel and others were “instructed and encouraged by [Commonwealth President] Quezon to cooperate with the enemy in order to protect the people” (86).

⁶ Retired Chief of Staff of the US Army, who was named Field Marshal of the Philippine Army in 1935 by President Quezon. On July 26, 1941, when the Japanese threat to the Philippines became clear, he became commander of the United States Army Forces in the Far East (USAFFE), a combination of Philippine and American forces. In March 1942, he was relieved as commander of USAFFE by President Roosevelt and

in late 1944-early 1945,⁷ the Huks and other resistance movements had already defeated many of the Japanese forces (Agoncillo 416-423; Tan 86-88).⁸ Osmeña, who became Commonwealth President when Quezon died in 1944,⁹ had the task of rebuilding a war-damaged country and economy. He also had to contend with interference from MacArthur and other American authorities.¹⁰ In April 1946, the Commonwealth held its final election. Manuel Roxas, one of the "collaborators" and with the backing of MacArthur, won the election (Agoncillo 434-436; Steinberg, "Philippine Collaboration"

ordered to go to Australia, where he planned his return to the Philippines. MacArthur and his forces returned in October 1944. He took over the Philippine government as Military Administrator until the end of February 1945 (Agoncillo 354-355, 388, 393, 410, 418-423).

⁷ According to Agoncillo, the United States took years to send reinforcements because of its agreement with Great Britain to adhere to a "Europe-First Policy" (393).

⁸ Agoncillo reports that, "when . . . the Americans entered Manila in force they promptly disarmed the Huk squadrons ahead of them" (449). They followed this with the mass arrests and further disarming of the Huks (449-451).

⁹ While the Japanese were invading the Philippines in December 1941, MacArthur ordered Quezon and other officials to move to Corregidor. The party proceeded to Australia in March 1942 and, then, to Washington, DC in April 1942. Because of the war, Quezon was allowed to extend his presidency past the eight-year limit, but, due to failing health, he died on August 1, 1944.

¹⁰ According to Agoncillo, after the war, "most of the important affairs of the government should have been handled by the Filipino officials, but MacArthur . . . actually made the important decisions for President Osmeña" (430). MacArthur pressured Osmeña to call Congress to session (430-431). Osmeña was also forced to comply with President Roosevelt's stand on the severe punishment of collaborators or risk losing American aid (431-432). Interference from the US Congress will be discussed in the next section of this chapter, "Colonial and Neo-Colonial Economy."

77-83).¹¹ On July 4, 1946, the US granted the Philippines its independence (Tan 88-89). Roxas became the first President of the Republic (Agoncillo 436).

Upon Roxas's death in 1948, Elpidio Quirino assumed the presidency; he won the election in 1949 (Agoncillo 439-440; Tan 97). His administration saw the arrest of the Huk *politburo* and a five-year \$250 million financial aid package from the US (Agoncillo 454-458, 505-507; Shalom 111-120; Tan 97). Ramon Magsaysay was the first to campaign to the *tao* or the common man and, with the help of the US, was elected in 1953 (see Smith). During his term, the Huks were suppressed; settlement projects were undertaken; roads and irrigation were improved; and artesian wells were constructed (Agoncillo 458, 461-466; Tan 97). According to Agoncillo, however, Magsaysay spoiled the masses and, without a clear plan, his efforts to improve their lot failed (466-469). When Magsaysay died in a plane crash in 1957, Carlos Garcia finished his term; he won the election later that year. Garcia, a nationalist, called for austerity and a "Filipino First" policy, but his presidency was beset by the same graft and corruption as his predecessors' (Agoncillo 469-471, 510-513; Tan 97-98). In 1961, Diosdado Macapagal foiled Garcia's bid for reelection (Agoncillo 472-473; Tan 98). He moved Philippine Independence Day from July 4 to June 12¹² and proposed the Agricultural Land Reform Code, which replaced tenancy with leaseholding (Agoncillo 477-479).

¹¹ Soon after his election, Roxas granted amnesty to all collaborators (Agoncillo 432).

¹² The US granted the Philippines its independence on July 4, 1946. June 12 was the date when revolutionaries proclaimed their independence from Spain in 1898.

In 1965, the people again showed their dissatisfaction with the government in power and voted decisively for Ferdinand Marcos (Agoncillo 480-482; Tan 98-99). In the violent and fraudulent election of 1969, he became the first president to be re-elected (Richter 53; Schirmer and Shalom 163; Tan 100). While Marcos had specific plans for a freer economy and the First Lady was working on cultural retrieval programs, they faced difficulties in execution, especially since dishonesty and profiteering in government remained a problem (Agoncillo 563-564; Tan 99). During this administration, there was an increase in student rallies and demonstrations against the "US-Marcos dictatorship" (Agoncillo 495-501, 570-571; Shabecoff 157-161; Tan 99-100). Also, the Huks resurfaced and the secessionist Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the communist National People's Army (NPA) were formed (Agoncillo 487-489; Anderson, "Cacique" 19; Shabecoff 158-161; Tan 100-101). Citing a "state of rebellion," particularly due to the activities of MNLF and NPA guerrilla forces, Marcos declared martial law through Presidential Decree 1081 on September 21, 1972 and began over a decade of authoritarian rule (Agoncillo 572-573; US Staff Report 165-169; Tan 100-101). An additional, if not the overriding, reason for this action was the imminent approach in 1973 of his presidential two-term limit (Anderson, "Cacique" 20-21; Richter 53; Schirmer and Shalom 163-164).

In order to give legitimacy to martial law, Marcos hastened, and even feigned, the ratification of a new Constitution by referendum in 1973 (Agoncillo 575-576; Mijares 191-193; Tan 103). Congress was discharged and presidential decrees replaced the law-making process (Agoncillo 576; Schirmer and Shalom 164; Tan 103). The writ of *habeas*

corpus was also suspended, which led to the immediate mass arrest of opposition leaders, rebels, and suspected subversives (Agoncillo 573; Tan 102-103).¹³ Freedom of the press was heavily curtailed (Tan 103). During this authoritarian era, freedom, in general, was limited, while military power was flagrant (Agoncillo 575; Anderson “Cacique” 23). At the same time, though, Marcos began to institute economic and political programs designed to create a “New Society” with improved social conditions and free from neo-colonial control (Agoncillo 574-583; Rand Corp. 178-181; Tan 103-104). Initially, the President’s plans were quite successful. As Tan points out,

Political initiatives opened more diplomatic relations and new markets and got concessions on the American military bases and other agreements. . . . Economic prospects were improved with the opening of new markets for exports outside of the United States and the development of domestic export potentials other than the traditional exports to the United States. Self-sufficiency were [*sic*] encouraged through the KKK [*Kilusang Kabuhayan at Kaunlaran* or “Action for Livelihood and Prosperity”] Program, agro-industrial projects, arm and ammunition factories, manpower training and infrastructure projects. (105)

However, due to increased corruption,¹⁴ reported excesses, and continued repression of rights and freedom, the citizens’ dissatisfaction ballooned. Opposition came from all sides, including the MNLF, the NPA, tribal Filipinos, and the Catholic Church (see Guerrero, Natl. Democratic Front, Noble, Swenson, and Youngblood). People also criticized the United States because, while welcoming Filipino political refugees, it

¹³ For more details about human rights violations during martial law, see Amnesty International, “1975 Mission” and “1981 Mission.”

¹⁴ An anonymous article, “Some are Smarter Than Others,” lists how some of Marcos’s cronies advanced financially and/or politically during his regime.

“amplified its military and economic aid to the national security state” (San Juan, Philippine Temptation 126; see also Bello and Rivera).

In 1981, Marcos “lifted” martial law, but nothing changed as he still had power over the military, the Assembly, the press, and other mechanisms for control (Civil Liberties 218-221; Schirmer and Shalom 165). It was the assassination of political opponent Benigno Aquino, Jr. in 1983, upon his return from exile, which eventually led to the demise of the Marcos dictatorship (Schirmer and Shalom 275; Tan 104).¹⁵ This atrocious incident ignited the opposition, roused popular indignation, and generated changes in US policies.¹⁶ Under pressure, particularly from the US, Marcos held a snap election in 1986.¹⁷ Alleging massive fraud, the rival consortium headed by the widowed Corazon Aquino refused to accept a Marcos win and declared its own victory (Agoncillo 584; Schirmer and Shalom 333-335; Tan 105).¹⁸ Ensuing protests culminated in the three-day “People Power” revolution on February 22-24, 1986 and concluded in the flight

¹⁵ The Agrava Commission’s “Majority Report” indicates that the assassination was a military conspiracy and implicates one civilian and twenty-five military officers, including Chief of Staff Fabian Ver. See Sussman, O’Connor, and Lindsey for the effects of the slaying on the economy.

¹⁶ For more information about increased opposition, see: Aguilar-San Juan, Danguilan-Vitug, McAfee, Stoltzfus, and the US Senate Intelligence Committee. For additional data on US policies, especially its intervention, in the Philippines, see: Chanda, National Security Study Directive, and the US Air Force.

¹⁷ To learn more about Aquino’s platform, see “Program of Social Reform.” For the nationalist debate about the elections, see BAYAN’s “Call for Boycott” and KAAKBAY’s “Support for Aquino.”

¹⁸ For viewpoints about electoral fraud, see Reagan and the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines.

of Marcos and his cronies to Hawaii and the inauguration of Aquino (Agoncillo 584-585; Schirmer and Shalom 335-338; Tan 105; also see Berlow and Burgess).

Aquino set up a "revolutionary government" and proceeded to dismantle or reorganize existing governmental organizations, while also removing Marcos loyalists from office. A "Freedom Constitution" provided temporary legal structure for the administration until the New Constitution was ratified in February 1987 (Agoncillo 585-586; Tan 105-106). The 1987 Congressional elections and the 1988 local elections brought back to power many of the pre-martial law political dynasties, as well as some Marcos supporters (Anderson, "Cacique" 26-32). The honeymoon period of the "People Power Revolution" soon came to an end, as the various parties of the coalition that backed Aquino went their separate ways (Anderson, "Cacique" 23-27; Tan 107-108). The administration endured several coup attempts, especially by military personnel, between 1987 and 1989 (Anderson, "Cacique" 24; Schirmer and Shalom 401-402; Tan 110-112). In 1992, Fidel Ramos won the presidential election. Through "people empowerment" and his "Philippine 2000" program, the country showed marked improvement on concerns such as unification, poverty, foreign investments, and infrastructure. According to Tan, "by mid 1995 . . . visible signs of economic recovery, political stability, and renewed faith in the Filipino began to be positively portrayed in domestic and foreign media" (116). When the Asian economic crisis hit in 1997, the Philippines was not as deeply affected as its neighbors. Because one term of six years was not sufficient to accomplish his goals, Ramos attempted to amend the Constitution.

so that the presidential limit could be extended to two terms, but to no avail (“History/Background”). Thus, his promising efforts came to an end.

In May 1998, Joseph Estrada, a Marcos loyalist and former actor, narrowly won the election, due to his popularity with the masses.¹⁹ Economic conditions quickly deteriorated, while corruption increased. By October 2000, allegations surfaced that Estrada had been receiving payoffs from illegal gambling operators. The Senate impeachment trial commenced in December, but was suspended indefinitely when the prosecution resigned on January 17, 2001 (“Timeline”). On the same day, Filipinos began their four-day demonstration and called for the President’s resignation.²⁰ Estrada fled from Malacañang Palace²¹ on January 20, and Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, Vice President and daughter of a former President, was sworn in by the Philippine Chief Justice (“Confusion”; “Timeline”). Estrada’s arrest on April 25 led to protests by his supporters, which culminated on the night of April 30 outside Malacañang. Arroyo declared a “state of rebellion” on May 1, which was subsequently lifted on May 7

¹⁹ His campaign slogan was “*Erap para sa mahirap*,” which means “Erap for the poor.” Erap is Estrada’s nickname, dating from his showbusiness days. It is the reverse of *pare*, which is a derivative of the Spanish *compadre* and is a term used informally to refer to ritual kin or, sometimes, friends.

²⁰ In her inaugural speech, Arroyo refers to these protests as EDSA 2001 (or II), as opposed to EDSA 1986 (or I) or the “People Power Revolution” (“Inauguration Speech”) (n.p.). EDSA (Epifanio de los Santos Avenue) is the name of a street in Manila, where demonstrators convened both in 1986 and 2001. After EDSA I, a monument to “people power” was erected at the site.

²¹ The residence of the President of the Philippines.

("Arroyo's State"; "Philippines Lifts").²² Giving credibility to her government, candidates from Arroyo's party won the majority of positions in the May 14 Congressional and local elections.

Colonial and Neo-Colonial Economy

Contemporary scholars of nationalism generally subscribe to the notion of nation as a social construct. Nations are "imagined communities," as Benedict Anderson defines them. However, for a colonized country like the Philippines, this "community" was not "imagined" by its natives but, rather, by its colonizers (*Imagined Communities* 163-185). Almost three and a half centuries of Spanish rule and about five decades of American occupation were primarily responsible for creating the entity that is now known as the Republic of the Philippines. While colonization left indelible imprints on Philippine politics, culture, and other areas, its effects on the economy continue to be felt and contribute to the nation's persistent underdevelopment.

Evidence shows that the early inhabitants of the Philippine archipelago, though relatively primitive, were on a positive course of economic development (Agoncillo 48-53; Scott 4-5; Tan 43-44). The natives had communal access to and were sustained by the bountiful natural resources of the islands (Tan 43). The disparate kinship communities or *barangays* had forged symbiotic economic relationships with each other

²² The declaration was followed by the arrest of opposition leaders suspected of plotting to overthrow the government ("Arroyo's State"). According to the article, "Philippines Lifts 'Rebellion' Decree," "poorer segments of Philippine society . . . tend not to see Arroyo as a legitimate president," as they "still see Estrada . . . as the [action] hero they saw in the movies" (2).

(Tan 44). Moreover, these communities enjoyed an active and efficient commercial trade with neighboring cultures (Tan 44, 60-61). The arrival of the Spaniards brought an end to, and even retarded, the economic development of these aboriginal communities.

Spain wasted no time in profiting from its new acquisition. Soon after settling in the Philippines in 1565, the colonists immersed themselves in the galleon trade, their principal source of wealth in the islands. For two and a half centuries (1565-1815), Spanish galleons plied the Pacific between Manila and Acapulco, trading Oriental goods for commodities from the Americas and Europe (Agoncillo 85-87; Tan 60-61). This exclusivist enterprise aborted the embryonic economy of the pre-colonial communities. The internal and external trades, which were marked by open exchange and mutual benefits, were replaced by an isolationist, prohibitive, and abusive system. According to Tan,

... the establishment of a monopolistic foreign trade by Spain through only two ports, Manila in the Philippines and Acapulco in Mexico, disrupted and eventually destroyed the dynamic nature of Philippine external trade and commerce. This was done through limitations to freedom of trade and strict legal exaction on native trade by limiting foreign entry to only one port, thus ensuring the easy and effective collection of dues from foreign traders. The only participation the natives had was to provide services as oarsmen and other labor needs. The privileges or rights of investment were confined to the Spaniards, especially members of the religious orders who almost monopolized the benefits of colonialism. (61)

Not only did the galleon trade stunt commercial growth, but it was also incongruous with agrarian and other industrial development. As Agoncillo points out,

In theory, galleon construction was not meant to conflict with the planting and harvesting schedules but in practice this was not the case. Thus, the growth of Philippine agriculture was further retarded, so that as early as

the 1600s, many of the significant Filipino cottage industries such as weaving and extractive industries were being ruined and disregarded along with agriculture, as money and gains were channelled to the galleon trade. (86)

Likewise, the galleon trade was deleterious to the native populace as they were drafted to perform such hard labor as road building, shipbuilding, and rowing. These forced services “were notorious for many inhuman treatments, death of natives, and break-up of families resulting in untold sufferings . . .” and inevitably led to local rebellions (Tan 62).²³

Other colonial devices also conspired to subjugate the natives and their economy. The *encomienda*, though not a land grant, gave individuals and institutions rights over a piece of territory for a certain period of time (Agoncillo 83-85; Tan 59). The *encomenderos* had a share in the harvest and exacted dues and services from their tenants. Through this system and for their personal profit, the *encomenderos*, including the clergy, exploited the *indios* under their jurisdiction. The abolition of the *encomienda* system around the eighteenth century gave way to *haciendas* or landed estates, which were mostly donated to or bought by the various religious orders (Anderson, “Cacique” 6; Tan 59-60). The *haciendas* became the models for agrarian development in the country and were the sites of heightened abuses by the friars, against which the natives eventually revolted. Both of these institutions hastened the decline of small-scale and subsistence

²³ These include the “Sumodoy revolt (1649), when the Visayans were drafted to haul timber to Cavite, and the Pampanga Revolt (1660), when the overburdened and overtaxed Kapampangans were inflamed by the forcible cutting and hauling of heavy logs” (Agoncillo 86).

farming, as the production of export crops such as sugar, tobacco, and *abaca* ("Manila hemp") became more imperative (Fajardo 164; Posadas 14-15). No longer growing as much rice and other sustaining crops, the natives were easy victims of uncontrolled pricing and monopolies. The Spaniards capitalized on the weaknesses of the people by instituting monopolies on vices such as tobacco, which they themselves introduced to the islands, and ceremonial necessities such as wine and betel nut (Tan 60). These institutions, combined with the various tributes and forced labor, made it almost financially impossible for the natives to eke out a living.

At the turn of the century, the Philippines was turned over from Spain, a waning Old World ruler, to the United States, an emergent New World leader. At this historical junction, typical Filipinos were preoccupied with economic survival. Spanish institutions had made farming unprofitable for them, so "some attempted to supplement income in off-season by sending family members to urban centers for low-wage employment or as domestic servants" (Pido, "Macro/Micro" 23). The arrival of the Americans did not quite alleviate the financial crunch for the masses. Though public works and health and sanitary practices improved and there were increased educational and political opportunities for Filipinos, the American administrators purposefully preserved the social status quo. They ensured that the native elite maintained its privileged position, thus making allies out of them and using them to further US colonial aims. For instance, though land reform was a potential solution to the economic difficulties of the Filipinos, it ran counter to imperialist objectives. Thus, when the Americans confiscated the enormous land holdings of the friars, they chose to auction them instead of distributing

them to the people, especially the tenant farmers. Only the wealthy, who were mostly of Spanish or Chinese descent, were able to afford the land (Anderson, "Cacique" 10). Further disputes about land ownership, over which the Americans presided, were also judged in favor of the elite (Lopez 22). This resulted in the "dispossession of many peasants from their customary holdings, often by fraudulent means, reducing many to permanently indebted sharecropping on large *haciendas*" (Posadas 9). The commoners could not voice their dissatisfaction through the electoral process since, as the late Senator Jose Diokno explains, "at the very beginning when they introduced democracy here and they had elections, they did not allow Filipinos who had no property to vote" (qtd. in Denton and Villena-Denton 43). Thus, somewhat similar to the slaves of antebellum America, many Filipino peasants worked lands they did not own and had no say in their own future.

Once the Americans controlled the land, or the people who owned it, they proceeded to implement their imperialist agenda, which was clearly expressed by William Howard Taft, the first Governor General of the Philippines and future US President, in the following:

The promotion of their material and intellectual welfare will necessarily develop wants on their own part for things which in times of poverty they regard as luxuries, but which, as they grow more educated and as they grow wealthier, become necessities. The carrying out of the principle, 'the Philippines for the Filipinos' in first promoting the welfare, material, spiritual, and intellectual of the people of these Islands is the one course which can create any market here among the people for American goods and American supplies that will make the relation of the United States to the Philippines a profitable one for our merchants and manufacturers. (qtd. in Constantino, History 292)

Thus, once they are provided with a better quality of living, Filipinos can focus their attentions on the consumption of American products.

To ensure that Americans had the advantage, the US transformed the Philippines into "a colonial economy of the classical type. Emphasis was laid almost exclusively upon the raw materials and extractive industries, while light consumer goods industries and power production received minimal encouragement" (Lopez 23). The administration retained the *hacienda* system it inherited from Spain and amplified the country's existing role as an agricultural exporter. Given the incentive of supposedly favorable trade agreements, Filipino landowners increased their production of such export crops as sugar, tobacco, coconut, and *abaca* (Ignacio 43-44; Lopez 23; Posadas 14). Under such "free trade" policies as the Payne-Aldrich Act (1909) and the Simmons-Underwood Tariff Act (1913), the United States opened up its market to Philippine exports. Of course, "the products the Philippines could export were . . . confined to what American industries needed as raw materials" (Tan 75). So, though the Philippines enjoyed high quotas, it was limited to certain products, while US goods, on the other hand, could enter the Philippine market without specifications or limitations (Tan 75). The US profited greatly from this relationship, while the Philippine economy, consequently, relied increasingly on the American market. As literary critic Lily Rose Roxas-Topo points out:

Economically, while the islands experienced prosperity, this prosperity was deceptive. The free trade policy promoted a dependence of Philippine goods on the American market and was, in the end, detrimental to Philippine exports. This created a one-sided trade agreement favorable to the Americans and economic dependency, which a political independence could not correct. (49)

Constantino adds: “The influx of duty-free American goods drastically changed the consumption habits of the Filipinos and produced a ‘buy-stateside’ mentality with disastrous effects on local production” (History 306).

In addition to free trade, the American-instituted public school system virtually guaranteed a demand for American goods, as well as values and ideals. With English as the medium of instruction, the Americans were quickly able to reproduce their own curriculum in the Philippines, using materials from the United States (Constantino, History 312; Elevazo and Elevazo 27). And,

[w]ith American textbooks, Filipinos began learning not only a new language but a new culture. Education became miseducation because it began to de-Filipinize the youth, taught them to look up to American heroes, to regard American culture as superior to theirs and American society as the model par excellence for Philippine society. These textbooks gave them a good dose of American history while distorting, or at least ignoring, their own.

Such aspects of Philippine life and history as found their way into later school material naturally had to conform to the American viewpoint . . . (Constantino, History 312)

Thus, the colonizers had downright control of the intellectual development of the colonized. Through their textbooks, they were able to rewrite history, particularly their role in it; while they were quick to denounce the Spanish colonial past, they glossed over the Filipino-American War or any other resistance to American occupation. As Diokno explains:

The transformation of Uncle Sam, from an evil policeman [during the Philippine-American War] to a kind patron reflects in part the success of the American public school system. [This was] an agency of indoctrination from the basic readers to the advanced civic texts. The colonial curriculum worked to instill a binational loyalty in the Filipino child—a loyalty to an emerging Philippine nation and to its protector,

America. American colonial schools defined the Filipino national identity for the Filipinos in a way that made it seem compatible with long-term dependence upon America. (qtd. in Denton and Villena-Denton 44)

More significantly, American teachers were able to mold young Filipino minds. In addition to the basics, they taught Filipinos about “American values and the Coca-Cola culture” (Pido, “Macro/Micro” 24). As a result, the public school system produced generations of citizens with nontraditional ideals and different life expectations (Pido, “Macro/Micro” 24-25; Tan 78-79). Young Filipinos learned to appreciate anything western or “Stateside” as superior to their own; they became avid consumers of American products. This kind of control over the colony’s knowledge base reinforced the subaltern/hegemonic positions of the two countries. It ensured, and even elevated, the economic and cultural dominance of the US metropole over its Philippine hinterland.

Political autonomy did not emancipate the Philippines from its colonial status; it only became “neo-” instead. When the US Congress passed the Tydings-McDuffie Law in 1934, promising Philippine independence in ten years, it was economically motivated. In the 1920s, while the Philippines was enjoying agricultural prosperity, American farmers were experiencing a slump and they blamed the competition from Philippine exports and labor (Anderson, “Cacique” 13; Agoncillo 341-344; Jenkins 56-57). According to Jenkins, “failing to secure what they considered adequate protection in the form of quotas and duties . . . these [farm] groups gave their wholehearted support to the move to cut the Philippines loose from the American free-trade bloc,” i.e., independence (57). With this bill, “free trade” was extended to 1940; quotas on Philippine agricultural products were reinstated, while the US continued to have no restrictions; and provisions

were given for gradually-increasing—from 5% to 25%—Philippine export taxes between 1940 and 1946 and full US tariffs after independence (Agoncillo 346; Jenkins 58; Tan 76). Because of the decades of “free trade,” the Philippines was heavily dependent on US markets and overlooked other outlets. Thus, the restored quotas greatly affected its economy. “for the surplus products that could no longer enter the American markets free of duty had a difficult time finding other foreign markets. The over-all effect of the Philippine-American free trade relations was, therefore, the placing of [the] Philippine economy at the mercy of the Americans” (Agoncillo 376).

In the wake of World War II, it became even more expedient for the United States to grant the Philippines immediate independence. As its colonial ruler, the US would have been bound to assist the Philippines in repairing the extensive damages from the war. By liberating the Philippines in 1946, the US escaped such obligations and, instead, appeared in an altruistic light by extending “foreign aid” (Tan 88-89). With independence, the Philippines moved from being a colony to a neo-colony because the US remained in control, albeit indirectly. To retain its advantage in the Philippines, the US Congress passed the Bell Trade Relations Act, which extended “free trade” until 1954 and granted “parity rights” to the US (Agoncillo 433-434; Corpuz, “Realities” 57-58; Tan 91-92). Similar to previous agreements, the free trade provisions included quotas on Philippine products, but none for American exports.²⁴ Under the parity rights section, the

²⁴ For key provisions of the bill, see US Dept. of State, “Summary.” Tan points out, “The Philippine exporters could not profit initially from the free trade extension since industrial and agricultural capacities were destroyed by the war. But American exporters could very well flood the Philippine market and neutralize local industries” (91).

Philippines had to amend its Constitution so that American citizens and businesses could have the same rights as Filipinos to exploit and utilize natural resources and to operate public utilities.²⁵ The Philippines had no choice but to accept the Bell Trade Act because, otherwise, it would not receive the full \$620 million for war damages allocated by the Tydings Rehabilitation Act (Anderson, "Cacique" 14-15; Agoncillo 434; Tan 91-92). The Laurel-Langley Agreement of 1955 gave the Philippines minor concessions in its trade relations with the US. The rate of increase in duties for American goods from 1956 through 1974 was higher than those for Philippine exports. The Philippines also obtained reciprocal parity rights, though individual state laws could limit these rights. However, the rights of the US were extended to cover "all forms of business enterprise" (Agoncillo 525; US Dept. of State, "Parity" 95-96; Tan 94-95).

In addition to these economic safeguards, the United States ensured its continuing presence in the Pacific through military treaties. The Military Bases Agreement of 1947 granted the US the right to use twenty-three military facilities in the Philippines "for a period of ninety-nine years subject to extension thereafter," without any restrictions on how these facilities would be used (Lopez 29-30; US Senate, "Military Bases" 96-100;

²⁵ The Philippine Constitution decreed that exploitation of natural resources and operation of public utilities were reserved for Filipinos or corporations that were at least 60% owned by Filipinos. With parity, "U.S. citizens could have ownership up to 100%, whereas [other] foreign nationals could have no more than 40%" (Schirmer and Shalom 87). In order to amend the Constitution, President Roxas unseated members of the opposition. See Ramon Diokno for his point of view regarding Roxas's actions.

Tan 91-93).²⁶ With the Military Assistance Pact (1947), the US agreed to furnish arms, supplies, and training to the Philippine armed forces and to create a US Military Advisory Group for the Philippines (Agoncillo 523; US Senate, "Military Assistance" 101-103; Tan 93).²⁷ In 1951, both countries signed the Mutual Defense Treaty, in the event of armed attack from external forces, though a declaration of war from the US was not automatic (Agoncillo 523; Tan 93-94). In 1966, the US agreed to reduce the base agreement to twenty-five years, subject to renewal every five years (Sigur 393). In 1991, the Philippines chose not to renew the Base Agreement, though, in 1999, the two countries signed the Visiting Forces Agreement, which allows the US to conduct military exercises in the Philippines.

Today, over fifty years after the Philippines' so-called political independence, schools remain the place where Filipinos are fashioned into American consumers and

²⁶ It also prevented the Philippines from giving base rights to other countries, without prior consent of the US; gave the US jurisdiction over offenses committed on these bases; and permitted the US the right to recruit Filipinos for voluntary enlistment (Lopez 29-30; US Senate, "Military Bases" 96-100; Tan 91-93). The facilities were often used by the US as its base for military intervention in Asia and the Middle East, including the Korean and Vietnam Wars (Long 243-247; "Uses" 140).

²⁷ According to Tan, the pact limited the Philippines' ability to develop its military according to its needs. He points out:

The military surplus turned over to the Philippines . . . did not include ownership. Its mere use, therefore, served as a psychological, if not a real, factor in influencing military affairs. Likewise, the prohibition against the acquisition by the Philippines of advanced military equipment or aircraft confined the Philippine freedom to acquire only that which the United States was willing to sell. (93)

The pact was originally for five years; it was extended indefinitely by an exchange of notes in 1953 (Agoncillo 523).

supporters since “the curricula and textbooks are substantially taken from the United States. Many school administrators and top professors were trained in the United States. Naturally, they tend to transplant the U.S. style of education to Filipino students because they believe such kind of education is better” (Fajardo 189). At the same time, the Philippines’ insurmountable debt to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) allows these American-led entities to dictate the direction of Filipino intellectual and vocational development. In the 1980s, for instance, the WB provided funds for 90 million textbooks, which “stress the benefits of colonial rule, foster the importance of foreign investments, and denigrate those countries which oppose American imperialism” (Fajardo 345). Critics also claim that the WB is more inclined to extend loans for programs which train Filipinos as cheap and skilled laborers for multinational corporations (Fajardo 192-193, 343-345). Therefore, the US and US-financed organizations retain control of the Filipinos’ knowledge base and even their detractors cannot escape such enculturation. As Crispulo Mercado, an accountant, claims, “For me whatever knowledge we have is from English. We don’t have math in Tagalog. We were educated by the Americans. Even the protestors [demonstrators at the US Embassy], whatever they say, when they go home they watch American TV shows” (qtd. in Denton and Villena-Denton 179).

As alluded to by Mercado, the United States also asserts its hegemony through mass media. The US, which is globally dominant in all media forms, floods the Philippines with American literature, music, movies, and television shows, thereby supplying Filipinos with images of splendor and prosperity and fueling their desires to

live in America. As Felix I. Rodriguez mentions, “Elementary school children, seeing Donald Duck on television, dream of becoming Americans in the hope that they will finally be able to live in Disney’s Kingdom” (318). In addition, the ubiquitous marketing of American products is especially effective in enticing Filipinos and making them crave for “Stateside” commodities. Girlie Garcia and Mike Soler, members of a church youth group, offer the following observation:

G: Ah, because of the mass-media, because of the foreign things coming in to the Philippines, the youths, they’re very inclined to go American, you know.

M: McDonalds!

G: Yes, like McDonalds, the food. You look around you and you have Madonnas and Cindy Laupers walking around on the streets. And I think every Filipino’s dream is to go to America and just to see the place because we’ve heard so much about it. (qtd. in Denton and Villena-Denton 180)

Lourdes Zafra agrees: “I really decry the fact that our tastes have already been all directed towards America, because of the mass media and advertising. For example, I enjoy kakanin and suman and so on, or native foods. But our children prefer McDonald’s” (qtd. in Denton and Villena-Denton 179). Thus, the combination of American-style education and mass media are very successful in selling American goods. They preserve the Filipinos’ subalternity by imparting American values and making them want to “go American.” Consequently, as educator Paul Dumol declares, “We are the province, the outlands for the big city which is across the Pacific; that mentality operates very much among the Filipinos” (qtd. in Denton and Villena-Denton 180).

Therefore, from the very beginning of its independent history, the Philippines has been governed by dual, sometimes dueling, interests and, unfortunately for the Filipino

people. Americans have often had the advantage. Though trade privileges between the Philippines and the US ended on July 4, 1974, the economic system that was put in place by decades of dependency has been difficult for the Philippines to overcome. Through their military presence in the Philippines, the US has also been able to maintain the status quo by supporting the appropriate candidates or authorities and providing military aid.²⁸ The American-dominated mass media, too, have furthered the Filipinos' attraction to American products and ideas. In addition, as the primary stockholder in the IMF and the WB, the US has been influencing the Philippine economy through the conditions set by these organizations in exchange for monetary aid.²⁹ However, as the Philippines deems this financial support necessary for its economic survival, it continues with this policy of mendicancy and maintains its status as a neo-colonial debtor nation. Thus, as San Juan asserts, "US direct colonial rule lasted up to 1946, but its cultural and political hegemony persists to this day . . ." (Philippine Temptation 1-2).

²⁸ Smith talks about the CIA's role in the 1953 and 1957 presidential elections. See US Senate, "U.S. Commitments to the Philippines" for information about US contributions to the suppression of the Huks. Bello and Rivera describes the dramatic increase in and the uses of military aid after martial law. According to Schirmer and Shalom, the US became more ambivalent in its support of Marcos, after the uproar over the assassination of Benigno Aquino (276-280).

²⁹ Fajardo describes the role of the WB/IMF and multinational corporations in the Philippines (221, 343-353, 357-358). See Bello and Broad for more information about the IMF in the Philippines. Also, Lindsey argues that "the impact of foreign investment" from transnational corporations (TNCs) has been "largely negative" (230-234), while Perpiñan exposes the TNCs' exploitation of women workers.

Filipino Migration to the United States

As a result of its colonial/neo-colonial economy, the Philippines remains underdeveloped. The lack of prospects in the country has been the impetus behind large-scale migrations, as Filipinos look outward in their quest for financial security. This trend began at the turn of the twentieth century when, driven by a combination of dwindling agricultural prospects in the Philippines and the lure of the American-taught vision of a golden land of opportunity, Filipinos began migrating to the United States. Around this time in American history, Hawaiian plantation owners' access to cheap labor was threatened: with Chinese immigration already curtailed by the Exclusionary Act of 1882, the impending Gentlemen's Agreement (1907-1908) also promised to stop Japanese laborers from entering the United States (Klose 129, 154; Mayberry 25). The acquisition of the Philippines provided the solution because, as an "unincorporated territory" (Lopez 8), its citizens were considered "American nationals" and were free to enter the US (Mayberry 17; Posadas 16). Recruiters from the Hawaiian Sugar Planters Association (HSPA) began to import Filipino laborers as early as 1906 and up to the mid-1930's (Mayberry 20-21, 30; Posadas 15, 23). Approximately 120,000 contract workers or *Sakadas*, as they called themselves, came to Hawaii; they were mostly unmarried males from the Ilocano-speaking region of northern Luzon. They comprised 19 percent of sugar plantation employees in 1915; 41 percent in 1922; and 69.9 percent in 1932 (Posadas 15). Only about half of these laborers returned to the Philippines after their contracts ended; the rest either stayed in Hawaii or proceeded to the US mainland.

By the 1920s, a growing number of Filipinos had migrated to the US mainland—some via Hawaii and others directly from the Philippines. Most of these migrants lived on the West Coast. Some found employment as service workers in restaurants, hotels, and homes, while others, called *Alaskeros*, worked the Alaskan salmon canneries. The majority, however, worked as seasonal agricultural workers, moving from region to region according to the growing season; they eventually became known as *Manongs* (“older brothers or elderly men”) by future generations. Like their Hawaiian counterparts, these mainland Filipinos were at the bottom of the employment ladder. They were given the most unpleasant and backbreaking jobs, mostly “stoop labor” in the fields. They also endured poor wages, terrible working conditions, and dreary living arrangements. Some tried to improve their situation through labor organizing, but unions were not effective until much later—in the mid-1940s in Hawaii (Mayberry 23) and in the mid-1960s in California. Early labor leaders were disposed of: Pablo Manlapit was deported from Hawaii in 1935, while *Alaskeros* Virgil Duyungan and Aurelio Simon were gunned down in a Seattle restaurant in 1936 (Posadas 15, 24).

These early migrants came to the United States to live the “American dream.” Instilled with the vision of a “land of opportunity,” where everyone was equal and hard work paid off, they thought they could work for a few years and retire to the Philippines in wealth. Though they earned more than they would have in the Philippines, their wages were less than those advertised by recruiters or earned by workers from other races. Though they were categorized as “nationals,” these Filipinos were not and could not

become naturalized citizens. They, therefore, could not vote and had no legal rights. As San Juan explains,

These Filipinos bore the stigmata of an indeterminate status—neither protected wards nor citizens. Consequently, labelled as ‘nationals’—veritable floating signifiers!—they were subjected to various forms of racist discrimination and exclusion, circumscribed by (among others) laws of antimiscegenation and prohibited from employment in government and ownership of land. (Philippine Temptation 90)

In their everyday lives, they were segregated from general white society, as landlords refused to house them and “Positively No Filipinos Allowed” signs greeted them at the doors of many restaurants, barbershops, theaters, and other establishments. Unable to participate in normal leisurely pursuits, they were relegated to the pleasures afforded by taxi dance halls, pool rooms, and gambling dens. Racism took on violent forms in attacks and riots against Filipinos, mostly perpetrated by whites. The worst took place in Watsonville, California in 1930 when, “during five days of violence, gunmen firing from a passing car peppered a camp barracks with shots and killed Filipino farmworker Fermin Tobera as he lay in his bunk” (Posadas 20). More than fifty others were injured (Mayberry 29).

In addition to these manual laborers, Filipinos of a different sort were among the first to migrate to the mainland United States. Beginning in 1903, the colonial government gave away scholarships for selected students to further their education in the US (Posadas 16). These *pensionados*, as they were known, primarily belonged to upper class families. In exchange for the financial support, these students worked as low-ranking bureaucrats or as teachers upon their return. The *pensionado* program was in

keeping with US colonial policies, as it made collaborators out of these Filipino leaders-in-the-making, while ensuring that they were thoroughly enculturated right there in the motherland (Posadas 16-17). These few hundred students enjoyed their American adventures and their legendary accounts encouraged others to follow suit. By the 1920s, however, few students received full governmental support; the rest were self-supporting. Unfortunately for these newcomers, their experiences were not always so favorable. Many ran out of money and had to get jobs. At a time when Filipino laborers had also begun flooding into the mainland, these students did not receive the same kind of welcome as the earlier *pensionados* did. Instead, they experienced similar instances of racism and difficulties as their working-class counterparts (Mayberry 19). Despite these obstacles, many completed their education and returned to the Philippines, while others opted to stay.

When the Depression hit the US, many Americans clamored for the expulsion of Filipinos, whom they viewed as competition for available jobs. The Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1934 granted Commonwealth status to the Philippines, thereby halting their heretofore free migration to the US and severely restricting it to an annual quota of fifty. While Congress could not force Filipinos to go back, they passed the Repatriation Act of 1935, which offered to pay the passage back to the Philippines. Migrants had to choose between remaining or risking the chance of never re-entering the US; only about 2,000 took the offer (Mayberry 31; Posadas 23-24). Though most of these Filipinos had envisioned themselves merely as sojourners, circumstances made settlers out of them.

World War II changed the face—or, to be more precise, the gender—of Filipino migration to the US. Whereas the “first wave” of settlers were overwhelmingly male, the “second wave” consisted mostly of women. Prior to the war, the US had already begun recruiting Filipinos to serve in the Navy as mess stewards and musicians. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, “. . . a change in the Selective Service Act permitted Filipinos to serve in the US Army even though they were not citizens. Thousands saw active duty in the Pacific in the 1st and 2nd Infantry Regiments, while others served in non-Filipino fighting units in Europe. The right of naturalization was soon extended to these Filipinos . . .” (Posadas 26). Towards the end of the war, military personnel stationed in the Philippines began to marry Filipinas. When the men returned to the United States, these “war brides” were left behind. The War Brides Act of 1945 and the Fiancées Act of 1946 allowed Filipina wives, fiancées, and children to enter the US outside the quota limit. Approximately 118,000 spouses and children immigrated (Posadas 28). The continuing enlistment of Filipinos by the US Navy, per the US-Philippine Military Base Agreement of 1947, also allowed a few thousand Filipino servicemen to come to the US (Posadas 30). These men, too, would have been able to bring their families and fiancées with them.

In 1946, at almost the same time as the proclamation of Philippine independence, the Luce-Celler Bill was passed, which allowed the naturalization of civilian Filipinos who came to the US prior to the Tydings-McDuffie Act (Posadas 26). After becoming American citizens, those who were already married were finally able to reunite with their families. Also, many of the unmarried men of the *Manong* generation—now middle-

aged—returned to the Philippines and brought back wives, often much younger, with whom they could start families.

In addition to these “war brides,” some women came independently as professional nurses. According to historian Barbara Posadas, the State Department’s Exchange Visitor Program (EVP)

offered foreign nursing graduates a two-year opportunity for post-graduate study and clinical experience in U.S. hospitals on the premise that they would return to their homelands with increased knowledge and skill. In practice, however, the EVP also became a convenient means for addressing the nursing shortage in many inner-city hospitals at a cost cheaper than hiring U.S.-trained nurses. (30)

Because of this program, the number of nursing graduates in the Philippines increased dramatically—from 7,000 in 1948 to 57,000 in 1953. Though only about 10,000 nurses participated in EVP, many more were able to immigrate during the “third wave.”

In 1965, Congress passed a new law, which intrinsically opened up immigration doors to an enormous “third wave” of Filipinos. In previous laws, Filipino entry to the United States was limited to fifty and, later, one hundred. The new Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) removed quotas based on national origins and, rather, instituted an annual cap of 170,000 for the Eastern Hemisphere and 120,000 for the Western Hemisphere, with no country exceeding 20,000 (Mayberry 41; Posadas 35). Under this law, there were “seven rank-ordered preferences” based on occupational shortages and family reunification, with “each allocated a percentage of the annual maximum” (Posadas 35). Under the third, or employment-based, preference, nurses and doctors practically had a monopoly on these slots. The demand for health care professionals lasted for about

a decade, after which the entry of physicians especially was heavily reduced. Due to high unemployment rates in 1975, medical associations and lobbyists began to pressure lawmakers to restrict the immigration of foreign medical graduates (FMGs). Congress responded with two laws in 1976. The Eilberg Act required professionals to have job offers before immigrating, while the Health Professions Educational Assistance Act (HPEAA) removed FMGs from the Department of Labor's short supply list, or Schedule A. In addition, the HPEAA required FMGs "to pass either the National Board of Medical Examiners' Association or the Visa Qualifying Exam and demonstrate 'competency in oral and written English' before qualifying for admission" (Posadas 38). Once in the US, many also faced additional testing and residency requirements. Aside from physicians, these laws also affected foreign nursing graduates (FNGs), who were also removed from Schedule A in 1976, but not to the same extent. Critical staff shortages and active recruitment, particularly in and by inner-city hospitals, allowed the continued immigration of Filipino nurses. After 1976, many came to the US on temporary work visas and later obtained "green cards" and became permanent residents. This trend continued in the early- through mid- 1990s, under a program that allowed hospitals to hire an unlimited number of nurses under a temporary visa (H1A) category (Posadas 39).

The remaining preferences for the INA were for the purposes of family reunification. Under this law, "immigrants who became citizens might 'petition' the U.S. government for immigrant visas for their adult unmarried and married children and their siblings. While waiting to become a resident, a permanent resident might be joined by a spouse and unmarried children" (Posadas 35). Thus, those Filipinos who were

naturalized after the war—the *Manongs*, the war brides, etc.—were united with their adult children and siblings. In turn, these married children and siblings were able to sponsor their spouses and unmarried children upon establishing permanent residency, as well as married children and other siblings upon citizenship. Even the new immigrants, who entered via the professional preference of this same law, were able to expand their family circle by petitioning their spouses, children, and siblings (Posadas 36). In addition to these preference-driven allocations, an even greater number of family members came outside the 20,000 annual limit. Prior to 1965, only military personnel and the spouses and minor children of naturalized citizens could immigrate to the United States outside the annual limit of fifty or, later, a hundred persons. The INA continued these exemptions, but also added the parents of citizens on the list. Again, these spouses and parents were later able to sponsor other relatives. Clearly, the concentric effect of this new preference-driven law led to an exponential increase in Filipino immigration. In the ten years following the passage of this act alone, “over 230,000 Filipinos immigrated to the United States, more than doubling the Filipino American population of 1960” (Posadas 37).

In addition to these preferences, there were other ways through which Filipinos migrated to the United States. Filipinos continued to enlist in the US Navy, became citizens, and sponsored family members. A few were granted political asylum from the Marcos dictatorship. In addition, just like the nurses, other professionals came to the US with temporary work visas and later became permanent residents. Also, some Filipinos who came on student and tourist visas were able to achieve residency status (Posadas 36).

However, some of those with work, student, or tourist visas who wanted to remain in the US could not obtain green cards, so they “overstayed” their visas. These undocumented aliens, or TNTs (*tago ng tago* or “hide and hide”), choose to stay despite their lack of legal rights, low wages and high potential for exploitation by employers, and the risk of deportation. Still others enter fraudulently through false marriage papers or paid marriages. The latest trend is for Filipinas to become the “mail order” brides of American citizens. In an effort to address the problem of illegal immigration, Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) and the Immigration Marriage Fraud Amendments (IMFA) in 1986. The IRCA increased enforcement, employer penalties, and, most importantly, legalization. The legalization or amnesty program “permitted undocumented aliens who had resided in the United States continuously but illegally since January 1982 to apply for temporary residency, and then, after a nineteen-month interval, for permanent residency” (Posadas 40). The IMFA, on the other hand, “made those qualifying for immigrant status on the basis of a marriage of less than two years ‘conditional immigrants’ and required a Filipina seeking to become the ‘mail order’ bride of an American citizen to have met him in person before the marriage” (Posadas 40). In addition, because of publicized abuses of mail order brides, Congress also passed legislation in the late 1990s, which required mail order bride businesses to inform their clients about the laws regarding residency, marriage fraud, and spousal battery.

In 1990, a new Immigration Act slightly changed the employment and family preferences of 1965. Under this law, “9,800 Filipinos can be admitted each year on the basis of job skills—more than double the 4,000 admitted annually under the 1965 Act”

(Posadas 42). The 1990 Act also reduces the annual allocation of visas for the siblings of US citizens, while increasing the slots for the spouses and children of permanent residents. In addition, a significant section of this Act allowed the naturalization of “surviving Philippine-born World War II veterans of the USAFFE, the Philippine Army, the Philippine Scout Rangers, and recognized guerrilla units who served during the period between September 1, 1939 and December 31, 1946,” though without conferring full veterans’ benefits (Posadas 43-44). In 1996, Congress passed two additional laws designed to curb illegal immigration and cut benefits to legal and illegal immigrants. The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) makes it difficult for those with non-immigrant visas to adjust their status and imposes severe penalties on TNs or those intending to be TNs. In addition, the IIRIRA requires “ . . . immigrant sponsors to earn an income of at least 125 percent of the U.S. poverty level. . . . Signing an affidavit of support for a prospective immigrant now commits the sponsor to financial support for a minimum of five years—until the immigrant becomes a U.S. citizen or qualifies for Social Security with ten years of covered employment” (Posadas 132-133). Those who attempt to obtain governmental assistance or “welfare” within this period may be deported. In addition, the Welfare Reform Act (WRA) of 1996 aims at reducing, and even ending, federal assistance to non-citizens; provisions include the elimination of Social Security Income (SSI) benefits for elderly and disabled non-citizens, the disallowance of food stamps for non-citizens, and the limitation of access to health care benefits under Medicaid. Amendments to this act in 1997 have restored SSI and disability benefits to those legal immigrants already receiving them, as well as promising

future access to disability benefits by legal immigrants already in the US. However, future immigrants will be denied such access. Also, legal immigrants have to either become citizens or work in the US for at least ten years before qualifying for SSI or food stamps (Posadas 133-134). If welfare benefits to legal immigrants are being cut, then there is obviously no way that TNTs could now avail themselves of such aid.

Because of the INA, the Filipino population in the United States has grown tremendously, increasing from

... 337,000 in 1970 to 775,000 in 1980 and to 1.4 million in 1990. . . . To put these figures in comparative historical perspective, between 1909 and 1946, about 127,000 Filipinos went to Hawai'i as plantation labor recruits, and almost one-half of them returned home (Okamura 1983: 73). With immigration limited by a 100 person quota established when the Philippines attained independence in 1946, from that year to 1965 only 34,000 Filipinos entered the United States. (Okamura 393)

This makes the Philippines second only to Mexico as the largest source of immigrants.

The 2000 Census shows that there are over 1.85 million Filipinos in the US (US Bureau of Census, US 3),³⁰ 918,678 (49.65%) of whom are residing in California and 260,158 (14.06%) in Los Angeles County alone (US Census Bureau, California 1, 20). According to Okamura, considering the heavy influx of immigrants in the last few decades, it is not surprising that 71.5 percent of Filipino Americans are foreign-born (394). Unlike their

³⁰ This figure falls far below the projected population of 2.1 million (Okamura 394; Posadas xiii; San Juan, Philippine Temptation 102). This might be due to the fact that, for the first time, the Census Bureau created new categories for those who are of mixed descent, and many Filipino Americans are products of interracial marriages. The 1.85 million consists of those who responded to being **only** of Filipino descent (US Bureau of Census, US 5-7) and may also not include a substantial portion of the estimated 95,000 TNTs (Posadas 130).

predecessors, however, the majority of this "third wave" of immigrants are female, highly-educated professionals from urban areas in the Philippines. Barring any changes in immigration laws, these demographic trends are likely to continue, as more and more Filipinos migrate to the United States.

The sheer numbers of Filipinos wanting to better their lives in the United States is evidenced by the approximately 600,000 backlogged visa applications at the US embassy in Manila (Okamura 394). However, there are many others who have no hope of achieving this dream and who have, therefore, looked to other shores for their fortunes. In the last twenty-five years or so, there has been a substantial movement of Filipinos to other countries, mostly to the Middle East and Asia. They are usually working under contract and are, accordingly, known as OCWs (overseas contract workers) or OFWs (overseas Filipino workers). The number of OCWs has increased dramatically, "from 14,366 workers in 1972 to 353,894 in 1982 and to approximately 617,000 in 1984" (Hunt, et al. 242); by 1994, there were approximately 2.56 million OCWs (Commission on Filipinos 6). Thus, there now exists a worldwide Filipino diaspora. According to Okamura, they

... can be found in over 130 countries and territories throughout the world including both developed and developing countries (Tyner 1992: 11). Taking into consideration the substantial number of undocumented Filipinos living and/or working abroad, a necessarily very rough estimate of the Filipino population residing overseas either permanently or temporarily would be between four and five million. (387)

This figure includes the Filipinos in the United States, who account for about one-fourth or one-third of the overseas population. Unlike the Filipinos in the US, however, who

tend to be immigrants, OCWs have temporary status. Though most are educated and professionally-trained, many are working beneath their capabilities, e.g. as construction workers, domestic helpers, or “cultural” entertainers. Since they are only temporary workers, their monetary gains only last as long as they are being contracted. Once their stints abroad are over, many OCWs often return with no job prospects and no savings (since they were sending their earning to their families in the Philippines) and face serious emotional and psychological problems (e.g., marital disintegration, chemical dependencies, lifestyle withdrawal) within themselves and their families.

The ongoing wave of migration to other nations, particularly to the United States, shows no sign of ebbing. Filipinos continue to look outward for economic opportunities. Though it is only temporary for some, many are able to get out of debt, improve their standards of living, send relatives to school, and even establish small family businesses. For the Philippine government, though, the value of overseas workers can be measured in the enormous amounts of money that they remit to their families in the Philippines. These remittances account for approximately four and a half billion dollars or five percent of the Philippines’ GNP (Posadas 127) and enable the government to continue paying its foreign debts while temporarily relieving the difficulties of some of its citizens. Unable to present internal solutions to its economic woes, the state encourages these migrations, even going so far as lauding OFWs as “*mga bagong bayani*” or the new heroes of the country (Rafael, “Your Grief” 5). As San Juan suggests, though, this trend is actually ideal for the ruling elite and in/vested international parties because it maintains the neo-colonial status quo (Philippine Temptation 91-93, 99-104). This “brain drain” of

educated professionals ensures that developed nations have intellectual hegemony while keeping the Philippines underdeveloped. Also, as these migrants are primarily from the middle-class sphere, their departure removes potential political opposition, which might otherwise disturb the elite's—and their transnational allies'—dominance.

The *Balibayan* Program

The naturalization of Filipinos in the United States, coupled with the changes in immigration laws, led to a highly visible increase in the Filipino American population. By the 1970s, scores of professionals and family members had migrated—and were continuing to migrate—to the US. In the same year that the Immigration and Naturalization Act was being enacted in the US, the Philippines elected Ferdinand Marcos as its new President. In September 1972, he declared martial law and began his authoritarian rule. In an effort to publicize the achievements of his “New Society,” as well as to promote tourism, Marcos issued Presidential Decree 189 in May 1973 and cleaved the Department of Trade and Tourism into two separate cabinets. The Department of Tourism (DOT) became the “primary policy, planning, programming, coordinating and administrative entity of the executive branch of government in the development of the tourist industry” (Castelo 290; Cruz 149).

Under the leadership of Secretary Jose Aspiras, the new DOT devised and introduced the *Balibayan* program on September 1, 1973. The program was designed to entice overseas Filipinos, particularly from the United States, to return, *balik*, to their hometown or country, *bayan*, for a visit and observe the benefits of martial law, while

simultaneously generating income for the Philippines (Rafael. "Your Grief" 2-3; Richter 59). It achieved its objectives by offering such incentives as: reduced airfares on the then government-owned Philippine Airlines, tremendous hotel discounts, travel tax exemptions and other tax breaks, and generous baggage allowances (Castelo 290; Cruz 174; Rafael. "Your Grief" 2-4). The *Balibayan* program also played on the expatriates' emotional yearning for their families and sentimental attachment to their homeland. According to tourism scholar Linda Richter,

Balibayan initially was built upon the close Philippine family ties and what is the longest Christmas season in the world: All Saints Day (November 1) to Epiphany (January 6). Hundreds of thousands of copies of 'Invitation to a Traditional Philippine Christmas' were sent abroad. School children were assigned to invite relatives home for Christmas. (59)

The DOT also "exhorted towns and cities to put the accent on customs and traditions associated with the observance of Christmas in the country such as *misa de gallo* ["dawn mass"], the preparation of native delicacies like *puto bumbong*, *bibingka*, etc., and the holding of local *ferias* ["fairs"], and the hanging of *furoles* or lanterns" (Castelo 290). In addition, the DOT advertised the program by sending a song-and-dance troupe to perform before Filipino assemblies in the US (Castelo 290).

Originally, the promotion was only supposed to last for six months, from September 1, 1973 through February 28, 1974. It was soon extended to six more months (Phase II), from March 1, 1974 through August 31, 1974, and, again, for another eighteen months (Phase III), from September 1, 1974 through February 29, 1976 (Castelo 292). After Phase III, the program was extended indefinitely. According to Richter, "by 1978 nearly a million Filipinos and their families had taken advantage of the government

program” (59). It generated over \$45 million dollars in its initial phases, making travel and tourism the fourth highest money grosser (Castelo 292-293). Castelo claims that the *Balibayan* program “has been rated as the ‘most successful tourist-promotional ever launched by a government agency, anywhere in the world’” (290), while the United Nations has commended it as “innovative and constructive” (Richter 61). Though the increase in *balibayan* arrivals boosted the economy, Filipino citizens inevitably had to bear the cost of the promotion discounts (Richter 59). However, the political advantages of the program to the Marcos regime were incalculable. Richter explains:

The favorable comments on the cleanliness, beauty, and order that prevailed in tourist areas provided positive feedback to both the world and the local press. Like tourists in general, *Balibayans* rarely were interested in the political details of the government but were impressed with the relatively relaxed atmosphere and congenial surroundings. Yet they were more credible for political purposes than ordinary tourists because they were in a position to compare the New Society on a temporary basis with the Old Society they had known more closely and opted to leave. (60)

The DOT has since initiated other tourism programs, though the *Balibayan* program has remained a staple. Building on the success of the original promotion, it launched similar programs that were geared towards specific segments of the overseas population. *Balik-Scientist* was introduced in October 1975 and offered “incentives for practicing professional skills in the Philippines as well as regular *Balibayan* privileges” (Richter 60). That was followed in July 1978 by *Balik-UP*, which “encourage[d] visits from University of the Philippines alumni, the graduates of the most prestigious university in the country” (Richter 60). In 1977, the DOT also established the “Reunion for Peace” program, which urged World War II veterans to return and visit battle sites and

memorials (Castelo 293; Richter 60-61). Like the *Balibbayan* program, it offered reduced rates on airfare and hotel and cheap tours. In the 1980s, the DOT promoted tourism with the slogans “Fiesta Islands”; “There’s a Fiesta for Everyone”; and “Fiesta Never Ends in the Philippines” (Cruz 174). *Fiesta* is the Spanish word for festival and refers to the countless colorful festivals held in each town in the Philippines, usually to commemorate a saint’s feast day (Cruz 174). In the 1990s, the catch phrases were: “Island Philippines”; “Our Islands Have It”; “Jeepney Islands”; and “Musical Islands Philippines” (Cruz 174).

№ 284401
NAME: _____
ADDRESS: _____
TEL NO.: _____
NATIONALITY: _____
PROFESSION: _____
PASSPORT No.: _____
DATE OF ARRIVAL: _____
FIRST VISIT TO THE PHILIPPINES YES NO
SIGNATURE: _____

№ 284401
BRING HOME
A FRIEND
PHILIPPINES
MY HOME YOUR HOME

INVITEE

№ 284401
BRING HOME
A FRIEND
PHILIPPINES
MY HOME YOUR HOME

SPONSOR

Figure 2.3. “Bring Home a Friend” raffle coupon

(Ofelia. Department of Tourism. June 1999)

Throughout most of the 1990s (Ofelia FN5), the DOT also came up with the new “Bring Home a Friend” program intended to “increase tourist arrivals to the Philippines by encouraging Filipino citizens to promote the Philippines as a tourist destination” (DOT, “Bring Home”). Both sponsors and invitees received raffle coupons (see Figure 2.3), which could win them such prizes as: a house and lot and cash prizes for the sponsor;

roundtrip tickets to the Philippines for the invitee: hotel accommodations, casino chips, jewelry, and souvenirs for both.

The latest campaign, initiated under the Estrada administration, is going with the theme, “Rediscovery Philippines” (see Figure 2.4). According to former Tourism Secretary Gemma Cruz-Araneta, “it highlights Philippine culture, traditions and its multi-faceted destinations. With this program, the DOT hopes to instill a ‘pride of place’ in each Filipino” (“Tourism Receipts”). In 1999, a resolution was filed by House Representative John Orola to revive the original *Balikbayan* and “Reunion for Peace” programs for the millennium. Though the *Balikbayan* program has been alive all along, he proposed that the original features and incentives be reinstated (“Millennium Tourism”: “Revive Balikbayan”). Orola expressed the belief that the resurrection of these programs would complement the current “Discover Your Roots” promotion directed at third- and fourth generation Filipino-Americans (“Revive Balikbayan”). In response, the DOT came up, in 2000, with the “*Balikbayani*” Program, a “travel incentive program for Filipinos and those of Filipino lineage living or working abroad” (DOT, “*Balikbayani*”) (see Figure 2.5). A cross between the “Bring Home a Friend” promotion and an airline mileage program, the *balikbayani* gains a number of points for each tourist he or she helps bring to the Philippines and is later rewarded with corresponding prizes (“*Balikbayani*” Tourism”; DOT, “*Balikbayani*”). What is important to note is that the name of the program fuses *balikbayan* (“return to country”) from the original program with *bayani* (“hero”). With this combination, the OFWs—the new heroes—are incorporated into the *balikbayan* category.

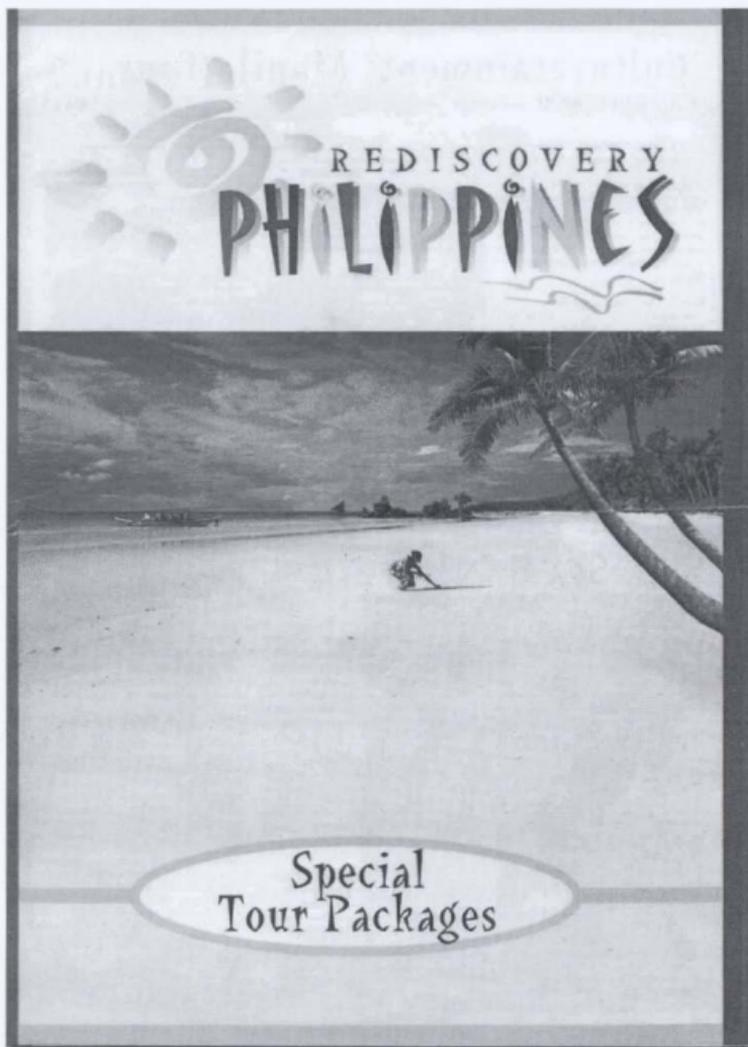


Figure 2.4 Cover page of "Rediscovery Philippines" tours brochure

(Department of Tourism-Los Angeles. Aug. 1999)



Figure 2.5 Cover of *Balikbayani* Program brochure
(Department of Tourism-Los Angeles. Aug. 1999)

From these different programs, it is clear that *balikbayans* have been—and continue to be—the object of advertising by the DOT. These campaigns encourage them to visit the Philippines and/or to bring or send along their relatives, friends, and co-workers. This is because *balikbayans* have proven to be an important source of revenue for the tourism industry. According to various sources, they account for approximately ten percent of tourist arrivals, with 174,277 recorded in 1998 and 199,290 in 1999 (Cruz5, 174; DOT, “Visitor Arrivals”: “Revive Balikbayan”). However, these figures are inaccurate because the overseas Filipino category only includes “Philippine passport holders permanently residing abroad” and “excludes overseas Filipino workers” (DOT, “Visitor Arrivals”). Since most Filipinos in the US are naturalized citizens, with American passports, they probably make up a substantial portion of the 463,600 US arrivals in 1999 (DOT, “Visitor Arrivals”). Add to that those who are citizens of other countries and the OCWs, and the number should be much higher than the aforementioned ten percent. Accordingly, this implies that *balikbayans* contribute even more considerably to tourist receipts, which, in 1999, totalled over 2.5 billion US dollars (DOT, “Visitor Receipts”). In addition, as Richter points out, “beyond their normal tourist expenditures *Balikbayans* also are a source of remittances and gifts” (80). While there is no way of calculating the value of these remittances and gifts, it is very likely that they amount to equal or more than the tourist expenses. Therefore, since *balikbayans* help the economy significantly, the Philippine DOT will continue to entice them to visit the Philippines through the *Balikbayan* and other programs.

Conclusion

The original inhabitants of the Philippines were of Polynesian and Malayan stock. Centuries of trading with the Chinese, Hinduized Malays, and Arabs and migrations from China and Indochina brought an infusion of blood and cultural and material influences. The combination of these elements, plus geographic location and isolation and economic and historical factors, produced the linguistically and culturally diverse groups in the Philippines. The arrival of the Spaniards altered the archipelago's course of evolution. Where independent kinship groups existed, colonialism brought them together under one name, one government. For the lowlanders, who were a majority of the population, Catholicism replaced paganism; only the pagan uplanders and Muslims to the South escaped similar proselytization. The open and reciprocal trading system that had existed for ages was supplanted by a colonial economy, which was destructive for the country's natural resources and people. Such institutions as the galleon trade, *encomienda* and *hacienda* systems, and forced labor were conducive for exploiting the natives while enriching the Spaniards. Prolonged abuse eventually united the Filipinos and they revolted against their conquerors. However, one master was succeeded by another. Subtler in its domination, the United States appeared to be a generous benefactor as it improved education and health and introduced other aspects of the country's infrastructure. There was a hidden agenda behind this development, though. Wanting a market for its manufactured goods, as well as a source of raw materials, the Americans inculcated Filipinos with the idea of a paradisiacal America and left them hungry for

anything “Stateside.” In essence, the US expanded the colonial economy created by Spain. Japan’s brief occupation during World War II was unable to root out American influences. Neither was the birth of a new republic able to remedy its American dependency, as the Philippines today continues to be an economic and cultural neo-colony.

Because of the colonial economy, very few people owned the land by the turn of the twentieth century, and most rest were reduced to tenancy. The harsh economic reality forced many Filipinos to move to urban centers in search of better opportunities. They also began to migrate to the ultimate metropole, the United States. Displaced agricultural workers found employment in Hawaiian plantations and, later, on farms and canneries on the mainland. Many persevered in the US despite poor working conditions and violent racism. Those who remained were eventually given the right to naturalization. Around World War II, servicemen, war brides, and wives of the first wavers made up the bulk of the limited Filipino migration. Immigration to the US changed tremendously with the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, bringing in relatives under the “family reunification” policy and those of professional caliber. The Filipino population has practically doubled every decade since then. Because prospects in the Philippines remain dim and visas to the US limited, Filipinos have also begun to migrate to other countries in the last twenty-five years. Most work under contract in Asia and the Middle East. In the 1970s, Ferdinand Marcos, who had just declared martial law, perceived the political and economic possibilities of this growing overseas population. His administration created the Department of Tourism, which came up with the *Balibayan* program. Offering

money-saving incentives and a chance to reconnect with family and homeland, the program lured numerous Filipinos abroad to visit the Philippines. It was highly successful and made tourism the fourth biggest source of income. The *Balibayan* program has remained a staple of the DOT's campaigns, though it might go by another name and its incentives have changed slightly. As a result of this promotion, a new term was introduced into the Filipino vocabulary.

Thus, geography and history, politics and economics have shaped the nation that is the Philippines today. Situated as it is on the outskirts of Asia, the ancestry of its inhabitants and many cultural elements originated from the mainland. However, its recent history of colonization has left an unmistakable legacy. In addition to system-wide influences, the Philippines' foreign rulers have bequeathed a colonial economy that has ensured its persistent underdevelopment and neo-colonization, even after independence. Out-migration has been the primary solution to the state's inability to provide economic security to its citizens. Consequently, a Filipino diaspora has been forming and growing in the last few decades, the majority of which can be found in the United States. Geography, history, politics, and economics have, thus, placed the Philippines at the crossroads of "East" and "West" and have created a fusion of "Oriental" and "Occidental" values, ideals, and sensibilities. It is this same ad/odd mixture, which gave birth to the transnational figure of the *balikbayan* and guarantees its continued existence and relevance. As long as the Philippines remains economically depressed, Filipinos will continue to migrate to other nations and the DOT will continue to appeal to their heartstrings and pockets. In the next chapter, I focus on the population catered to by the

DOT—the *balikbayans*—and describe the *balikbayan* boxes and their contents. It is here that I introduce the subjects (and objects) of this thesis.

CHAPTER THREE

A Boxful of Goodies: *Balikbayans* and *Balikbayan* Boxes

Soon after the martial law-inspired and United Nations-lauded *Balikbayan* Program was established, it lent its name to the Filipinos who visited the Philippines under its auspices. The word has also come to signify the boxes of goodies that these visitors take with them. One of the perquisites of the Department of Tourism program was that *balikbayans* received tax breaks on goods they brought into the Philippines. Eager or, more often, obligated to share their good fortune with family and friends, *balikbayans* took—and continue to take—advantage of this incentive, carting back boxes full of clothes, grocery items, and other *pasulubong*.

In this chapter, I consider this unique and temporary segment of the Filipino population—the *balikbayans*. I present definitions of the term and depictions of the people. I also describe the *balikbayan* boxes they bring and their contents. Here, I introduce many of the *balikbayans*, observers, and business people I interviewed, so that they can offer their own ideas about *balikbayans* and *balikbayan* boxes and enhance my overview of this specific gift-giving tradition. This chapter highlights the inherent connection between *balikbayans* and their eponymous boxes, thereby setting the stage for the metonymic analyses in later sections.

Return of the Natives: The *Balikhbayans*

By joining the Tagalog words *balik*, to return, and *bayan*, town or nation, the Marcos administration created a name for its tourism program. The invented term—*balikhbayan*—quickly worked its way into the vernacular and became the designation for a new and distinct category of Filipinos. The word is now so much a part of colloquial speech that most people are unaware of its age or origin.

Dulce is a 61-year old retired government employee from Urdaneta, Pangasinan, Philippines. She is married with four children, three of whom remain in the Philippines. She visited the United States three times as a tourist before immigrating with her husband in 1998. Dulce lives in Temecula, California with the daughter who petitioned her and her family. When asked when the term *balikhbayan* began to be used, she replies, “I don’t really know. It just happened, as far as I could remember. Or the term came . . . as early as latter part of 60s, I think” (T10).

Dulce’s sister, Harlika, is a 41-year old nurse. She is married with three children and lives in Carson, California. She immigrated to the US when she was 18. Harlika has visited the Philippines a few times since then. She comes up with a later time frame for the word. “I think it started in the 70s” (T11).

Responding similarly is my close friend and former classmate, Rhea, a 27-year old native of Cebu City, Philippines. She is a government employee who has applied twice

for a US tourist visa and was denied both times.¹ Rhea personally knows some *balikbayans*. She says,

I don't know when it started 'cause *pag na 'na koy buot, nakadungog na man ko ana nga word, balikbayan* ("when I had sense already, I've already heard of that word, *balikbayan*"). *Basta tawo gani nga gikan sa lain, sa gawas gani, ingnon man dayon'g balikbayan* ("If a person is from another, from outside, he is immediately called *balikbayan*"). I don't know when it started, I really don't know. (T4)

Judy is 34 years old, married to my older brother, and resides in Talisay, Cebu, Philippines. She works as a movie theater checker, through the government's disability opportunity law.² In addition to my family, Judy also has a brother-in-law (her sister's husband) who has been a *balikbayan*, but she has never been to the US. According to her, the word *balikbayan* was created

Diri na sa ato kay Filipino word man na . . . Diri na sa ato-a sa Pilipinas. Dugay na lagi na, Jade, pero di lang ko kakuan unsang year. Mga

¹ As discussed in the previous chapter, hundreds of thousands of Filipinos apply for a US visa annually. The difficulty of obtaining visas is a well-known, often joked-about, reality. Wary of those intending to become TNTs or illegal immigrants, the consuls at the American embassy can be quite strict. Single females, like Rhea, especially have the smallest chance for approval because the consuls suspect that they will marry once they get to the US, thus obtaining residency status. However, many Filipinos and Filipino-Americans accuse the embassy of profiting from this high demand because of the exorbitant fees they collect, regardless of whether the application is approved or not. (Keep in mind that applicants also have to dial a toll-call number to schedule an interview and pay the fare and lodging to get to their visa interview in Manila.) They also maintain that consuls are deny-happy, sometimes barely looking over the applications.

² According to my brother, Joey, who is disabled and actively involved in improving the quality of life for the disabled, the Philippines' Republic Act 7277 or "Magna Carta for Disabled Persons" stipulates that five percent of casual employees and contractual positions in the Department of Social Welfare, Department of Health, Department of Education, Culture & Sports, and other government agencies is reserved for disabled persons (E1).

seventies [nakadungog na], kanang sa istorya, akong amiga . . . Pagka-pirmero, wa [kasabot], pagkadugay, nakakuan na ko nga mao diay nang balikbayan . . .

(“Here in our place because it is a Filipino word . . . It was here in the Philippines. It’s old, Jade, but I can’t say what year. The seventies [she already heard], from stories, my friend . . . In the beginning, no [didn’t understand what it meant], later, I understood that that’s what a *balikbayan* is . . .”) (T5)

Isabel, 37, is my friend, who came to the US in 1992 and now lives in North Hollywood with her husband and two daughters. She is the controller for a private company. She has not returned to the Philippines yet, though she had experiences with *balikbayan* relatives while she was still in the Philippines. *Balikbayan*, Isabel explains, is

. . . like a compound word . . . So, pretty much, it’s just like . . . a lot of words in the Philippines, that they just make up a term. I don’t think it was an original word in the Filipino dictionary, they just coined it up . . . and it just transferred by word of mouth . . . When . . . there was a boom with overseas contract workers to the Middle East, that’s when it was coined, I think. I think around early 80s. (T8)

Lambert, Harlika and Dulce’s sister, is 48 years old and lives in Los Angeles. She is divorced and has two children. After undergoing nurse training in Australia for three years, she came to the United States when she was 22. Lambert worked as a nurse, but is now on a disability pension. She has been a *balikbayan* three times. She speculates on the origin of the term, “I think maybe the travel agents did it. Who knows? It’s the only thing I can think of” (T11).

My mother, Alicia, is 60 years old and a legal assistant with the County of Los Angeles. She is widowed, with six children. Petitioned by her mother, she immigrated to the US when she was 45 years old, along with her four children who were still minors at that time. A resident of Los Angeles, California, Alicia has returned to the Philippines

“five or six times” (T3), the latest in 1998. She guesses that the word *balikbayan* was invented by “I think somebody in the Philippines . . . If I remember right, it is one of the terms, I don’t know, coined by tourism people. I think so” (T7). She continues to say that it was created “must be before ’85 [*laughs*],” which was when she came to the US, in order “to attract more tourists, to attract more people so . . . they will spend their dollars there, in the Philippines. In fact, they are giving, they used to give some incentives for *balikbayans*. Before, I think. There were free—I forgot. There were incentives before when I was still there. No taxes, no duties on certain items” (T7). This is the closest version to the term’s actual origin, as related in the preceding chapter. Alicia declares that she obtained her information “from the newspaper” (T7).

However, regardless of whether they know how the word originated, everybody knows what it means. Alicia succinctly defines it, “*Balik* is return, *bayan* is country, meaning you return to the country” (T7), while Isabel says, “I think it’s somebody who’s an immigrant to another country and comes over to visit the Philippines” (T8). Rhea explains: “*Balikbayan* for me is just anybody, let’s say, a person from Philippines goes to other countries and comes back to Philippines, so that person is a *balikbayan*. So it’s *balikbayan*, going back to where you came from” (T4). She continues, “It’s a general term for anyone who comes back to the Philippines . . . It doesn’t mean that, if you say *balikbayan*, it means somebody who comes permanent or temporary. It’s anybody who comes back to the Philippines, for vacation, for returning from years away from the Philippines” (T4).

Nene is 31 years old and briefly worked as a domestic helper for my brother and Judy. She hails from San Remigio, a rural area of Cebu, Philippines, and is married with two children. She has never been to the US and has had limited contact with *halikbayans*. According to Nene,

Balikbayan, ang definition anang balikbayan, diri sila nagpuyo sa Pilipinas, unya ningadto g' America, unya nibalik na pud ngari. Sa sulti-sulti ra sad na. sa akong gipaminawan ba. Pero nakabasa ko sa . . . istorya anang balikbayan, nga kana ganing ningadto sila ug America, unya didto sila nangita'g trabaho, unya paghuman na nila didto, didto na sila. Pag gusto na sila mamauli ngari, mao nang gitawag balikbayan . . . Unsa to nga libro uy? . . . Basta naa sa mura'g grade 2 o . . . grade 1. Sa eskwelahan sa akong anak ba, akong nabasahan sa balikbayan. Mura'g Pilipino. . . Basta nakabasa ko ana. Jade, halikbayan na, mao na akong nabasahan.

(“*Balikbayan*, the definition of *balikbayan*, they lived here in the Philippines, then they went to America, then they came back here again. From what people say, from what I’ve heard. But I read a story . . . about *balikbayan*, that they went to America, and they looked for work there, and then after they were done there, that’s where they stayed. When they want to come home here, that’s when they are called *balikbayan* . . . What book was it? . . . I think it was in grade 2 or . . . grade 1. From my child’s school, I read about *balikbayan*. I think it was Pilipino [the subject]. . . . I read that, Jade, *balikbayan*, that’s what I read.”) (T6)

Clearly, most Filipinos, regardless of background, can give a definition for the term *balikbayan*. As Nene testifies, it is even featured in a children’s textbook. Initially, though, *balikbayan* primarily referred to Filipinos from North America, particularly the United States (Rafael, ““Your Grief” 3; “Millennium” n.p.). As the Filipino diaspora has grown and, in recent years, has increasingly been comprised of temporary OCWs to Asia and the Middle East, the use of the term has also expanded to include them. Now, in

common usage, *balikbayan* refers to Filipinos who are, as the Cebuanos³ say, “*gikan sa gawas*” or “from outside.” However, permanent immigrants to the United States (and, to a much lesser extent, Canada and Australia) remain the majority (Cruz 23), and they are usually the ones who are designated as such. As Judy says, *balikbayans* are “*gikan ug lain nga country, laing lugar. Kasagaran bakasyon, kadiyot ra . . . Kasagaran, sa States gyud*” (“from a different country, different place. Most [are on] vacation, only for a short time . . . Most [are] from the States”)³ (T5). In this work, my focus is on these American *balikbayans*.

Balikbayans are ubiquitous figures in everyday Philippines. Some may only visit once or twice, while others return regularly. According to Frank Denton and Victoria Villena-Denton, of the 125 Filipino Americans they interviewed, “One in two of these respondents indicated that they make a trip to the Philippines at least every five years. One in four indicated no more than two years between visits home” (142). Among those I interviewed, age appears to be the determining factor in the frequency of visits. Filipino Americans who are older in age now or at the time of their immigration to the United States return to the Philippines more often, while those who are younger are not as inclined to do so.

Take Madrona, for example, a 62-year old retiree, who is the eldest sibling of Dulce, Lambert, and Harlika. She came to the US when she was 31 years old and currently resides in Los Angeles with her husband and youngest daughter (T1; W1). Her

³ Residents of Cebu.

son and other daughter, as well as some of her siblings (two of whom she petitioned⁴), also live in Southern California. Madrona visited the Philippines for the first time in 1973, after five and a half years in the US, and with her family in 1980 (P23). Lately, she has been returning more frequently. Onofre, Madrona's 67-year old husband, has also taken several trips to the Philippines, most of them with his wife. Another older interviewee, Alicia, has visited the Philippines on a number of occasions. Three of Alicia's sisters, who are in their 50s and 60s and also live in Southern California, have also gone back periodically.

Gil, 34, is the son of Madrona and Onofre and my brother-in-law. He came to the US when he was two years old. He resides in Torrance, California with his wife and two kids. Previously a teacher like his mother, Gil is now the technology coordinator of his school district. He has only been to the Philippines twice, with his family when he was 13 and with his wife in 1994 (T11). Similarly, Allan, 35, is my older brother and Alicia's son. He works as a supervisor for the Department of Social Services and lives in Glendale, California. Though he immigrated at the older age of 20, he only returned for the first time after 13 years (1998), with his wife and two children, and has not been back since (T2).

⁴ Madrona has actually petitioned eleven people in all, including her husband and son. She petitioned Lambert and Harlika, as well as a brother who lives in Sacramento in Northern California. She also petitioned another brother, who has since passed away, though his family is now in Southern California, as well. She was also responsible for bringing her parents to the US, though they moved back to the Philippines to live out their remaining years. The other brother and two half-brothers she petitioned have not yet received their immigrant visas.

This predilection among older Filipino Americans to return repeatedly to the Philippines corroborates Posadas's observation that "'[g]oing home' . . . requires close connections with family still in the Philippines. A trip can be occasioned by a crisis such as the illness of a parent. But after chain migration that has reunited siblings in the United States, and after parents in the Philippines have died, cross-Pacific family ties necessarily diminish" (142). Elderly immigrants and those who were older at the time of migration are more likely to have siblings and parents remaining in the Philippines, as well as more intimate relationships with extended family and friends there. These affiliations are likely to compel them to visit. In addition, the illness or death of these family members often occasion *balikbayans* to go back. The younger ones such as Gil and Allan, on the other hand, tend to have their immediate family members already with them in the United States and are not as likely to have similar attachments.

Those who are retired are able to stay in the Philippines for months at a time, too. According to Madrona, "my husband and I stayed there for 6 months. But most of the time I only stay there for a month or 2 & then come back" (W1). My grandmother was the same way. When she was still alive, she halved her time between the Philippines and the US. Though I am far from retirement, I have been able to spend several months at a time in the Philippines, but that is only because I am a student and am doing research. For the majority of *balikbayans*, though, visits to the Philippines are quite short, depending on how much vacation time they can take from work. Allan, for example, "stayed there for three weeks" (T2), while Alicia's visits were "not more than 15 days" (T3). On his two trips, Gil was there for about a month and two weeks respectively

(T11). The temporariness and brevity of their presence in the Philippines are part of what it means to be a *balikbayan*.

However, Dulce disagrees with this assessment, expressing that a *balikbayan* is

a returning Filipino citizen, a returning Filipino, regardless of whatever the citizenship—being a naturalized US citizen or not—who prefers to go home to the Philippines **for good** [my emphasis] . . . Well, others say it's just *balikbayans*, on the other hand, like I was telling you, with all those big boxes to bring home to the Philippines, to bring home to their loved ones in the Philippines when they come but then come back to America again, for a short stint in the Philippines and then come back here, because they would like to stay in the United States rather than staying in the Philippines. But still, they would like to go back, love to go back to the Philippines and really be a *balikbayan* . . . That's how I foresee it to be, to enjoy life after having spent so much time in the United States, life in the Philippines for good, be with your loved ones. (T10)

While there are indeed *balikbayans* who do return to the Philippines for good, especially those who are retired and wish to spend their golden years there, the original term as coined by the DOT implies transience. *Balikbayans* are more helpful to the economy when they come as tourists with tourists' money to spend, and most fall under this category. Dulce's emphatic statement, rather, belies her own homesickness and desire to go back home, to live the life she has been accustomed to for 60 years, before she immigrated to the US at her daughter's behest.

Balikbayans have become commonplace in the daily lives of most Filipinos. They are so recognizable, in fact, that there are stereotypes about and caricatures of them. The foremost cliché is that *balikbayan* equals money. According to Nene,

Kanang balikbayan nagpasabot na daghan gyu'g kwarta [laughs] kay kasagaran mao man na. O . . . mao gyud na siyay unang ma-sud sa atong hunahuna, nga daghan gyu'g kwarta balikbayan. Di gyud na sila mo-uli ug way kwarta. Uli gani sila, daghan gyu'g kwarta kay mo-uli na sila'g

Pilipinas, ingnon man gyud na sila 'g 'kanang balikbayan, daghan na kaayo na 'g kwarta.

(“That *balikbayan* means s/he has a lot of money [laughs] because usually that’s how it is. Yes. . . . that is what first comes to our mind, that a *balikbayan* has lots of money. They won’t come home if they don’t have money. If they come home, they should have lots of money because, when they come home to the Philippines, people will tell them, ‘that *balikbayan*, s/he has a whole lot of money.’”) (T6)

She laughingly continues that balikbayans do not come home without money because

“*daghan ma 'g manugat* (“many will meet them”)” (T6). Isabel offers a similar and more personal point of view:

Based from my experience when I was there. . . . I thought at that time . . . when a *balikbayan* comes over, they got lots of money. We see them as dollars. We think that they will always have something for us, you know. So, it’s expected and . . . that’s what they always tell you. . . . the people there, like friends and family, too. That’s why I don’t wanna go home ‘cause it’s the same thing. ‘Cause I know what we were like before. Now, if I’m going home, I don’t think so, I think. (T8)

Comparably, Judy explains:

Mao man gyud nay kasagaran . . . expectations diri sa ato sa Pilipinas, nga basta maka-balikbayan gani ka, daghan na gyud ka ug kwarta. Kay ang pliete, ang mga papeles, mahal gud na ang bayaran gud no. Unya ang-ang mang mo-ari lang ka. Kasagaran gud sa ato gud, dili mo-uli kay walay pasalubong, walay thatag. Mao bitaw nang . . . magda 'g balikbayan box kay dugay na ra ba ko'ng wa ni-uli no, unya para ni sa akong parente. Unya mag-expect gyud nang parente nimo diri nga daghan na gyud na 'g kwarta kay pila na gud na ka tuig didto, unya wa na maglisod kay maayo 'ng trabaho didto. Siempre ni-bakasyon na na diri kay naana'y daghang kwarta . . . Pero . . . kasagaran gyud, bisag unsaon nimo 'g ingon nga wa koy kwarta, moingon dayon, 'ay, sus, naa niy daghang kwarta kay gikan na gud ni didto gud.' Unya kasagaran gyud sa balikbayan, kasagaran gyud sa akong nakuanan, na man gyud daghang kwarta bisag moingon na.

(“That is usually . . . the expectations here in the Philippines, that if you can be a *balikbayan*, then you already have lots of money. Because the fare, the papers, the expenses are expensive. Then, you can’t just come here. Most of us won’t go home when there’s no *pasalubong*, nothing to

give. That is why we bring *balikbayan* box because it's been a long time since I've been home, and this is for my relatives. And then, your relatives here are, of course, going to expect that this person is going to have lots of money because how many years have you been there and s/he's not having a hard time there because there are good jobs there. Of course, this person is vacationing here because s/he has lots of money already . . . But . . . usually, however much you tell them that you don't have money, they say, 'oh, this person has lots of money because s/he's already from there.' And then, most of the *balikbayans*, most that I [know], they do have lots of money even when they say they don't.") (T5)

Though many *balikbayans* do return to the Philippines expecting to spend plenty of money, there are cases when they do not have such fortunes. Yet, they often still end up having to pay. As Judy points out,

... *ang uban sad, ma-apekehan na lang kay, ang-ang no, ang tan-aw gud sa kanang taga-dinhi sa Pilipinas, daghan gyud na siya'g kwarta. So, mao na, mamarayeg ang uban. Unya siempre siguro ang gikan sad didto, ma-ikog sad sila, ma-ahat na lang bisag ang katong kwarta igo-igo ra to . . . Panagsa ra man gud ang mokuhan anang idea gud nga, 'ay gimingaw na sa sa iyang relatives uy.'* *Kasagaran kay somebody na na, daghan na'g kwarta, mao nang niuli diri.*
 (" . . . others are pressured because, imagine, the view of those who live here in the Philippines, s/he has lots of money. So, that's how it is, some entreat them. Then, of course, maybe those who are from there, they feel bad, so they are forced even though their money is only enough . . . Very few get the idea that, 'oh s/he just misses his/her relatives.' Most think that s/he is somebody, has a lot of money, that's why s/he came back here.") (T5)

I personally know what it is like to be the object of such financial expectations. In the US, my status as a starving graduate student is typical and understandable but, once I was in the Philippines, many people could not comprehend that. My simultaneous position as a *balikbayan*, who is supposed to be well-off, somehow overrode the fact that I was an unemployed scholar. For instance, despite the fact that they knew I was a student, some of my relatives repeatedly and not-too-subtly hinted that we go places or do things. I am

sure they were somewhat disgruntled when I would lightly, but continually, decline their proposals, saying “*Wa koy kwarta* (“I have no money”).” This also made me quite unpopular with them. Since I returned to the Philippines three times in the span of about two years and stayed there for a total of almost fourteen months, people naturally assumed that I had the finances to support such an apparently leisurely lifestyle. New acquaintances often commented that I was so *swerte* or lucky to be able to travel back and forth. Little did they know that I was living on student loans and usually only had enough money for airfare and not much more. Even when they were informed of this, they still would not believe it.

Merchants, too, try to cash in on the *balikbayans*’ assumed wealth. Lambert recounts the time she went to the Philippines with her children: “Yeah, I was trying to buy some slippers and then, they were gonna give me like 35 pesos, they said. And then when they heard Junior speak English to me ‘Mommy, what are you buying?’ Ah, they increased it to like . . . 40 pesos. I said, ‘forget it.’ I went to another place” (T11).

Because of this perception of affluence, *balikbayans* are usually considered to have higher status. According to Dulce, “Well, they look up to you as being able to travel most of the time and they say that . . . you are rich enough to make the necessary travel when, in fact [*laughs*], my daughter pays for my ticket” (T10). Judy adds,

. . . *kung mo-bakasyon sad sila, sikat sila. Ang mga relatives ba, mokuan gyud nila ba, kay naka-adto na sila. Ing-ana ba, lahi, mas taas sila ug level kay sa diri, kay diri sila gikan, nakaadto sila, unya mas taas man ngadto . . . in terms of living ba.*
 (“ . . . when they vacation, they are popular. The relatives [pay attention] to them because they have been there. Like that, different, they are of

higher level than here, because they came from here, they've been there, and it's higher there . . . in terms of living.") (T5)

Alicia concurs. "They treat you with respect . . . Ah well, I've always been treated up, like that [*laughs*]. But I think it's different because I complain of the heat and they consider it. I mean, they take it, they always consider it that you feel the heat and so they take care of the, they see to it that we have the electric fans and everything" (T7). I, too, experienced the same kind of deference. During my lengthy stay in the Philippines, I did not want to be such an obvious *balikbayan*. As my accent in and facility with speaking English would certainly betray me, I consciously conversed in the local dialect—Cebuano—as much as possible. In fact, the residents probably used more English in their speech than I did and, after a while, I even joked that I had forgotten how to speak English. I also generally rode jeepneys⁵—the Philippines' most common and cheapest form of public transportation—instead of air-conditioned taxis and would often eat at roadside stands.⁶ For the most part, I believe I achieved my goal of not being a

⁵ Historically, jeepneys were American jeeps which, after World War II, were "stripped down and rebuilt by the Filipinos, who converted them into minibuses capable of holding between ten and fifteen passengers. . . . They became and still are the mass transit system. . . . Decorated with tassels, bits of plastic stripping, foil, mirrors, paint, and virtually anything else that can be attached to the chassis, the jeepneys are a folk art extension of their individual Filipino owners" (Steinberg, *Philippines* 1). These days, there are numerous shops which make jeepneys of many varieties, ranging from the small multicabs used for shorter routes to the classic Saraos for regular routes and the new, longer Chariots and mini-buses for long-distance routes. For additional information, see Meñez's treatment of jeepneys as contemporary urban folklore.

⁶ In the Philippines, it is common that there are one or more families in each *barangay* or community who sell cooked food. Some may offer only three or four dishes, while others may have more variety. Roadside stands, which sell barbecued pork strips,

conspicuous *balikbayan*. However, those who did know that I was a *balikbayan* were constantly concerned about my comfort. For example, they always wanted me to sit down or have a better seat; were worried if there was food that I would eat or if I had eaten enough; and made sure that I was not too hot. In short, they were very accommodating, and I had to assure them continually that I was fine. While that may be the natural behavior towards guests, I would often still receive the same heightened consideration even when there were other guests present or when I was in a regular, non-visitor situation.

Another “manifestation of this improved status is the preference for migrants to stand as sponsors or godparents at weddings and baptisms” (Cabillao 53). Madrona verifies this tendency. “Especially in the weddings, you’re always the *ninang*, the godmother. I have many. Yeah, I go home sometimes because they write me [to be the *ninang*], that’s true. They expect dollars to pin⁷—although that’s not really true. Just by they thought that you are from America. Well, sometimes it’s true, too” (T1). I have observed this inclination, as well. When my family visited the Philippines, my two brothers were immediately asked to be the godparents for my cousin’s newborn son. On

chicken, etc. are also typical. Both these places may or may not have tables and chairs where people can consume their food.

⁷ In Filipino wedding receptions, we have what we call a “money dance.” Guests pin money on the bride’s or groom’s clothes (or some make a hat) before they get to dance with the newlywed. My mother says that this is a Tagalog custom, but I know that Ilocanos and Cebuans do it, too. Mexicans also have a similar custom. The Philippines likely adopted this from the Mexico through the galleon trade, or perhaps both countries acquired it from Spain.

a succeeding trip. I was also asked to be the godmother of another cousin's son. In fact, one does not even have to be physically present in the Philippines to be a sponsor. My mother was one of the sponsors for my cousin's wedding. She did not go home for that, but she sent the money that she was supposed to contribute.⁸ Sponsorship and godparenthood are significant cultural aspects in the Philippines:⁹ they are ways for people to become ritual kin. The people chosen to be sponsors or godparents usually have high standing in the community and do not have close relationships with the families of the couple to be married or the child to be baptized. Once they become sponsors and godparents, they become honorary members of the family (see Hart). The fact that *balikbayans* are given this distinction indicates their prominent position.

Gil, on the other hand, views this elevation not necessarily as a mixture of blind esteem and customary hospitality but more as an attitudinal fault on the *balikbayans'* part. He sarcastically remarks:

⁸ Each sponsor pays a certain amount of money, and this helps to offset the wedding and/or start off the new couple. My aunt told my mother to send \$130, so she did. That comes out to quite a bit of money, especially when there are a lot of sponsors like my cousin had (they had about seven pairs). This is a custom that, according to my mother, is practiced in the Luzon region (in the north) of the Philippines. While my family is from the Visayas area (in the center), my cousin's bride is from the north.

⁹ According to my mother, the more sponsors you have and the more prominent or richer they are, the more *engrande* or grand the wedding or baptism is. Nowadays, this practice has changed a little. As in the style of Americans, relatives and friends are, more and more, being chosen as sponsors and godparents. The bride's and groom's parents often select the wedding sponsors, while the child's parents choose for a baptism. After the ceremony, the parents of the newlyweds and the sponsors call each other *comadre* or *compadre*, as do the parents of the child and the godparents.

Balikhayan means that you can go back and visit your country with a higher nose¹⁰ than you came with [group laughter]. Because . . . for some reason, now you feel a little better because your hourly rate is matching the annual income of your relatives back home. Now suddenly, you've elevated yourself to some type of status and you go back and you speak good English and you get in front of a line somewhere. Because you're somehow treated differently. (T11)

To Gil, *balikhayans* are indeed accorded a higher status by other Filipinos, but he concludes that this might be as much a result of the *balikhayans'* feelings of grandeur and their demands for special treatment as the residents' deferential reaction.

In addition to acting superior frequently, *balikhayans* also exhibit other behavioral traits which generally distinguish them from the regular population. These are often perceived as strange and amusing. As Posadas enumerates,

They carry their own bags, clear their own dishes after family meals, buy everything made of mango that they can find, leave big tips in restaurants, and are courteous when waiting in lines. 'If the balikhayan drives while in the Philippines, he or she will often be the one who stops for pedestrians and desists from trying to run them down. The balikhayan generally does not lean on his horn or try to squeeze his vehicle into the three feet remaining between himself and other cars stuck in traffic' (Babst-Vokey 1996: 24). (143)

¹⁰ This idiom is quite useful in this discussion. Though Gilmore was using it for its usual meaning of snobbishness, there are actually other implications that are of importance in this thesis. First, Filipinos are stereotypically *pango* or flat-nosed. This probably accounts for the laughter when Gilmore says it because *balikhayans* must have really changed if they now have higher noses. Another assumption might also be that they have had plastic surgery, a quite common procedure in the United States. Second, having a long nose is considered beautiful. This goes along with the preference for fair skin. The only people who have such noses and skin in the Philippines are foreigners or those of foreign descent. Many Filipinos view what is foreign as better, even down to physical characteristics. Such biases are legacies of colonialism (see Gochenour 6, 11, 29). So, coming from the US somehow endows *balikhayans* with higher noses, a kind of contagion of the American magic.

I was guilty of performing similar actions. I usually wore shorts and sleeveless shirts.¹¹ I was conscious about wearing sunblock.¹² I only drank bottled water. I liked watching movies from the beginning, rather than going in whenever we purchased the tickets.¹³ I did not mind cooking and cleaning sometimes, chores which are often left for the domestic helpers to do.¹⁴ I ate more than my share of fresh mangoes when they were in season, as well as local ice cream and other delicacies. My friend, Rhea, made fun of me

¹¹ Despite the heat, Filipinos still generally prefer to wear the more modest jeans and T-shirts. Shorts and tank tops are often only worn at home.

¹² Most Filipinos rarely wear sunblock. Reasons for this may include its prohibitive cost, unfamiliarity with the product, or the view that it is unnecessary.

¹³ Unlike the US where we can see a movie only once, Philippine moviegoers can see a movie as many times as they want, as long as they do not go out of the theater. They can go in at any point in the movie. So, most see no reason to wait for the starting time because, if they walk in during the middle of the film, they can just see the beginning when it is re-run. While it is a time-saving habit, it can also be distracting as, often, those who walk in during the movie tend to talk and do not pay attention to the movie (perhaps, they start paying attention when the movie is re-run). Because of this style of going in at any point, there is no way to ensure that sales correspond with seating capacity; so, when movies are newly-released or are popular, the theaters can be "standing room only."

¹⁴ Live-in domestic helpers (the politically-correct term for maids) are common in the Philippines. Practically any family from the lower middle class and up (and maybe even some from the lower socioeconomic brackets) have one or more helpers. They do practically everything: cooking, washing (by hand), ironing, cleaning (including scrubbing floors), etc. Some helpers are *yayas* or nannies and have the primary task of looking after young children. In some families, each child has his or her own *yaya*. It is a source of pride for many Filipinos to have soft hands, for it means that the person has never performed hard labor. When my family was still living in the Philippines, we usually had two helpers who did all of the chores. During my first extended visit to the Philippines, my brother and sister-in-law had a helper. We did not have one the second time (though we still had someone who regularly came on weekends and others who helped intermittently). Even when we had a full-time helper, I often cleaned my own room and sometimes did the cooking.

whenever I insisted on leaving the customary (in the US) 10-15% tip at restaurants.¹⁵ Thus, these foreign manners, along with such stereotypical physical indicators as “the change in your get-up, by your skin having been fairer in complexion, all that” (Dulce T10), differentiate *balikbayans* from local Filipinos. As Posadas somewhat plaintively expresses, “Perhaps, even more than the distance created by miles and years, altered perceptions and changed behaviors gradually set Filipino immigrants apart from the *kababayans* [countrymen] left behind” (143). However, despite such changes, locals do not see too much of a transformation in *balikbayans*. Judy says that “*Depende. Kay ang uban mao ra man gihapon* (“It depends. Because some are the same as before”)” (T5). Rhea adds, “. . . my friends, not really . . . They’re still the same” (T4). As she sums up, “they’re still Filipinos” (T4).

Packaged Culture: *Balikbayan* Boxes

The most stereotypical aspect of *balikbayans*, though, are the boxes of *pasalubong* or gifts that they bring with them whenever they return to the Philippines. In airports throughout the United States, particularly in California, and at the counters of airlines with Philippine destinations, queues of Filipinos carting large, rather nondescript, usually brown or white packages are familiar sights (see Figure 1.1). These cartons are, appropriately enough, called *balikbayan* boxes. These containers have become such a

¹⁵ According to my friends, you are not expected to tip at restaurants. If you have some loose change, then you might leave that if you wish. Rhea and I eventually reached a compromise, whereby I tipped more than the average Filipino, but not as much as Americans.

part of Filipino life that it is one of the items included in “100 Things About Being Pinoy,” which is a list of the quintessential attributes of Filipinos and Filipino culture. Rex is a 29-year old teacher living in Rowland Heights, California (E4). He was born in the US and has visited the Philippines five times (E6). He is Gil’s friend and happened to be present when I was conducting my videotape interview with Madrona. He agrees with the article, saying this about *balikbayan* boxes, “You’re not a Filipino unless you bring three of these here” (V1).

Just like the term *balikbayan*, no one quite knows how these boxes originated. In our group discussion about the DOT-coined word, Gil jokingly comments, “We don’t know how it turned into a box though” (T11). Harlika guesses that the use of these containers started in the “1970s, huh?” (T11), while Isabel says, “I really don’t know ‘cause I’ve seen one a long time ago, like in the ‘80s” (T8). Judy conjectures that *balikbayan* boxes have been around “*Taud-taud na siguro uy, pero dili lang ko kakuan ug specific year. Basta taud-taud na*” (“A while maybe, but I just can’t [say] a specific year. It’s been a while”) (T5). In addition, Rhea offers the following explanation:

Kana nga balikbayan, dugay na na siya, for sure, pero kanang balikbayan box, siguro na-common na na siya nga term kay tungod nga mura’g nana siguroy mga tawong naghimong mga boxes nga para balikbayans. Nana gyud siguroy word nga ‘balikbayan box.’
 (“That [word] *balikbayan*, that’s old, for sure, but the *balikbayan* box, maybe that term became common because maybe people started making boxes for *balikbayans*. And maybe it already has the word ‘*balikbayan* box.’”) (T4)

Dulce responds similarly, “I really don’t have an idea how it started . . . *Balikbayan*, returning Filipino, has to come home, and so therefore should be bringing something for

home. And that is, the box itself being labelled as a *balikbayan* box, isn't it?" (T10).

Like Gil, Rhea and Dulce indicate a correlation between the term and the boxes. Alicia, too, suggests the same thing when she replies that the boxes are, "I think it's part of the tourism thing" (T7).

While it is unclear exactly when and how *balikbayans* began utilizing cartons as luggage, social historian Vicente Rafael notes that "discarded boxes of computer equipment, canned goods and Pampers diapers . . . were used in the 1970s and early 1980s to pack gifts (*pasalubong*) that visiting immigrants felt obliged to bring back to their relative in the Philippines" ("Your Grief" 17). However, as one of the prerequisites of the *Balikbayan* Program was the tax allowances on *balikbayan* boxes and imported consumer goods, the practice must have already been widespread by 1973 (Cruz 124; "Millennium" n.p.). It is likely that this is merely an adaptation of the old Filipino habit of using whatever containers were available, such as *maleta* ("suitcase"), *baul* ("wooden trunks"), *sako* ("sacks previously containing rice, flour, or sugar"), and other kinds of *supot* ("wrappers or bags"), to transport goods over substantial distances. In the case of early immigrants, boxes served their purpose for they were plentiful, sturdy, and large enough to carry their personal effects and presents over the Pacific.

The practice changed in the mid-1980s when, according to Rafael, "standardized cardboard boxes marked 'balikbayan box' began to be manufactured by enterprising Filipino-American entrepreneurs . . . As with the found boxes used in an earlier period, balikbayan boxes conform to airline regulations on the maximum allowable size of checked-in baggage" ("Your Grief" 17). This timeline corresponds with that established

in two related articles in LifeStyles magazine. They claim that the “inventor of the *balikbayan* box” is Rico Nunga, president of REN International, a freight forwarding company, and that, “unknown to many people, REN was the first company to introduce the concept of the Balikbayan Box. What is not known is the person who coined the Balikbayan Box monicker” (“Rico Nunga” 17). This innovation reputedly occurred in 1985, four years after Nunga founded his door-to-door (DTD) cargo business. One article explains that, in the mid-1970s to the early 1980s, when the number of Filipino OCWs in the Middle East first exploded, the custom of “sending ‘stateside’ goods to the Philippines started” (“Special Delivery” 16). It goes on to explain that a presidential decree by Marcos facilitated the unimpeded and express processing through Customs and that Nunga improved on this air freight process by introducing the cheaper and non-weight restricted sea freight. The use of ocean vessels and Philippine brokerages are the bases of the booming *balikbayan* box or DTD businesses in the United States. However, the article does not provide the connection between the supposed Middle Eastern origins of the *balikbayan* box custom and its American version. Its use of the term “stateside” is somewhat inappropriate and misleading, as it implies that these things come from the US, when they were really coming from the Middle East. Neither does the article make any mention of the DOT’s *Balikbayan* Program or the fact that *balikbayans* have also been using boxes to bring home actual “stateside” commodities. This leads me to the conclusion that *balikbayans* were the first to use boxes for their *pasalubong* and that the practice of sending them came later. Nunga may indeed have created the *balikbayan* box prototype and its associated DTD delivery system, but *balikbayans* quickly appropriated these containers for their visits.

RJ is Isabel's 36-year old husband. He came to the US in 1984 and, like Isabel, has not been back to Philippines. While I was interviewing Isabel, RJ offered tongue-in-cheek alternatives for the history of the *balikbayan* box: "It started when a Filipino bought a TV. They didn't know what to do with the box. They ship the things back home in the box. People in the Philippines [think], 'Oh, this is a nice box.' They use it to ship to the US. They ship back to the Philippine. You have the *balikbayan* box" (T8). His other explanation is: "It started when LBC created the box and then the box came out of the sky. And Mr. LBC had a dream, a dream for a box to conquer the world [guffaws]" (T8).

These boxes have, indeed, conquered the *balikbayan* world. They have become recognizable objects on both sides of the Pacific, and the business of sending them is thriving. Today, there are numerous DTD corporations, particularly in California. The industry makes an estimated \$150 million a year ("Special Delivery" 16). The older companies, like REN, started out in air cargo before expanding to sea freight. LBC, the firm mentioned in RJ's story, actually began in the Philippines as a money remittance and courier business. When it expanded to the US in 1988, it offered those two services plus air cargo, which was eventually replaced by sea cargo (T12). Newer places, such as BayanBox, which only opened in April 1999, continue to pop up because as Arlene, one of its owners, explains, "We knew that a lot of people were sending boxes and we thought it was profitable. From our research" (P1). Michael, the Southern California Team Leader for LBC, concurs, "We're a growing industry. Yes, you can base it on all the competition that you see right now. If it's not a growing business, there won't be anyone

going into this kind of business” (T12). These forwarding companies, along with Filipino stores, are the *balikbayans*’ sources for their boxes. As Jay, Michael’s Assistant Team Leader, asserts, “In fact, . . . a huge part of our sale of boxes are for people who travel” (T12). However, those who have access to large containers do still continue to use them. For example, when I went to the Philippines with my aunts, one of them used an appliance box (see Figure 3.1).



Figure 3.1 My aunts at the Ninoy Aquino International Airport (NAIA) in Manila. One aunt utilized an appliance box as a *balikbayan* box (see foreground)

While these enterprises market *balikbayan* boxes, they do not “manufacture” them, as Rafael suggests. The *balikbayans* I interviewed do not know who makes these

containers and probably do not really care to know. Dulce replies, “I don’t know” (T10). She adds that they are created “ . . . maybe back home, maybe here [*laughs*]” (T10). Alicia says, “Yeah, it’s made here but I think it’s pursuant to specifications *sa* (“of the”) plane or whatever. Because . . . other countries don’t have those, that kind of specifications *nga* (“of”) boxes” (T7). Harlika, on the other hand, guesses that “the recycling company” produces the boxes (T11), while Lambert assumes that “they order it from paper companies, paper mill companies. Who knows? I don’t know” (T11). Isabel provides the most obvious response, “Who makes them? I don’t know. The box company, I guess” (T8). The door-to-door companies confirm that they do indeed obtain their boxes from paper manufacturers. Michael reveals that their containers are made by Jefferson Smurfit, “a vendor up north, in San Francisco” (T12). This information can be gleaned quite easily as, according to Jay, “it’s on the box” (T12). In fact, I knew this before I interviewed them because I had already inspected their boxes. BayanBox’s Arlene discloses that they get their supply from three different manufacturers, including J. Duncan & Crew (P1).

What does a *balikbayan* box look like? Its appearance is nothing out of the ordinary. Its principal distinguishing factor is its large size. As Isabel simply replies, “It’s a big box. That’s about it” (T8). Judy responds similarly, “*Kanang balikbayan box gud, dako nga carton, gikan didto* (“You know, a *balikbayan* box, a big carton, from there”)(T5). Just like other boxes, this particular container is angular in form. Alicia describes it as “ . . . a square box [*laughs*]. It’s about . . . two feet wide, two feet long,

two feet deep. How do you call that? Two feet, two cubic feet, *di ba* ("isn't it")?" (T7).

Rhea concurs, remarking that it is

Square, a big square. Same as our cartons here . . . *Ing-ana ra'g color, kanang may pagka-brownish. Wa ko kita'g lain nga balikbayan boxes.* ("It has the same color, it's sort of brownish. I haven't seen a different kind.") *Maybe there are other kinds of balikbayan boxes. I don't know. Basta* ("But"), most of the case, *akong nakit-an kana rang ing-ana* ("what I've seen is only like that"). (T4)

She adds that, "Sometimes, when I'm in the airport, I see people bringing boxes and some of the boxes have words '*balikbayan box*'" (T4).

The vendors are more specific about the descriptions of their *balikbayan* boxes, especially their dimensions. Arlene answers that their containers are 20" x 20" x 20", brown, and says "BayanBox" on it (P1). Jay of LBC replies that

The largest would be 24" x 18" x 18". It's double-walled, meaning it's very strong, which is good for going to the provinces because, you know, if you send boxes to the provinces, once it gets to Manila, it will transfer to another ship. So, we do like the box to be sturdy, and we have one of the best boxes. And it's in red, it has red lettering. And it's like a big letter with 'from' and 'to' on it. And afterwards, 'handle with care.' (T12)

LBC boxes are white (see Figure 3.2). On its shorter sides (the width), "LBC" is printed in large, white, serif-type font on a wide red band. Under that in much smaller, red, sans-serif font are three toll-free numbers for "within USA," "Hawaii," and "So. CA. [Southern California]." On the upper left hand corner of its longer sides, there is a red triangle with white "LBC" on it, the same font as those on the width. The apex of the triangle points towards the corner. Following the contours of the base of the triangle are the red words "air post #," "origin," "destination," "bar code #," and "wt. [weight]," followed by corresponding red lines. Next to the weight line are check boxes for "air"

and “ocean.” Clearly, these spaces are intended for freight shipping information, which is what LBC does. Underneath the triangle and the lines are more lines (three each) for more specific “from” and “to” addresses. On the longer top flaps, it says “handle with care,” as Jay mentioned above. Towards the corner on one of the long bottom flaps is the circular, seal-like box certificate which contains manufacturer and product information. Aside from the white “LBC,” all the design features are in red and the fonts a sans-serif type.

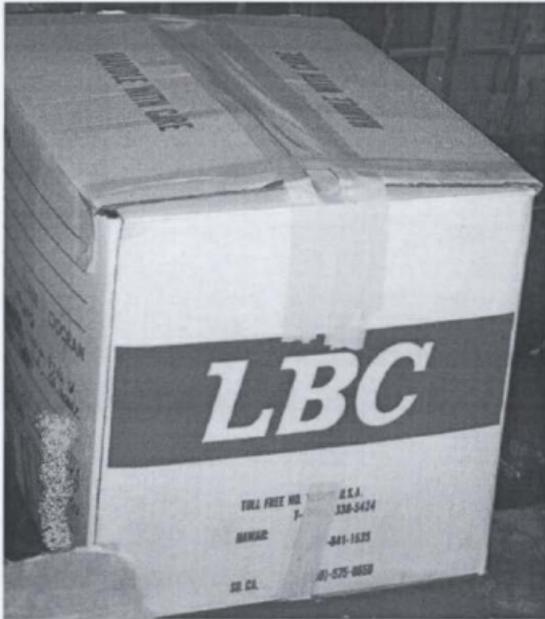


Figure 3.2 Madrona’s packed LBC box

As Judy points out, *balikbayan* boxes look “*pare-pareho* (“alike”)” (T5).

Typically, their sizes fall within a narrow range, which correspond to airline requirements. Most airlines that fly to the Philippines, including Philippine Airlines, Cathay Pacific, China Airlines, Thai Airways, and United Airlines, allow two pieces of check-in luggage per passenger, with each one not exceeding 62 inches in dimension (= length + width + height) and 70 pounds or 32 kilos in weight (“Free Baggage”; P9; P5; P2; P3). Both BayanBox’s and LBC’s boxes are 60 inches. Other shippers also have boxes with the same dimensions: REN’s are 20” x 20” x 20” (P6); Atlas’s are 23” x 20” 17” (P8); and Forex’s are “60 inches in total” (P7). A generic box that I purchased at a Filipino market has printed on it the following measurements: “24 3/4 x 15 5/8 x 21 3/8” or a total 61 3/4 inches, which is just shy of the airline limit. This somewhat corroborates my argument that these boxes were originally created for *balikbayan* visits, rather than door-to-door shipping. Also, according to forwarding law attorney Richard Gluck, he knows of no law which stipulates such dimensions for forwarded packages (E2). Jay affirms this and adds that the size has been standardized because “these boxes were originally used for going home and that is what airline regulations require” (P10). These containers are often brown in color, though there are also white ones. Those obtained from freight forwarding companies, like LBC, tend to have more writing on them. They include the company’s name, logo, and/or slogan, as well as various phone numbers. Those that are non-affiliated are simpler, without too much printing (see Figures 3.3 and 3.4). They are more obviously geared towards flyers. Some say “*balikbayan* box” on them, as well as “heavy duty” and “handle with care.” There are usually lines for the

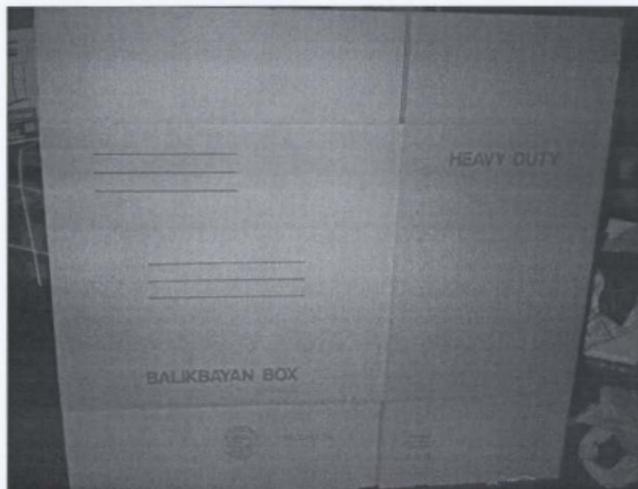


Figure 3.4 Box bought from Filipino market

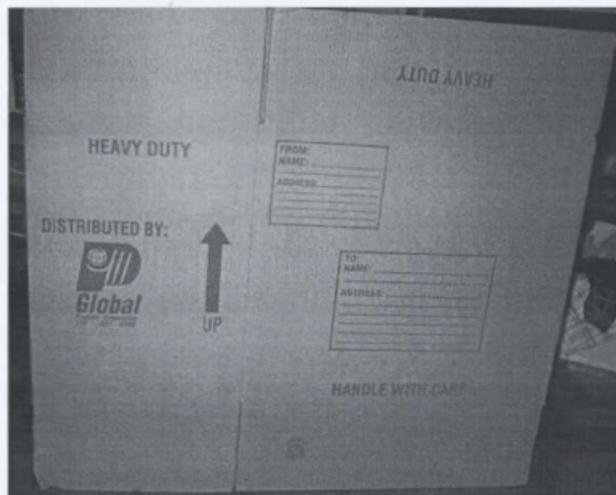


Figure 3.4 Another box from a Filipino market

travellers' addresses of origin and destination. *Balikhayan* boxes generally do not have any graphics on them, though there are some with a picture of an airplane on them.

As far as its composition, the *balikhayan* box is, as Dulce says, "... made of a really real hard carton, cardboard, or whatever the material used in it" (T10). These boxes are what are referred to in the paper-based industries as corrugated containers. According to the Jefferson Smurfit Group, LBC's supplier and the "world's leading paper-based packaging group" ("Introduction" 1), these containers are

manufactured from containerboard,¹⁶ consisting of linerboard¹⁷ and medium¹⁸. In its most common form, a corrugated box is made from two layers of linerboard and one layer of medium. The layers are combined on a corrugator, a machine that presses corrugations into the medium and laminates a ply of linerboard to each side. The resulting corrugated sheets are printed, folded and glued or stapled to form a finished box. Corrugated containers are designed primarily to protect a product during shipping but increasingly feature enhanced graphics, which increase a product's market appeal. ("Paper" 1)

Most *halikhayan* boxes that I have seen are single-walled, which means that they are only made with one layer of corrugated board. LBC's double-walled boxes are made with two

¹⁶ The Global Recycling Network's "Glossary of Recycling Terms" define containerboard as "the component materials used in the fabrication of corrugated cardboard" (n.p.).

¹⁷ Linerboard is "the grade of paperboard used for the outer 'facings' of a corrugated box. Linerboard is often referred to as kraftliner or testliner. . . . Linerboard makes up the outer (and inner) shell of the container which contains the ruffled corrugated medium" ("Paper" 1).

¹⁸ Medium is "the paperboard grade used to form the inner, fluted layer of corrugated board. Like linerboard, medium can be made of recycled material or wood pulp" ("Paper" 1).

layers, which, as Jay explains earlier, make them sturdier and allow them a greater weight capacity.

There are many advantages to using *balikbayan* boxes. As already mentioned, they conveniently conform to airline requirements. Alicia hypothesizes that this is deliberate: "... I'm sure it's according to specifications because years ago, three or four years ago, it was bigger, but now it's a bit smaller" (T7). The largeness of these cartons also make them suitable for *balikbayan* purposes. As Dulce explains, "... the size is actually, you know, adaptable for travel and that could contain a lot" (T10). Isabel responds that *balikbayans* use these containers "'Cause you could put more stuff, instead of using ... a suitcase, which can be bulky. This one is just designed to put the *pasalubong* in it, so you can take more to the Philippines" (T8). Similarly, Rhea answers, "Obviously, where will you place all those things? It must be in the box. Not all of that can be put in the suitcases ... As I said, that it's on a bigger scale" (T4). Also, a group of women I interviewed at the Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) replies that they use *balikbayan* boxes "mostly because of space." They "could put more things" into them and they are "more flexible, especially for square stuff" (one of their boxes contained a TV set). According to them, these boxes are good because Filipinos tend to "max out" on their allowance of 70 pounds per box (FN2). The fact that these cartons are quite lightweight is a plus, since suitcases take up so much of those precious pounds. As Dulce says, "... the box can contain a lot of things. Whereas if you have the Samsonite or what, these are ... very heavy and you ... hardly could squeeze in anything ... Then the weight would already be only for the luggage itself" (T10).

Balikhayan boxes need to be able to survive the weight of their contents, the distance travelled, and the amount of handling involved. Dulce points out that, “Well, really they have to be shaped that way to be adaptable to loading in the airplane” (T10). The boxes’ flat surfaces do indeed make them easier to stack, and they are actually designed for that purpose. According to Jefferson Smurfit, corrugated containers “withstand top and side pressure; are crush resistant and passes [sic] burst strength test. They are impact, drop and vibration damage-resistant. In addition they can be customised for added protection” (“Paper” 2). The strength of these cartons preserves the integrity of what is inside them. As Rhea indicates,

What’s the purpose? Very obvious . . . To keep intact all the *pasalubong*. Yeah, the purpose of the *balikhayan* box is where you can place all your *pasalubongs* and easier to carry . . . Yeah, ‘cause you just put it in the cart and push it, but it’s heavy if you put heavy things . . . But I guess it’s much, let’s just say, intact, I think that’s the right word, *mas intact siya kung i-sud siya sa balikhayan* box (“it’s more intact if it’s put in a *balikhayan* box”). No, I don’t think so compact *kay bulky man ang balikhayan* box (“because a *balikhayan* box is bulky”). *Kuan lang siya* (“It’s just”) intact, properly placed, ‘cause there’s a box for all the *pasalubong*. (T4)

Testifying to the strength of these containers, the women at LAX declare that the boxes can be “used over and over,” such as on the way back (FN2). Jay also makes a similar claim, “Just to show you how good the box is, people still use it. And you will notice even in the arrivals from the Philippines, they still have the LBC box. They still use the same box coming back” (T12). Though *balikhayan* boxes can be reused,¹⁹ they are also

¹⁹ Though I doubt that most *balikhayans* give any thought to the environmental impact of these boxes, they are highly recyclable. According to Jefferson Smurfit,

“cheap and disposable alternatives to more costly suitcases” (Rafael, “Your Grief” 17). The travellers can leave the boxes in the Philippines if they do not need them for their return trip to the US.

The features I have enumerated above prove that these boxes are suitable for the purposes of *balikbayans*. However, is practicality the only motivation? Nene speculates that “*Mao tinga’i nay gilati didto sa ila nga balaud ba. Kana gyuy gamiton kung sudlan sa ilang mga hutang, sa ilang giputos ba nga padung*” (“Maybe that’s what’s decreed there in their law. That’s what has to be used for putting in their things, of those they’ve packed for going”)” (T6). While there is actually no US law which strictly dictates what kind of luggage travellers can use, I am sure that federal aviation regulations affect the size and weight that airplanes, and consequently passengers, can safely carry. Judy offers a related explanation,

... intended man gyud na para sa balikbayan, kunang balikbayan box. Ang Philippine government nag-lobby para sa mga balikbayan. Mao na ang mga balikbayan gi-encourage to used the balikbayan boxes para siguro maka-save sa taxes.
 (“... that *balikbayan* box is really intended for the *balikbayan*. The Philippine government lobbied for the *balikbayan*. That’s why *balikbayans* are encouraged to use the *balikbayan* boxes so maybe they can save on taxes.”) (E3)

She also expresses on a different occasion, “*Mas maka-lesser sila or . . . gaan sila’g preference sa government anang . . . particular nga box. Naa sila’y kanang privilege. Tingali’g tax-exempt*” (“They can pay lesser or . . . they are given a preference by the

“corrugated containers . . . consistently lead the pack when it comes to recovery: in the US, over 70% of corrugated containers are recycled” (“Paper” 2).

government on that particular box. They have a kind of privilege. Maybe it's tax-exempt")" (T5). Though I doubt that the Philippine government established the *balikbayan* box custom by lobbying that those specific containers be utilized, it did help to popularize the practice when it began, as Judy says, to give preferences or tax exemptions on them.

However, the continued usage of *balikbayan* boxes can most likely be credited not only to its convenience, but also because it has become customary. Rhea explains:

But obviously they should bring balikbayan boxes 'cause trait na man sa Pinoy²⁰ nga magda gyud ug pasalubong. Unya asa man nila isud ang ilang pasalubong? Di sa box gyud. M'unang magda sila 'g balikbayan box. Pero, as akong gisulti nimo sa una, wa pa siguroy word nga balikbayan box . . . Pasalubong gyud siguroy permiro kay common man na siya nga word, pasalubong.

("But obviously, they should bring *balikbayan* boxes 'cause that is already a trait of a Filipino that they should bring *pasalubong*. And where are they gonna put their *pasalubong*? In the box, of course. That's why they bring *balikbayan* box. But, as I told you before, there was probably no word *balikbayan* box. *Pasalubong* probably came first because that's a common word, *pasalubong*." (T4)

Madrona concurs:

I don't know. It's just . . . like a tradition already that we have to bring back something, you know. But I'm thinking, next time, always promise that next time, just my clothes, that's it. Then I find out that packing and packing and packing, it's crazy, especially the boxes. . . . If possible, I don't want to travel anymore with boxes. Honestly . . . That's why I have those . . . bags, suitcases. It's more handy. But most Filipinos . . . have the big boxes . . . (T1)

²⁰ This term was coined by Filipinos who lived in the US prior to World War II, who used it to refer to themselves. The term is now used to refer to any Filipino. This is not to say that **all** Filipinos refer to themselves by this term, but everyone does know what it means.

For most *balikbayans* then, these boxes have become a component of the Filipino custom of bringing *pasalubong*. Their homecoming would probably not be the same if they did not have these containers full of gifts. Though some *balikbayans* might vow, as Madrona does, not to bother with them anymore, most inevitably still end up doing so.

What's in the Box?

Balikbayan boxes would be nothing but empty containers without their contents. The *pasalubong* usually contained in them are integral elements of these boxes. As the anonymous author(s) of "100 Things" write(s), "The most wonderful part is that, more often than not, the contents are carted home to be distributed" (3). When I asked what *balikbayans* put in their boxes, Rex immediately answered "corned beef" (V1). That is the first thing that came to Alicia's mind, as well: "What do I think? Corned beef.

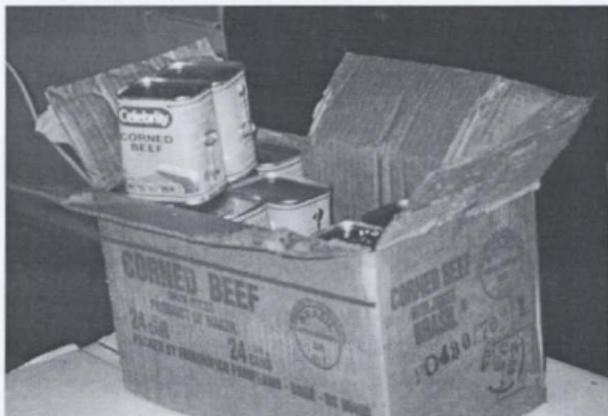


Figure 3.5 Box of corned beef for Madrona's *balikbayan* box

Because most people I know send corned beef” (T7). Madrona certainly brings “. . . canned goods, corned beef, a lot of corned beef . . . Because there, it’s expensive. I have a whole box of corned beef . . . [brings box of corned beef and starts opening it] . . . I bought three boxes of corned beef like this, the two there and one for this one” (V1) (see Figure 3.5). In addition to corned beef, *balikbayans* bring assorted canned goods, including “spam [*sic*], sausages, etc.” (W1) and “Star-Kist tuna” (V1) (see Figure 3.6).



Figure 3.6 Basket of canned goods, also for Madrona’s box

Aside from canned food whose weight can quickly add up, chocolates make popular, and much lighter, *pasalubong* (see Figure 3.7). According to Rhea, she receives

“usually chocolates” (T4). I tend to give chocolates because people in the Philippines love them and the good kinds are expensive there. They make elegant gifts, as well, especially when they are in boxes. Important for *balikbayans* like me who are on a budget, they can also be economical because you can give one box to a whole family,



Figure 3.7 Boxes of chocolate for *pasalubong*

rather than giving each member something, or you can give a bar or two to individuals. My brother, Allan, also chooses chocolates because “*Wa may lain mahuna-hunaang dad-on. Barato man*” (“Can’t think of anything else to bring. It’s cheap”) (T2). Candies also make inexpensive presents. The group of women at LAX had candies in their boxes (FN2). So did Joseph, an 18-year old tourist I also interviewed at LAX, who was

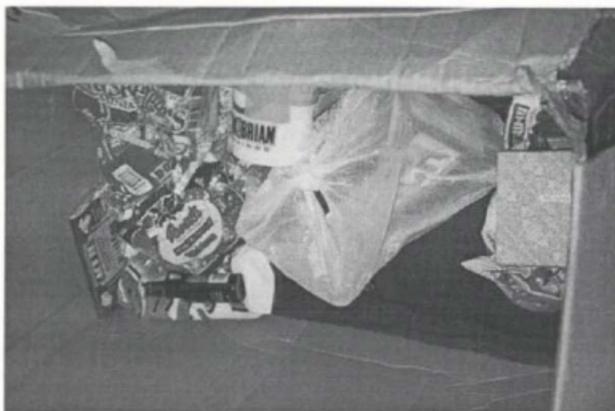


Figure 3.8 Chocolates and candies my aunt brought for *pasalubong*

returning to the Philippines after a two-week visit to the US (FN3). My aunts bring candy, too, including leftovers from Halloween, Easter, and other holidays (see Figure 3.8).

Balikbayans also take other kinds of snackfoods to the Philippines. In her boxes, Madrona brings “raisins, prunes” (V1). She also carries “potato chips, too, because my mom loves potato chips. I brought home, especially Pringles, it has to be Pringles. And . . . the meat jerkies, beef jerkies” (T1). Gayle is Allan’s 34-year old wife, who works as a dental assistant. Petitioned by her father, she came to the US in 1983 with her family, but she went back to the Philippines three times (until 1987) to finish her college education (P11). Her fourth visit was with us in 1998, and she, too, brought Pringles then. When Gayle and her US-born 5-year old daughter, Annie, were preparing to send a *balikbayan* box to Allan’s relatives, they had:

A: Chocolates.

G: There's some chocolates. What else? What are these?

A: Coffee.

G: Chocolate milk.

A&G: Cookies

.....

G: There's some soup, but it's in the car. Soup, noodles soup. And there's some more cookies here. (V2)

Though, in the above exchange, Annie mistook chocolate milk for coffee, Gayle and Allan have actually taken coffee to the Philippines. This is not that uncommon.

According to Madrona, "I also bring home coffee like Taster's Choice" (W1), as well as cream (T1). When my mother and aunts went home for my grandmother's funeral, they, too, had coffee, sugar packets, and stirrers. In addition, they brought snackables, such as big bags of potato chips and cheeseballs, tinned cookies, chocolates, and candies. They also had ham, bacon, and cheese for sandwiches, as well as paper and plastic goods—plates, napkins, forks and spoons, etc.—that mourners could use. One of my aunts also brought frozen ravioli a year later, when we were observing the one-year anniversary²¹ of my grandmother's death. During one of my lengthy stays in the Philippines, my mother sent me, via my cousin, some ham, bacon, and chicken nuggets (Figure 3.9). Clearly, *balikbayans* bring all sorts of food products to the Philippines. They might even transport something as basic as rice. Based on his forwarding business experience, Michael points out,

²¹ This is how the Catholics in the Philippines mark a person's passing: beginning on the day a person dies, a novena (nine days of prayers or services) is held; then just before the 40th day after the death, another novena is held, with the last day falling on the 40th day. A year later, a novena is held, culminating on the anniversary of the person's death.

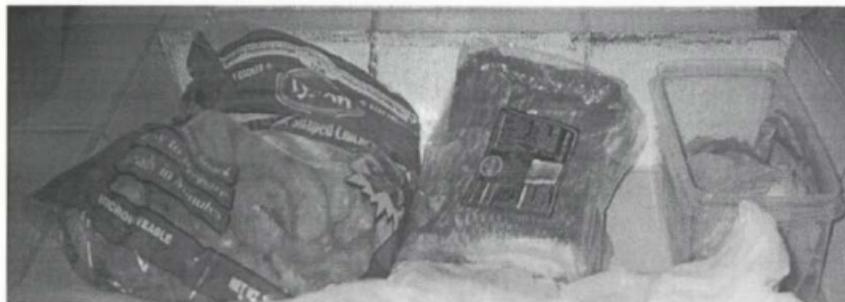


Figure 3.9 Chicken nuggets, bacon, and ham sent to me by my mother

... the *balikbayan* box is also a means of, you know, giving ... support to the families via the way of food. You'll be surprised to find rice ... Especially for the indigent families in the Philippines, those ... who aren't really well-off, the families here send foodstuffs—canned goods, whatever, clothes, school supplies. Because sometimes they would rather send material things in boxes instead of sending money. 'Cause if you send money, the tendency is to spend it on something else. (T12)

However, while sent *balikbayan* boxes might contain staples, those that are brought by visitors are more likely to have luxury food items.

Besides food, *balikbayan* boxes contain clothing. T-shirts are especially prevalent (see Figure 3.10). According to Rhea, "... the most common, wherein I think it's the easiest to bring, are T-shirts, the clothing ones. Perfumes, like that ..." (T4). Allan epitomizes this preponderance: "Inside the boxes, we took four dozens of T-shirts, printed T-shirts" (T2). Monty is a 33-year old man I also interviewed at LAX. He immigrated to the United States twenty years ago and was returning to the Philippines for the second time when I spoke with him. He also had some "California shirts, 'Made in the USA'" in his boxes (FN1).

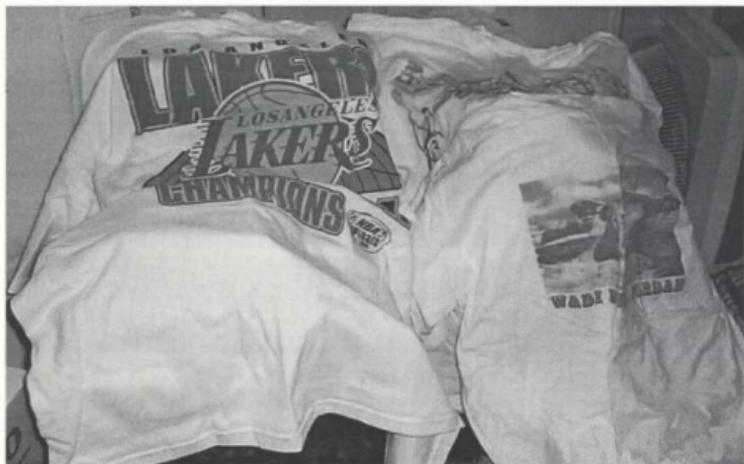


Figure 3.10 T-shirts for *pasalubong*



Figure 3.11 Shoes my aunt brought for *pasalubong*

Balikhayan boxes also hold other kinds of clothing and accessories (see Figures 3.11 and 3.13). Dulce brings, “Clothings, shoes—bags. New and used stuff at the same time” (T10). My relatives in the Philippines often ask for similar things, and we usually accommodate them. My sister-in-law, Judy, usually wants bags and shoes, though she specifies that they do not have to be brand-new. My cousins all wanted shoes and my aunt bought them some. My uncle, who is an executive, usually receives shirts and ties. We have also given sunglasses and watches to my brother, other relatives, and friends. Madrona differentiates between the quality of her gifts: she brings “watches—cheap watches, expensive watches for special people [*laughs*]” (V1). And I believe most *balikhayans* do the same.

Many times, *balikhayans* take used things (see Figure 3.12). Gayle packs “... some clothes, old clothes. And purse. And new clothes. And new shoes. Some old jeans, whoever it would fit. . . . It’s filled with old clothes—you know, it’s not old, old clothes. Worn summer clothes that doesn’t fit. So we’re sending it over. *Sayang* (“It would be a waste”)” (V2). Alicia also brings “Some old stuff, some clothes which we no longer wear, shoes. Whoever wants them. Some of those we give to poor relations. Oh yeah, anything coming from America. Poor relations, so they can’t afford to get stuff, so they like it. Even my sister-in-law, who’s an executive secretary, she wears my hand-me-downs” (T3). Madrona continues, “I also bring home a lot of used clothes from my children to fill up about three *balikhayan* boxes” (T1). When her children or sisters are cleaning out their closets, they give her the things they no longer want. Madrona usually has stock on hand for whenever she goes home or sends *balikhayan* boxes. She has:

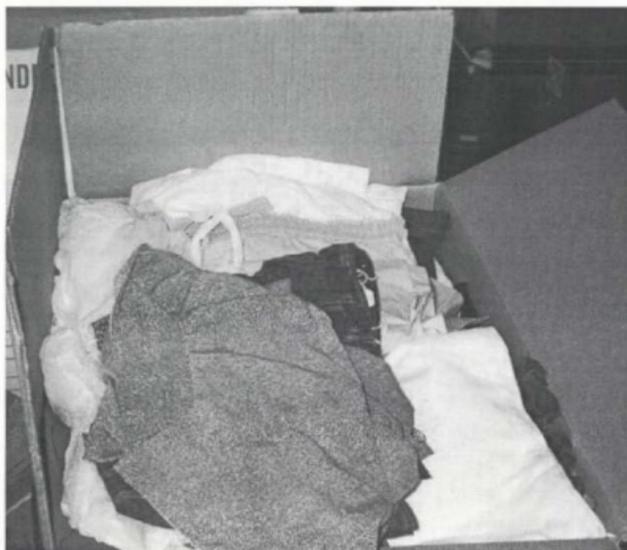


Figure 3.12 Used clothing in Madrona's box

Used toys, used clothes, used pants, used jackets. Like when Alma [her younger daughter] was the princess²² and had those gowns and Vicky [her older daughter]. All those gowns we don't use anymore. They said, 'Send them here, Auntie, and we can rent.' So I sent them in a box and they're renting. Bridesmaid's dresses. They rent them. To buy one is expensive. So I packed that, that was last year. I still have a lot again My sister, Lambert, says 'I have a lot here.' I said, 'why don't you send them?' It's too expensive to send a box, too. It's ninety dollars one box. . . . But the

²² Beauty pageants are very prevalent amongst Filipinos, even those residing in other countries. In the Philippines, each community will hold one or more beauty pageants (for young women, little girls, matrons, and/or gay men) for their *fiesta* or feast day. Most of the time, the winners are based on how much money they have raised. In the US, Filipino American organizations, also hold similar pageants. Madrona is very active in an organization for people from Urdaneta, Pangasinan, Philippines. Alma and Vicky were princesses in past pageants. The group also holds formal functions throughout the year. The gowns worn on these occasions were also included in the box.

men, the boys, they like the caps, baseball caps. I even have policeman caps sometimes, they like them, too. I've brought many of those. They can't afford them, plus the materials here is really very good for those caps, the material here is soft. Stuffed animals, too, because Alma had a lot. (T1)

Madrona also has "ballpens, crayons for the kids" (T1). Now that my cousins and friends have children, I also bring new books and used toys and clothes from my nieces and nephews over here.

Balikbayans obviously have use for both new and used objects, especially clothes, accessories, and toys (Figures 3.13 and 3.14). However, new goods are bought specifically for close family and friends, while old things can be for anyone. And, there is a kind of hierarchy of who gets to choose first. When I was preparing for one of my trips, for instance, I asked my sister if she had anything she no longer wanted. In response, she gave me a boxful of items. Before these got packed, we (the ones who were in LA) got first pick. I claimed some shorts, while my mother took a Victoria's Secret lotion set and my aunt two pairs of shoes. When the items reached the Philippines, family members and close friends then selected what they wanted before the remainder was passed on to more distant relatives, helpers, neighbors, and others. Often, many of these used objects are not too worn, as Gayle points out; they have just been used before. This would be the reason why someone like Alicia's sister-in-law, who is actually well-off, would be wearing her "hand-me-downs," usually blazers and work clothes. The used children's clothes and toys are almost new, as the children here get many of them as presents and they quickly outgrow them. Items that are more shabby-looking or unfashionable tend to go to the people who are at the bottom of the *balikbayan's* list. Objects that are more

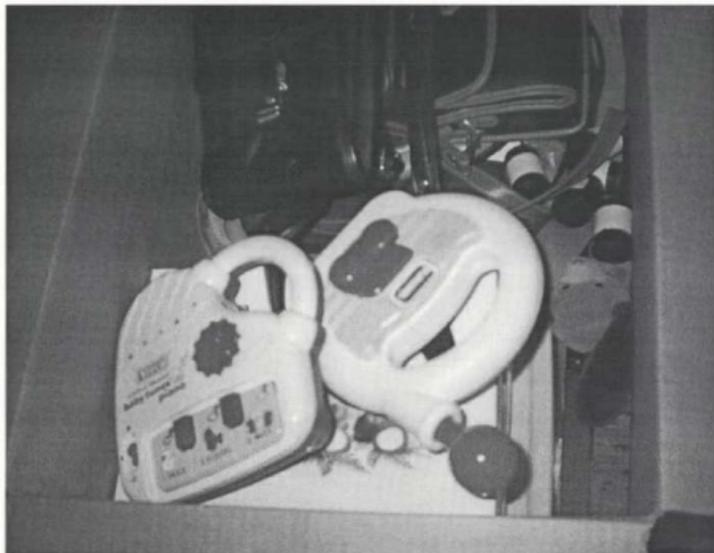


Figure 3.13 Used toys and bags in my *balikbayan* box

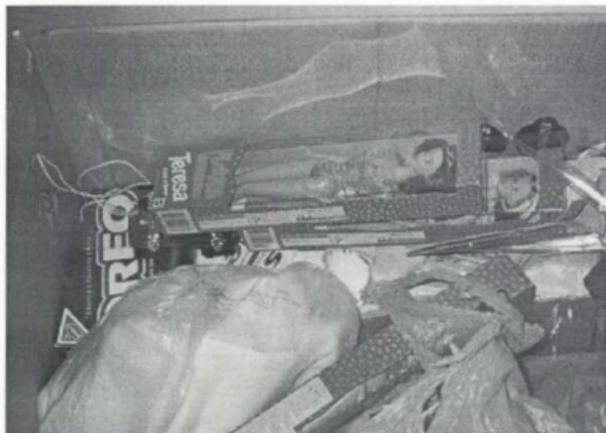


Figure 3.14 New dolls in my aunt's *balikbayan* box

extraordinary, such as Madrona's and her daughters' gowns, are put towards more creative and profitable use.

Sometimes, *balikbayans* take home appliances and electronic gadgets. According to Dulce, "If you don't have appliances, you can bring appliance, but I never did bring an appliance" (T10). Alicia admits that the "First time I went there, I brought a TV because Joey [her son] had no TV" (T3). Rex also discloses, "I brought a VCR one time" (V1). Madrona agrees, "Yeah, VCR, too. And radios" (V1). When my cousin went home, she also brought a VCR, as well as a Nintendo game console (see Figure 3.15). Rhea explains why:

Most of the case, they bring appliances. The radio, the cassette, . . . the VHS, component . . . Because as what I know, I think I read that somewhere, I forgot already, that *balikbayans* are free of tax when they



Figure 3.15 VCR and Nintendo console brought by my cousin

bring electronics. . . . *Balikbayans* only, ha, not vacationers only, it's different. But people who are limited. . . . *balikbayans* who doesn't want to pay over. . . . *pagma-overload, over na ang imong limit sa imong madala, so ang tendency nila, they don't bring na lang, they just buy it here* ("if it's overloaded, if you're over your limit of what you can bring, their tendency is they don't bring it, they just buy it here"). So they will bring their money here, which is much cheaper, I guess. . . . Yeah, they don't pay taxes. Taxes are expensive, yes. And when you buy appliances, it's with tax, so it's add-on. (T4)

According to the Bureau of Customs, *balikbayans* are exempt from duties and taxes for goods up to P10,000 (≈\$250). Technically, appliances fall under this category only if they are used (2). However, Customs officials are quite lax when dealing with *balikbayans* and most go through without having to declare anything. And, as Rhea mentions, they can also buy them at duty-free shops, where they can spend up to \$2000 within 48 hours after arrival. However, *balikbayans* do not only bring brand new gadgets; they also take used ones. The last time I went back, we dismantled my brother's computer tower and I brought the components (other than the case and power source), as well as an external modem, to the Philippines. My family had done the same thing a few years before. My brother in the Philippines finds the cases, monitors, and other accessories to go with them. My brother-in-law also sent him numerous programs and games on CD-ROM. According to Madrona, she sometimes takes "cameras, old cameras, even though they're not [working]" (V1). It is up to the people there to see if they can fix them. In addition, people may give videotapes and compact discs. Rex replies that *balikbayans* have "Videotapes. Videotapes of everyone out here" (V1). They also give regular videos, as my aunt does. On occasion, I have brought my friends videos and CDs that are not available in the Philippines.

Cosmetic and toiletry items can also be found frequently in *balikbayan* boxes (see Figure 3.16). According to Madrona,

Lot of stuff that you can take home, bring home. Soap, and they want Dial, Jergens. They don't like, know Lever. They don't know that and the Tone and the Coast. They want Dial, Jergens, Cashmere Bouquet [laughs] . . . Dove. Ivory. You know I brought home Ivory one time and I gave to Onofre's brother. He said, 'Why do you bring this kind of soap? It has no smell' [laughs]. Ivory, that's the best. Amor [Gil's nickname] used to [points to skin]. That's why we buy the unscented Dove because the scent makes you have . . . allergies. (T1)



Figure 3.16 Cosmetics and toiletries for *pasalubong*

Madrona, Dulce, and Joseph give perfumes, too. As do I. I also bring shampoos and lotions, usually from my sister's and mother's stocks. When Alicia was still living in the

Philippines, she “usually got perfumes and soaps and cosmetics” (T3). Now, when she goes back, she packs those, too. According to Isabel,

I: I always get make-up and perfume—

RJ: Samples

I: And chocolate.

R: Samples from May Co.

I: Yeah, samples [laughs] from Clinique [laughs]. (T8)

It is not uncommon for *balikbayans* to carry samples in their boxes. These might include miniature perfume vials and lotions that come free with cosmetic purchases. They might be complimentary soaps, shampoos, and conditioners from hotel rooms. When my grandmother used to work for a hotel, she kept a supply. Gayle, who works for a dentist’s office, also sometimes contribute free toothbrushes and travel-size toothpastes.

Also, *balikbayans* transport linens and similar products. Madrona declares, “Oh, towels, too. They like towels and especially bedsheets. . . . But they want the matching kind, too, with the pillows” (T1). Alicia admits receiving “towels, too, and bedsheets” (T3). Now, she sometimes sends along new and used bedsheets and towels. When my entire family went to the Philippines, we brought plenty of towels. We gave away some of them, while we used the others during our stay and left them afterwards. We even had toilet papers, mostly for our personal use, though some were given away.

In addition to all that I have mentioned, *balikbayans* bring various other *pasalubong*. Joseph had tequila in his box (FN3), while we brought some champagne for my brother’s wedding. Allan gave our brother and uncle some liquor and cigarettes, though he purchased these duty-free on the airplane. On the opposite pole, Madrona takes “Vitamins also, . . . the multivitamins. Because some are skinny and sickly, so they

ask for [laughs] vitamin” (T1). My cousin also brings vitamins, though her brother might have used some of that to feed roosters groomed for cockfighting. My aunt has also sent miscellaneous medicinal pills. Other presents include: textiles (Alicia, me), basketballs (Allan), new photo albums (Joseph, me), and journals (me). I have enumerated some of the most common contents of *balikbayan* boxes, but I am sure that they hold other kinds of commodities.

Conclusion

The invented word, *balikbayan*, has evolved from being the name of a tourism promotion to a term designating the people who visit the Philippines under this very program. These days, very few people know about the 1973 DOT campaign, but almost everyone will define a *balikbayan* as a returning Filipino. Originally, the term primarily referred to American immigrants who come to the Philippines temporarily. Today, it has expanded to include Filipino immigrants to other countries, as well as overseas contract workers. While the majority of *balikbayans* are visitors, the name could also include those who have come back permanently after extended residence (and, sometimes, changed citizenship) abroad. Based on the people I interviewed, older *balikbayans* or those who maintain intimate ties with family and friends in the Philippines seem to go back more frequently. The locals perceive *balikbayans* as wealthy and, consequently, accord them a higher status. This belief is difficult to shake off, however much the visitors try to contradict it. Though *balikbayans* are still mainly Filipinos at heart, they have acquired behaviors which are foreign and, thus, distinguish them from the locals.

The most discernible trait of *balikbayans* is that they usually bring with them boxes filled with *pasalubong*. Aptly named *balikbayan* boxes, these are corrugated containers, which conform to airline requirements for baggage. In the early days, returning Filipinos used discarded boxes but, in the 1980s, standardized *balikbayan* boxes began to surface. Soon, these containers also began to be used for door-to-door shipping of imported goods, without the accompanying visit. *Balikbayan* boxes are not extraordinary in appearance. They are large and spacious, lightweight but sturdy, cheap, reusable and disposable. *Balikbayan* boxes refer to the cartons themselves but also to what is inside them. Returning Filipinos bring a wide variety of commodities. They include: foodstuff, such as canned goods, chocolates, candies, potato chips, and coffee; clothes and accessories, including T-shirts, pants, shoes, bags, and watches; toys and school supplies; electronics; cosmetics and toiletries; linens; alcohol and cigarettes; and many more. These objects can either be new or used.

In this chapter, I have provided an introduction to *balikbayans* and *balikbayan* boxes, from my perspective, as well as those of other *balikbayans*, locals, and vendors. I have established the ubiquity of *balikbayans* and the universality of the custom of bringing *balikbayan* boxes. I have shown that *balikbayans* and *balikbayan* boxes are interconnected, that these boxes are essential—almost necessary—components of the *balikbayan* tradition of homecoming and gift-giving. As long as Filipinos migrate to other countries, then there will always be balikbayans yearning to return to their country. And, as long as *balikbayans* continue to go home, then there will always be the accompanying boxes full of goodies. In the following chapter, I proceed with my

examination of *balikbayans* and *balikbayan* boxes by providing a step-by-step account of the *balikbayan* box process. This discussion continues to demonstrate the connection between *balikbayans* and their boxes, by showcasing the personal care that goes into these boxes.

CHAPTER FOUR

Box Seats: The Performance of the *Balikbayan* Box Custom

The Filipino American practice of bringing home *balikbayan* boxes has become a popular tradition. The participants in the custom do not necessarily think about the activities involved; they perform them automatically, even somewhat mechanically. Instead, they focus on the contents of the boxes. However, these boxes do not become full by themselves nor do they transport themselves to their intended destination. Rather, there is a natural—and logical—process that accompanies the practice.

Dan Ben-Amos's statement that "[t]he meaning of a text is its meaning in context" (210) applies to material culture as well as other "texts." Therefore, in this chapter, I describe the events surrounding the *balikbayan* box. I detail the preparations involved, beginning with the decision to go home and the purchasing and packing of goods, proceeding with the transportation of the boxes, and finishing with the climactic acts of unpacking and distribution of gifts. I also refer to cultural reciprocity, as evidenced by the counter process of *padala* or send-off gifts. In addition, I look at the various roles of the participants, including the fundamental role played by women. As with the preceding chapter, I quote extensively from my interviews with *balikbayans* and locals, in order to highlight their particular, yet typical, experiences. In this section, I continue to demonstrate the connection between *balikbayans* and *balikbayan* boxes, this time vis-à-vis the performance of the custom. In many ways, the tremendous personal effort and care that go into these packages (or the lack thereof) reflect the *balikbayans'*

own sense of affection or obligation towards their recipients.

Behind the Scenes: Preparing the *Balibayan* Boxes

The tradition of bringing *balibayan* boxes is a part of the greater homecoming experience for Filipino Americans. It involves a chain of events which can be quite systematic. The sequence usually begins with the decision to go back to the Philippines. There are several reasons for returning. Alicia enumerates some of them:

Oh, different reasons. I first went back because my Auntie died. My mom had to go home, and she had nobody to accompany her. And then the next time, mom was celebrating her 75th birthday and we [she and her sisters] all went home to celebrate it with her. And then, the next, I don't know, just a visit. And then, for the funeral [her mother's]. Then, the last time, the kids want to go home, so I went with them. (T7)

Madrona has also returned to the Philippines for different reasons; she first went home due to homesickness and followed that with a family visit (T1). In recent years, she has gone back because of family emergencies and deaths (T1, W1). She explains, "Now, every year, I go home because of my mom [who was ill at the time of the interview and has since passed away]. So, because I already retired, I could go home. My other brothers and sisters still work" (T1). Illnesses and deaths in the family are universal reasons for *balibayan* trips. According to Lambert, "the last time we went was because my brother died" (T11). Recently, two of my cousins visited their respective fathers, who were both sick. However, happy occasions, especially weddings, can also be the motivation. When my brother got married a couple of years ago, we all went home to celebrate with him and his new wife. When I was younger and still living in the Philippines, I remember my grandmother and aunt coming back for my uncle's wedding.

I also recall some relatives returning for their parents' 50th wedding anniversary.

Sometimes, there is no specific event which requires a homecoming. *Balikbayans* frequently come back, as Harlika does, "to pay a visit to our parents or friends, our relatives, brothers and sisters, loved ones" (T1). Or, according to Gil, "I just want to be a tourist, see I'm more of a tourist than a returning [person?]" (T11). Having immigrated to the United States when he was still a baby, Gil does not have the same emotional attachments in the Philippines as his parents or other older relatives do. The first time he visited, he was barely a teenager and he was with his entire family. Like many Filipino American children who either grew up or were born in the US, his parents wanted to introduce him to his culture. In the same way, my aunt also brought my half-Caucasian cousins to the Philippines. Melissa Macagba Ignacio had a similar experience as Gil and my cousins, though hers happened a few years earlier and was more prolonged. She spent about a year in the Philippines, which she later chronicled in her book, The Philippines: Roots of My Heritage (A Journey of Discovery by a Pilipino American Teenager). However, as these youngsters grow older, they often develop their own desire to discover their heritage. Growing up in a predominantly African American community, Gil was a little confused about his ethnicity. It was not until he went to college and joined the Filipino organization on campus that he became more knowledgeable about his background. Returning to the Philippines was the next logical step and, in 1994, he travelled there with his wife:

G: I went to look for my roots [laughter].

Lambert: What did you find?

G: Mosquitoes [laughter]. And I found the bamboo bed I was born on

[*more laughter*].

L: Oh, you did, you saw it? Oh! Omigosh, you saw it?

Harlika: That's fun.

.....
G: Most of the people go back, if they're like me and they grew up here. They're almost looking for some sort of a connection to the place they were born in. Either they become disillusioned—

L: Gilmore, you were born there? You were not born here?

G: No. Starting two over there. Then they just find out that

H: He was just like Patrick [Gil's son].

G: Then they're like. 'Oh man. I don't wanna live here' [*laughter*]. (T11)

Some of these young Filipino Americans end up staying for long periods of time, while others only visit briefly. While they appreciate the beauty of the countryside, the friendliness of the people, the low cost of living, and other such positive traits, most, like Gil, would not want to live in the Philippines permanently. For most, differences in the two nations, particularly in the political system and the quality of living, weigh heavily in the United States' favor.

Balibayans, then, go back to the Philippines for a variety of reasons, ranging from family obligations and friendly visits to pleasure-seeking vacations and cultural discovery. Once the decision has been made to return, people usually buy their airplane tickets. The airline of choice for many of the *balibayans* I interviewed is the national carrier, Philippine Airlines (PAL). This is understandable because, from its inception around World War II until about 1980, PAL had a virtual monopoly on air travel in the Philippines (Daisy E5; "PAL History"; Richter 73-74). According to Richter, it officially "became the sole carrier in the Philippines" in January 1974, though the government approved the liberalization of air policy and the entry of foreign carriers by 1977 (73). Thus, it has only been in the last two decades that the skies have slowly opened up and

foreign carriers have made regular flights to the Philippines. In addition, according to my friend, Daisy, who had been a travel agent up until recently, PAL also faced competition for domestic routes beginning in the late 1980s (E5).

Other airlines that fly to the Philippines from the United States include: Asiana, Cathay Pacific, Korean, Thai, and United, and *balikbayans* may patronize them, especially if they offer better deals or services. However, despite the competition, PAL maintains the upper edge. Alicia admits, "I've been flying Philippine Airlines since. Because other airlines have stopover in other countries, so you lose hours" (T7). On other carriers, passengers usually have to change planes at certain depots, such as Bangkok for Thai Airways and Hong Kong for Cathay Pacific. Like Alicia, many travellers dislike the inconvenience of having to change planes and the hours wasted, especially since the flight itself from the US is already so lengthy. PAL, on the other hand, has direct flights from San Francisco (daily) and Los Angeles (ten times a week) ("Manila"). PAL also has preferential access to the brand-new Centennial Terminal 2 at the Ninoy Aquino International Airport (NAIA) in Manila ("Milestones"), which allows for quicker Customs clearance and easier connections to PAL domestic flights.

Some Filipino Americans begin acquiring possible presents even before they have confirmed homecoming plans. There are those who invariably have new and used commodities on hand to bring or send to the Philippines. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Madrona has become the terminal of sorts for any of her children's and siblings' unwanted belongings (T1, V1). She puts these aside until she is ready to send or bring home some *balikbayan* boxes, at which point she may go out and buy other things. Often

though. Madrona also has new objects on hand, such as canned goods and other items she may have bought on sale (V1). Just before I last went to the Philippines, for instance, she dipped into her supply and unexpectedly gave me two brand name purses for myself and a friend. Then, there are others, like Lambert and my aunt, who like to shop and end up amassing both useful articles and knickknacks. They, too, have stocks ready for future gift-giving.

Most of the people I interviewed, though, turn their attention to their *pasalubong* or gifts only once travel arrangements are in place. They may begin to inform family members of their impending journey and ask them to prepare anything they might want to send along. These relatives will often rummage through their closets and/or go shopping. So do the *balikbayans*. However, since they are usually responsible for filling up their boxes, the prospective travellers are more likely to go on a buying spree than those who are not going to the Philippines. According to Lambert and Harlika, hard work and planning go into the purchase of their *pasalubong*:

- L: When you have money [you begin to purchase] [*laughs*]. When you have to work overtime, work 16 hours so you can—
 H: Maybe we start like two months or one month before—
 L: Three months before, when you know you're going home already.
 H: And there's a sale.
 L: You go to the swap meet, you go to Robinsons-May 15-hour sale [*laughs*]. (T11)

For their older sister, Dulce, gift shopping also begins as early as possible:

As far back as—because you have to accumulate, because you could hardly find time, especially in my case now. I take care of the children and my daughter doesn't have time. She works full-time, she's a physician by

the way, *Manang*¹ Rhoda. And so, she could hardly find time to accompany us, although she finds pleasure in bringing us to the mall. So we do it not one at a time . . . Yeah, you have to have the stock . . . then you probably accumulate them until you start packing. (T10)

I am like Dulce, in that, once I know I am going to the Philippines, I take whatever opportunity I have to make my purchases. However, I do not necessarily buy things right away; I keep an eye out for possible gifts and bargains. As the departure date comes closer, I will get more serious about my shopping. I will even begin to request rides to Marshall's, Target, K-Mart, and other such discount places. My mother, on the other hand, prefers to acquire her gifts closer to her travel time. "Oh, I buy it a few days before I leave. But some people, I know of some people who buy it all year round and stock it until somebody goes home or until they are ready to send a box" (T7).

Oftentimes, *balikbayans* get special requests from relatives and friends in the Philippines. "Oh, they order sometimes, they write ahead," according to Madrona (T1). Lambert concurs, "They write you, they call you, they tell somebody. Like Rick, when he comes over, they're gonna say, 'Uncle Rick, tell our Aunties to send us dolls' or something like that" (T11). In Alicia's experience, "they write, they call. When they know that somebody's going home, they call and say 'send me this, send me this.' Or people from the US call them and ask what they want" (T7). In my family, then, we have some relatives who call us with their orders, though my brother tends to wait for us to ask him. I use e-mail to inquire if my friends would like me to get them something in

¹ Term of respect for an older sister or woman. Used by Ilocanos, like Dulce, and Visayans, like me. The male form is *Manong*, which has been used to refer to early Ilocano immigrants to the US.

particular. This ordering can make gift-shopping simpler for *balikbayans* as they have a list of what they should purchase. As Dulce reveals,

Yeah, they do [order]. Pants—the *maong* (“denim”) pants, the Levi’s, is that 501? And they even give us the specific sizes, too, my children especially, not other people, but my children. Sometimes they write, sometimes they call on the phone, especially I have my grandchildren, you know. ‘Mama, will you please buy me like this?’ especially when school is opening. Air Jordan shoes, like that, and then the T-shirt for the sports people here. Nike, you know. (T10)

Obviously, the requests can be very specific, and they usually include the brand names and sizes. When I was little and our grandmother or aunts in the US asked what we wanted, I remember that we used to make outlines of our feet on paper, cut them out, and send them so that our relatives could buy the perfect-fitting shoes. I do not recall if we specified the brands. Even now, there are probably still some people who do the same thing.

The recipients I talked to admit to ordering certain commodities. For instance, when Alicia was still in living in the Philippines, she “asked for a pressure cooker” from her mother (T3). Judy discloses,

O. Bag [laughs] . . . Ang-ang kay gamitonon man kaayo nako. O, mao ra to. [gi-unsay pagpangayo?] Sa phone. Gipangutana si Joey, uy [laughs], dili ako’y ni-sulti. [diperensiya unsay klase?] Wa, basta bag, unya gikan didto [laughs]. Sa ako, wala may kuan, dili man kaayo ko specific anang brand name, basta gikan lang didto.

(“Yes. Bag [laughs] . . . Because it’s very useful to me. Yes, that’s it. [how did you ask?] Over the phone. Joey [her husband/my brother] was asked [laughs], I’m not the one who said it. [does it make a difference what kind?] No, as long as it’s a bag, and comes from there [laughs]. For me, it doesn’t really matter, I’m not that specific about brand names, as long as it comes from there.”) (T5)

Rhea, in turn, divulges:

Yes! I did, I did . . . I asked somebody to bring me [a] few stuff for my volleyball, and I was able to get it. Most of the case, it's always for my volleyball. . . . [how did you ask?] Naturally, by just saying, 'Can I have this? Can I have that? Can you bring me this? Is it okay?' But it is always an ending statement of 'I'll pay you when you get here' [laughs]. So it's kind of indirect way of asking it. But . . . sometimes also, if I don't really need it, I always ask, 'Can I have a shirt?', like that. It's direct. But if it's something to do with my needs, then I have an ending statement, 'I'll pay you when you get here.' [are you gonna pay?] Sure, why not? . . . I can pay. [why do you say that then?] *Maowaw man ko nga mopalit siya'g daghan para nako, unya kahibaw man kong mahal. So mo'waw man ko, so ing-ana-on nako, 'bayaran tika.' Kay mas nindot man nga gikan sa gawas.* ("I'm embarrassed that the person will buy a lot for me, and then I know that it's expensive. I'm embarrassed, so I do it that way, 'I'll pay you.' Because it's nicer when it's from abroad.") [but you know you're not gonna pay?] Mmm, I'm not sure about that. Maybe that person will let me pay for it . . . But I hope not [laughs]. *Pero, siguro basta indirect way, maka-G naman na ba [smiles]—nga mao diay gusto* ("But, maybe if it's in an indirect way, the person will get it—that that's what's wanted") [laughs]. (T4)

In my experience, when the *balikbayans* are friends, and not family, locals do not want to appear too brazen. So, when queried, they will often only reply with "chocolates." If they respond with anything else, then the requesting may take on the tone of asking a favor, as demonstrated by Rhea, instead of naming the *pasalubong*. For instance, when I e-mailed one of my friends if she wanted me to get her anything from here, she asked me to purchase some CDs that are unavailable in the Philippines, as well as for a particular cosmetic product and said that she will pay me when I get there. I was unable to buy the make-up, but I found most of the CDs. As my money is limited, I did ask her to pay for all but two of the CDs. Some family members might also go this route, especially when their order is too costly. Depending on their closeness with and the financial status of the

balikbayans, these relatives may or may not have to reimburse the purchase(s).

As these *pasalubong* are often not part of the Filipino Americans' regular budget, paying for them can prove to be a challenge. Most *balikbayans* have mastered the money shuffle, especially with the aid of credit cards. As Dulce is a recent immigrant and already retired, she does not have her own means to finance her shopping. According to her, "I don't have the credit card. My daughter has all of those things. Honestly. She [pays]. [cash?] No, no, credit card. By check" (T10). Most travellers, though, have to provide for their own expenses. Alicia uses "card, cash, whatever. Or wherever I buy. If I buy in Chinatown, I pay in cash. If I buy in the garment district, I pay in cash. But if I go to the stores, then I use my card" (T7). Gil, Lambert, and Harlika also use a similar combination:

G: Cash.

H: Cash, some charge.

L: Cash, credit card, some *utang* ("debt, loan") from people. (T11)

Younger *balikbayans* tend to be more prudent in their spending. For example, both Gil and Allan use cash primarily. However, they have such liberty because they do not have as many or close attachments as the older travellers and, thus, do not have to purchase as much. In addition, they are also likely to travel with senior members of their families, particularly their parents, who generally have already taken care of the *pasalubong*. As Gil attests, "I didn't bring anything last time. My mom did" (T11).

While continuing to do their gift-shopping, many travellers will purchase their *balikbayan* boxes. They vary as to when and where they do this. Alicia says she buys them "a week before" (T7). Harlika and Lambert differ in their schedules:

H: You know what? Actually the day before or two days before your flight.

L: That's too late. A month before, for me. (T11)

Dulce, on the other hand, does not worry about buying them: “Oh, the boxes are already there. Already [*laughs*]. Although they're still folded this way [*makes slapping motion, indicating boxes are still flat*]. And then we just have to open when we are ready to pack” (T10). These cartons can be obtained from Filipino stores or forwarding companies (see Figure 4.1). According to Dulce, “Well, [*laughs*] this is [a] commercial



Figure 4.1 Pile of *balikhayan* boxes at one LBC location

... if I have to say. I'm making use of the LBC" (T10). Alicia obtains her cartons “from the Filipino store, but sometimes . . . Forex gives us free boxes . . . When you ask them to pick up a box, they'll give you a box, an empty box in return. Anything, as long as it's

free. If it's free, then the better" (T7). Generally, door-to-door companies, such as BayanBox and LBC, give customers an empty box for every box they send through them (Arlene P1; P15), though some, e.g., Forex and Atlas Shippers, may be persuaded to give a free box or two prior to shipping (P10; P11). In the following exchange can be found the reason why many businesses are hesitant to give out cartons before they are sent:

- Gil: You can just get it at your local Filipino store for how much?
 Lambert: 3 dollars
 Harlika: \$3.99
 L: \$2.50, 3 dollars
 G: Because now it's its own industry.
 L: They don't give you for free anymore. Because I used to get that for free, but then what happens is I'll just use it for storage and I wouldn't send.
 H: We use LBC.
 L: LBC. They have the Forex, too, but I've never tried. (T11)

LBC actually sells its boxes for \$3.50. They have two other sizes: "it's \$2.50, the 18" x 18" x 18". And then the 24" x 12" x 12" is 2 dollars" (Jay T12). Forex's boxes are priced at \$3 each, while REN's are \$3.50 (P19; P20). Travellers can also obtain these cartons at Filipino markets for about \$2-\$3 (Arko P13; Luneta P12; Nanay's P14). Though Dulce and her sisters utilize LBC boxes, some *balikbayans* do not have a preferred brand since, as Isabel expresses, "they're all the same" (T8). My family is included in this group. We usually buy our boxes at Filipino stores, since they have more of a selection.

The arrival of the boxes often signal the beginning of the *balikbayans'* packing. Lambert loads up "slowly" (T11) once she has purchased her boxes. According to Alicia, "maybe, when the box is there, [I] start putting stuff in and then re-arrange them later

[laughs]" (T7). Dulce replies: "Well, like my brother is now leaving, they just finished packing his things. But as far as I'm concerned, I do it . . . maybe a week before" (T10). As Dulce suggests, some may do their packing quickly and at the last minute. Lambert and Harlika expands:

- L: Ricardo [her brother] did it in 3 hours. He packed in 3 hours.
 Jiji: Wow!
 L: He just packed today, tonight in my place.
 J: He went shopping in your place? [laughter]
 H & L: Yeah [laughter].
 L: . . . Didn't give him money anymore 'cause I didn't have any cash.
 Just went shopping over there.
 H: She went shopping for him. (T11)

I am like my mother, Alicia, in that, as soon as I have the boxes, I start throwing things in them. When I am closer to leaving, I start arranging the contents and worrying about the weight. I get very stressed about packing, especially when I am still not finished on the day of my flight.

Like any traveller, *balikbayans* have a certain way of loading their things in their boxes. According to Alicia, "How do I pack it? I don't know. I wrap the breakables in towels or on textiles or whatever. Then put them in the middle, in the center" (T4). Dulce adds, "Yeah, if there's a need to put some padding or cushioning, you have to, especially if you have to buy something that is very delicate. But not for the canned goods . . . You just put the clothings down there for cushioning" (T10). When I pack, I usually place the heavy, but sturdy, objects at the bottom. If I do not have any of those, then I will place clothes or towels as a cushion. Like Alicia, I wrap fragile goods with fabric of some kind and place those in the center. I also tend to put more clothes or soft

things on the sides and the top, so that everything in the middle is padded. Then, I fill any spaces with little or malleable things. However, before I fully stuff my box, I feel how heavy it is. When it is almost full, I will weigh it. But, since the box is so big and the household scale is so small, weighing can be a challenge. I usually put the box on the scale, but often end up not seeing the numbers. If I maneuver the box so I can peek at the numbers, the carton is then mostly resting on the floor and, thus, I do not trust the measurement I get. Eventually, I remember a trick I learned from my aunts: I take about four pieces of canned goods of equal height, put them on the scale, and weigh them. Then I put the box over the tins and subtract the weight of the cans from the final poundage. However, this maneuver can be difficult, especially when I am doing it by myself. One or more of the cans will usually fall on its side or onto the floor. When I get help from my sister or mother (there are often no men around), it is easier to do, but we often get tired after doing it a couple of times. Usually, my box will be over the limit if I fill it to the top. So, I have to take out things from the box and weigh again and so on, until I get the desired weight. Though the limit is 70 pounds, I like my boxes to be around 65 to allow for differences in scales or mistakes in measuring. By the time I have reached the final weight, I have to score the top corners of the boxes and fold in new seams, in order to make a tighter fit and ensure that the contents stay firmly in place (see Figure 4.5).

Balikhayans have their own systems for sealing their boxes and readying them for transportation. According to Dulce,

We use tape, the adhesive, gray tape . . . I think it's about four inches or

three inches wide . . . My daughter just buys the very strong one. Rope? No, no. [mark?] Yeah, we use Pentel pens to do it. [ribbons?] Not on the box. Because we don't have a rope there anyway. Because it could be written, you know, on the box itself. (T10)

Alicia also utilizes

Tape. . . . packing tape. Usually colored ones—to be able to identify which of the many boxes are yours. And then you use a twine to wrap it. What do you call the twine to tie, to wrap it? Twine rope [laughs]. Doesn't matter [what kind of rope]. The *balikbayan* box has a space there—name, sender, address, to, name, address. [what do you use to write?] Marker. Sometimes you put ribbons or any other colored thing to identify it. [when do you finish?] The night before. (T7)

Harlika, Lambert, and Gil also describe how they seal their boxes:

- H: [I use] duct tape.
 L: Packing tape.
 H: Or the packing tape.
 L: And then you tie it with the rope, a figure of 8 or whatever, a square knot.
 L: Oh, you mark it with a Pentel pen, huh?
 H: A marker.
 G: Colored ribbons.
 L: Yeah, some put handkerchiefs or—
 H: Yeah, that's true.
 L: Red flags, I mean the ribbons.
 H: The ribbons.
 G: How about balloons? [laughs]
 H: I did the ribbons last time because I have the same *maleta* ("suitcase") with somebody. (T11)

As for me, I begin taping as soon as I unfold the box (see Figure 4.2). I tape the bottom and the sides, as well as the bottom inside and sides (see Figure 4.3). When I have finished packing (see Figure 4.4), I tape the top. I prefer to use duct tape and plenty of it. I usually layer the edges and crisscross the bottom and top. I write my name and destination address on top and at least two of the sides, using a thick marker or whatever

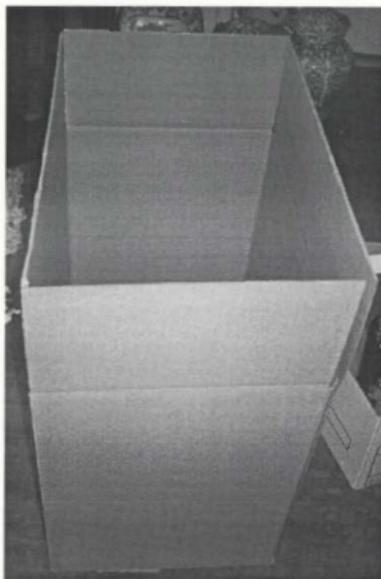


Figure 4.2 Assembled *balikbayan* box

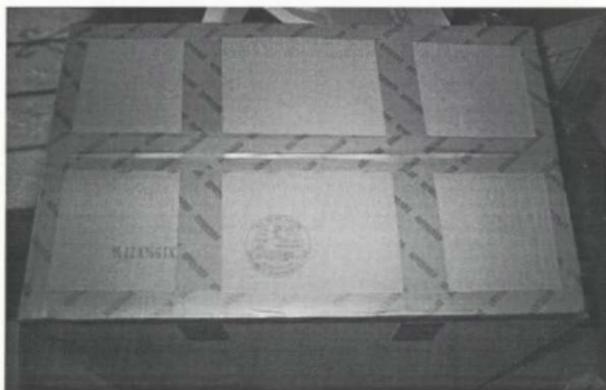


Figure 4.3 Taped *balikbayan* box



Figure 4.4 Full *balikbayan* box

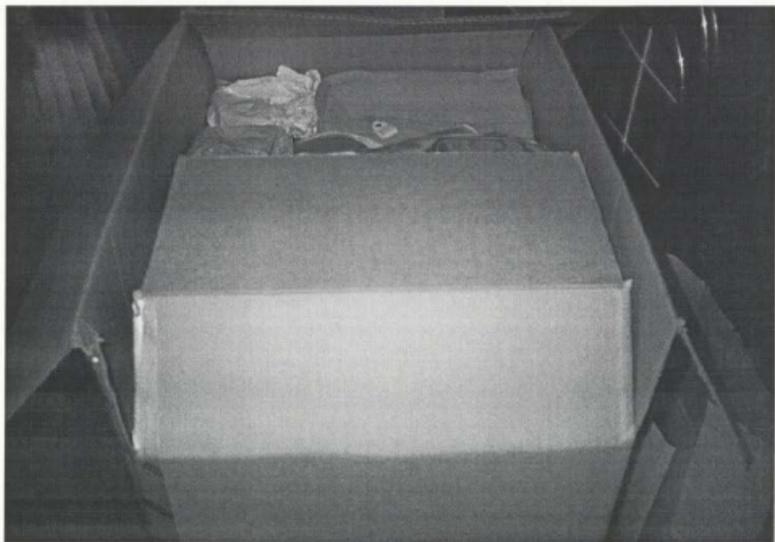


Figure 4.5 Box, with scored corners, for a tighter pack



Figure 4.6 *Balikbayan* boxes ready to go: packed, taped, labelled, and tied with ropes and ribbons

is available. As I do not know how to tie a rope around the box, I have someone else do it—whoever can do it better than I can. I like to use the thick polyurethane ropes; they do not chafe like hemp or other natural ropes. My mother usually provides the colored ribbons (see Figure 4.6). Packaging tapes, ropes, ribbons, and other markings serve several purposes, as pointed out by the women at LAX (FN2). First, they secure the boxes. Second, the ropes make the cartons more manageable for carrying, which is useful since the boxes are heavy and bulky. In addition, all of these tools make the boxes more distinct and recognizable, very helpful when everyone else has the same luggage.

The number of boxes that *balikbayans* transport with them, according to Alicia, “Depends on how much you bring. The airline only allows two pieces of luggage. . . Sometimes, [I] bring only one and I ship the others. Or sometimes, [I] pay for the extra”

(T7). Dulce takes

Not too much. I just had two. . . . Well, we are only allowed . . . two boxes. Otherwise, if we really . . . want so much to bring home, we load them earlier, we ship them earlier before we leave home for the Philippines, just in time for us to be there. But aside from what we have as an accompanied luggage” (T10).

Though some airlines, such as Asiana, China, and Korean, used to allow three pieces of luggage, that is no longer the case. Thus, Rhea is correct in her observation, “Most of the case, what I saw was one person, two boxes” (T4). However, *balikbayans* usually use up their baggage allowance, as the women at LAX point out (FN2). In fact, the tendency is that they go over the limit. In these instances, as both Alicia and Dulce refer to, travellers will often ship the extra packages via the forwarding companies, which is the cheaper way to go (around \$65-\$95 per box, arriving in 1-2 months). If they ship the boxes ahead of time, these could arrive at the same time that they are in the Philippines. However, for those who do not have enough foresight or time, they can also pay the excess baggage fee (about \$150), and those will arrive with them and their other boxes.

If, as Alicia mentioned, a *balikbayan* only has one box, there are often others—relatives or friends—who would be willing to send along another box for their friends and families. This is likely to occur when entire families or a group of people travel together, since they can bring that many more boxes. For example, when my family returned together to the Philippines, Allan went with his wife and two children. They brought “four overseas boxes, two luggages” (T2), but two of those boxes were not theirs. According to him, “*Di man to amo ba. Kuan man to sa parente ni Gayle. Iyang tiya nagpada sa iyang anak*” (“Those weren’t ours. Those were Gayle’s relative’s. Her aunt

was sending it to her child”)” (T2). As there are four people in Allan’s family, they could have checked in up to eight pieces of luggage, which meant that there were two extra spaces. Our mother, Alicia, claimed those spots. She also got two more allowances from me and my younger brother, giving her a total of one suitcase and five boxes for that trip. However, those boxes were not necessarily hers either. She recalls, “Two boxes for wedding gifts. . . . One box for Manila. Si Manny [her friend] *nagpada ug* (“sent along”) one box for Marilyn. Si Mitzi [her niece] *nagpada ug* (“sent along a”) small box for her sister *ug* (“and”) parents. Sometimes if I have space for them, then *magda ko* (“I bring”)” (T3). Alicia received Manny’s and Mitzi’s boxes “already packed” (T7). When there are so many people together, the amount of luggage can reach ridiculous proportions. On this particular journey, for example, Alicia, Allan, and I were accompanied by eight other adults (Gayle, her sister, and her brother-in-law, my sister, my brother), two children (Allan and Gayle’s children), and one infant (my sister’s son). We had nine suitcases and eleven *balikbayan* boxes, plus two strollers and carry-on baggage. The women I interviewed at LAX were escorting a couple and child. At that time, Asiana Airlines allowed three boxes per adult and two per child, so they had a total of eight boxes (see Figure 1.1). When I went home with my three aunts, we had one suitcase, seven boxes, four carry-ons, and a paper bag. One box was from my cousin to her family in the Philippines.

This practice of conveying boxes for others is called *padala* or *pakidala*, which can be roughly translated as “send along.” It is defined by “100 Things” as “a personalized door-to-door remittance and delivery system for overseas Filipino workers

who don't trust the banking system, and who expect a family update from the courier, as well" (31 July 1998:3). The way it works is that *balikbayans* will either ask relatives and friends if they can bring something to the Philippines for them or will be approached and asked if they have room. Dulce illustrates:

Padala? Well, yes, because, sometimes, they phone me if I have something to—like one of my *comadres*² here in Moreno, she had to tell me, ‘*Comadre*, I’m going home to the Philippines. Do you have something for your relatives?’ ‘Do you think you still can accommodate me?’ ‘Okay, go ahead, just anything, give something.’ So, give and take. So when I go home to the Philippines, I have to mention it, too, that I’m going home, like that. (T10)

It is not often that relatives and friends can use up a *balikbayan*'s box allotment, though. More commonly, they can only entrust something smaller. For instance, Isabel has given “usually cosmetics for my mom. You just pack them and bring it to their house” (T8). According to Dulce, her friends send “not very bulky things. Just letters most of the time. Letters with something with it, check [*laughs*]” (T10). Valuables, such as money remittances, are not placed in the boxes, though. As Madrona explains, “. . . I will not put that in the box. I’ll have letters there with money because some friends send letters with money, so I have to take care of them, put them in the hand-carry” (V1). Last time I visited the Philippines, I brought my aunt’s *padala* for my other aunt and cousins. They took up quite a bit of space—four pairs of shoes and a box of medicines—but I was willing to take them since that meant I did not have to buy those people any more

² A Spanish term. This is what you call a female who sponsored your child in a baptism or wedding, and vice-versa. Males are called *compadres*. Mexicans also use these terms.

pasalubong. Isabel also asked me to bring a videocamera to her sister's family: I put that in my backpack. I hand-carried my sister's checks for my brother, as well.

Showtime: The Homecoming

On the day of their departure, *balikbavans* have to convey themselves and their luggage to the airport. Dulce goes "through the van. [who carries boxes?] Well, my children did. Yes, I must be [at the airport] at least two hours before. Even earlier [laughs] because we want to make sure that they are really loaded and [laughs] they won't be left behind or whatever" (T10). Alicia proceeds "by car. [who helps?] Whoever drives. The kids. [early?] Yeah, two hours before . . . [do they stay?] No, no they don't. I wait in line. I think they stay [laughs]. I think they stay" (T7). According to Lambert, Harlika, and Gil:

- L: We drive there.
 H: By car, by van.
 [who carries?]
 L: The men.
 H: The men usually.

 [go early?]
 H: Yeah. Two to three hours—
 G: Three hours.
 L: Three hours before.
 H: Before the flight.
 L: Before the time because we have to weigh them. (T11)

The first time that I went to the Philippines, Allan drove a van with some of the boxes. Gil, my brother-in-law, picked up some of my mother's boxes, while his father, Onofre, transported luggage belonging to my sister and me. My sister and I rode with Gil, and we convoyed with his father. My mother rode with Allan and his family. My younger

brother flew down from Northern California and met up with us at LAX. Allan was very anxious about being there early, so we were there about four hours before our flight. The second time, my aunts hired their friend to take them and our boxes to the airport. My other aunt rode a shuttle, while my friend took me. We all met in line. The last time, Gil dropped me off with my boxes. Whoever takes *balikbayans* to the airport may or may not stay long. Some may accompany them until they have checked in and have gone through security, while others do not.

The first thing *balikbayans* usually do when they arrive at the airport is to load their luggage on rolling carts and stand in line to check in their baggage and obtain their boarding passes. While in line, travellers might do last-minute preparations. For example, when I went with my family, the boxes belonging to my sister and me were not tied, so my brothers secured them with rope while we were in line. We also put airline labels on them at that point. There are often ground personnel directing the flow of traffic of the check-in lines. They may hand out mini-flyers about the luggage restrictions and the penalties. For each group, one person may take care of all the passports and tickets and present them at the counter. Allan fulfilled this role for my family, while one of my aunts did it the second time I returned. The men are usually in charge of the boxes, lifting them from the carts to the scale. As there were no men when I went with my aunts, we dealt with the boxes ourselves. When I went alone, I lifted them myself. In my family, we usually have a snack once we have checked in. As the departure time nears, we go into the restricted area and say goodbye to those escorting us. Once we are on board, we try to make ourselves comfortable for the long flight. PAL's non-stop flights take about

12 to 16 hours from Los Angeles to Manila (“Int’l Flight”); that sometimes includes a refuelling stop in Honolulu. The airlines usually serve two meals during the flight. They also show movies, though most passengers opt to sleep. Before landing in the Philippines, travellers fill out arrival cards, declaration forms, and reconfirmation slips for their return flights.

Planes originating from international ports usually touch down at two Philippine airports: NAIA in Manila and Mactan-Cebu International Airport (MCIA) in Cebu. Davao, in southern Philippines, also has an international airport. Most airlines, though, go through NAIA. As the first stop in their country of destination, this is where they go through the Customs process. According to Dulce, she lands at

The Manila International Airport. . . . We have to go through the process of going through the Customs. They have to open the boxes a little. We have to go to baggage claim area. We ask those porters and we pay them. [Customs open?] They do. The usual thing, just to make sure that it’s really open. Sometimes, they ask you because you have to declare anyway what you have inside there and they would have to find out what really is in there. And then you could go through very easily. Pay anything? There’s the taxable items that you bring home, that I don’t pay any. I’ve never paid any. (T10)

Lambert and Harlika have a different view of the Customs process. They arrive at

L [*laughs*]: Hopefully, Manila International Airport.
[what do you do first?]

L: Yeah, through the baggage claim.

H: Yeah, baggage claim center.

L: Then if somebody’s waiting for you—

H: No, you pay for the guys after that.

L: Oh yeah.

H: They check your suitcase or bag. Then you give them *pasungsong* (“change”).

L: In the passport so they won’t open them. They just slice the rope.
That’s what I did last time. I just put ten dollars in and they slice the

rope.

H: You give them money, then you bribe them, then that's it. They won't open it.

L: They won't open the box anymore. So you have to bring an extra rope.

H: Crook, huh?

Gil: How do you slice the rope?

L: They just slice it, the Customs when they check. . . . So, if you put ten dollars, they just kinda try to pretend to slice. And then you bring your other rope and re-rope it. Otherwise, it's gonna be all over the place.

H: There's a transporter. There's a porter and a transporter guy that they all wait for you. Guys, men that wait for you right there. Then you bribe them, give them ten bucks.

G: You bribe everybody.

H: It's a bribery system. (T11)

From the United States, passengers may bypass Manila and go directly to Cebu only if they transfer in other countries. For example, Cathay Pacific flies to Hong Kong and Malaysia Airlines flies to Kuala Lumpur before connecting to Cebu (Daisy E5). These travellers go through Customs in Cebu. However, PAL has a program called "Cebu Express," in which passengers first arrive in Manila and take a connecting flight to Cebu, but, instead of going through Immigration and Customs in Manila, they do so in Cebu. When they arrive at MCIA, they undergo a similar process as those who land at NAIA.

When passengers from international destinations arrive in Manila or Cebu, the first thing they do is go through Immigration, where they get their passports stamped. The next step is to claim their baggage from the carousels. For *balikbayans*, this portion can be especially hectic, since the flights are usually full and there are so many boxes that look alike. When I went with my family in 1998, we waited about two hours for our luggage. That was probably because we checked in so early, which meant that our boxes

were loaded first, into the deepest recesses of the cargo hold. There are often porters around to help the passengers, or they can manage on their own. After claiming their belongings, travellers have to go through Customs with their declaration forms. Customs officials used to be notoriously corrupt, making it difficult for *balikbayans* to pass through without giving them money or something from their boxes. This is the reason why many travellers automatically hand them some money, so that they will not be detained. The government has been trying to crack down on this, though, and I believe that corruption is not as rampant as in the past. In my experience, it also occurs much less in Cebu than it does in Manila. Those who have stuck to their shady practices do so more discreetly. They no longer ask pointedly, but neither will they refuse any offers. When I returned with my family, Allan gave them \$20. The official told him not to be so obvious and to slip it under the passport. They did open one box, which had been marked with white chalk by security. If Allan had not given him any money, it is likely that the official would still have opened just that one box, as Customs agents generally check only the luggage with marks on them. When I went by myself, I did not bribe the official, and he inspected one of my boxes, which was marked. Thus, some *balikbayans* bring extra tape and rope, in case Customs agents have to look through their baggage.

Balikbayans who arrive in Manila and transfer to domestic flights have to go through extra steps. According to Alicia, "It [the luggage] goes through Customs in Manila. And then you have to get a porter to help you with it, to take you, transport it to the domestic airport. And then you have to check it again. . . . And then you pay . . . something there" (T7). Connecting passengers have to deplane, go through Immigration,

claim their baggage, and go through Customs. Then, they usually take a shuttle from NAIA to the domestic terminals, where they obtain their boarding passes, recheck their luggage, pay a terminal fee, and await their domestic flight. Once in Cebu or other domestic airports, travellers can reclaim their baggage. Before PAL moved its operations to the Centennial Terminal 2, its passengers had to go through this process, as well. The shuttle was free for them, but those from foreign carriers had to pay a fee. Now, PAL's international and domestic flights are in the same vicinity. Except for those who are taking advantage of "Cebu Express," travellers on other carriers or those going to other domestic destinations still have to contend with the more tedious process. However, as other international carriers gain access to NAIA's Centennial Terminal 2, passengers should be able to skip the shuttle ride, though they will probably still go through Immigration and Customs in Manila. This transfer process can get quite expensive, as travellers have to pay the porter(s) at NAIA, at the domestic terminal, and the final destination. Sometimes, these men might even complain if passengers only tip them a dollar or so. This is what happened when I visited with my aunts. They only gave the porter in Cebu a dollar (after paying two other porters in Manila), and the porter grumbled, but I do not think he got more. When I went with my family, my uncle told three porters to split \$20; they were more than happy with that. Fortunately, when I was by myself, I was able to take advantage of the "Cebu Express" program and did not have to bother with porters in Manila. Neither did I have to procure their services in Cebu.

Upon reaching their final destinations in the Philippines, the *balikbayans* I interviewed are commonly welcomed by a group of relatives, who provide them with

transportation. For Alicia, “usually, people, somebody meet. The sisters, the nephews, relatives, and so they take care of everything” (T7). Dulce travels “of course, by vehicle. They come to meet me in the airport. My son comes over with the van, something to transport . . . The car trunk is suitable also for the boxes” (T10). According to Lambert and Harlika,

L: We have a van.

H: Van

L: Or jeep.

H: Or jeepney, you know. We hire jeep or van. (T11).

When I went to the Philippines with my family, we stopped in Manila for a week. To accommodate the eleven of us and all of our luggage, my uncle met us with his car, two company vans, and drivers. When we went to Cebu, my uncle and his family were added to our group, bringing us to a total of fifteen. By that time, though, some of the boxes had been delivered to their various owners. We were met by my aunt and cousins, and our transportation included: another uncle and his 11-seater van, two of my aunt’s nephews and their sport utility vehicles, and two company trucks and drivers. When I returned with my aunts, we were met by the same aunt and cousins and rode a truck and a car. When I went by myself, I was met by my friend and transported in a borrowed car.

When *balikbayans* have too much luggage, logistics can be a problem, especially when they have to traverse additional distances. According to Madrona,

M: But Papa is angry when I carry [boxes]. Even my brother in the Philippines, he doesn’t like it because it doesn’t fit into his car. He says, ‘next time don’t bring any more boxes.’

Rex: No, you get somebody with a jeep.

M: You hire a jeep and its 2,500 [pesos³] from Manila to Pangasinan. And you have to feed them on the way because it's about lunch time when you reach there. Sometimes, when they come to pick me up, they already prepare their food in Pangasinan. (T1)

Though the Philippines has two international airports servicing flights from the United States and from which travellers can connect to local flights, there are few domestic routes outside the bigger cities. This means that many *balikbayans* face a grueling continuation to their already lengthy journey. Those who live in the mountain provinces and other remote areas usually have to face hours of driving over winding, bumpy, and dusty roads. Madrona's hometown of Urdaneta, Pangasinan, for example, is a five to six hour drive from Manila (FN6).⁴ Those who live on islands with no airports have to take a fast ferry, a ship, or a launch, depending on what is available. Some might even have to transfer a couple of times or onto varying modes of transportation.

Once they are in the Philippines, most *balikbayans* stay with their relatives, though there are some who prefer to check in at local hotels. According to Rex, for instance, "I usually stay with my family in Manila, Bacolod, or Iloilo" (E6). Since our house burned down in 1991, my family and I generally stay at my grandmother's house. However, when we visited together, there was not enough room for all of us. So, Allan and his family and in-laws resided at a hotel for two weeks. Upon their arrival, most

³ The peso is the Philippine currency. One peso equals 100 centavos. As I write this, the exchange rate is about P50 to \$1.

⁴ According to Madrona and Onofre, Urdaneta is about 100 kilometers from Manila. It used to take only about three hours to drive from Manila, but the terrible traffic has doubled the road time (FN6).

travellers proceed to their place of lodging, which is often where relatives have gathered and prepared food for them. They usually deposit their boxes and other luggage in the living room, while they mingle with their relatives. Dulce agrees: "Yes! Of course you have to. That's the wider space you could go . . . [what do you do first?]
Accommodation, you know, because they prepare something for you. Eat, have conversations, and all that. We do not actually open the boxes immediately. We rest . . . They allow me to take my rest" (T10). For Alicia, her boxes "stay in the living room [laughs] until they are ready to be opened. [what do you do?] Eat" (T7). According to Gil, Lambert, and Harlika,

G: You have to hide them.

L: Yeah, first . . . 'cause they're gonna start opening. It's in the living room, usually [laughs].
[what do you do?]

H: Oh yeah, we talk.

L: I usually take a shower first and then eat. That's what I do 'cause I feel sticky.

H: We talk and see how everybody's doing, and then start conversing with them. (T11)

In typical Filipino fashion, then, food is commonly the first order of the day, whether or not it is mealtime. *Balikhayans* eat the food that has been prepared and bought for them, usually delicacies reserved for special occasions. At the same time, they talk with their relatives and begin to catch up with the news. Afterwards, travellers are likely to shower, rest, or continue talking. For my family, our PAL flights from LAX arrive at dawn in Manila and our hour-long connections get to Cebu by mid-morning. After about an hour-long drive, we reach my grandmother's house just before lunchtime.

which is perfect timing. After greeting our relatives, we immediately proceed to the dining table and partake of the native fare, which includes *lechon* (“roasted pig”), *dinuguan* (“blood soup”), *puso* (“rice boiled in coconut leaf pouches”), and various seafood (such as crab and squid). We usually retire to our rooms afterwards, though the older folks tend to continue to converse with each other.

For the returnees I interviewed, the eagerly-awaited distribution of *pasalubong* often occurs after a brief respite. Alicia unwraps her packages “after resting for a while. Usually the same day because they are waiting [*laughs*]. Relatives, people you visit, your hosts [*laughs*]” (T7). According to Dulce,

If I’m excited also to give the *pasalubong* or whatever I brought for them, I voluntarily [say], ‘Oh, come on now, come here’ [*claps*]. [same day?] If it is early enough, but [if] not, you can leave it for the following morning. If I’m so tired, they will understand. If it’s late in the evening that you arrive home, you can wait for the following morning to do that. (T10)

Since my family arrives in Cebu in the morning, we generally open our boxes in the afternoon. We, the *balikbayans*, initiate the unpacking. When I visited with my family, there were too many activities since it was the first time that some of us had returned and it was also my brother’s wedding. So, the distribution did not occur all at once, but was staggered throughout our stay. However, when I returned with my aunts, they did not take a rest before handing out the *pasalubong* (see Figures 4.7 and 4.8). So, I interrupted my own repose to observe and take pictures of the occasion. On this second visit and the one after that, I distributed my presents at my leisure, but still on the same day.

The opening of *balikbayan* boxes and handing out of *pasalubong* are climactic events. There is a general feeling of excitement and joy as everyone acts out and watches



Figure 4.7 My aunt distributing her *pasalubong*



Figure 4.8 Another aunt distributing, while my uncle looks at his box of chocolate

the big performance. There are usually many relatives present as the action unfolds in the living room, where it is spacious and where the boxes have often been deposited in the first place. According to Lambert and Harlika, many people show up for the occasion:

- H&L: Everybody [*laughter*].
 L: Uncles, Aunties.
 H&L: Relatives.
 H: Friends.
 L: Other relatives, neighbors. (T11)

Alicia affirms that people wait around until this moment. “Yes . . . We open everything . . . there, in the living room. [who’s there?] The relatives, the hosts [*laughs*]” (T7). For Dulce, present during the affair are

Yes, of course, all my children and my grandchildren will be there, in-laws. [are they hovering?] [*laughs*] Not really, they’re very polite [*laughs*]. Not like, perhaps, those people who have been so—I don’t know, but my children are, you know, they know what it is, they could wait. Although when they’re so excited, when you already are there giving gifts or that, ‘Oh I have this, oh how nice! Thank you, Mama.’ (T10)

In my family, only our immediate relatives are there when we first open our boxes. If we first stop over in Manila, we take out the gifts for my uncle and his family. We usually pack in such a way that these are easily accessible. Otherwise, everyone—my brother and his wife, my aunt and cousins—receives his or her *pasalubong* in Cebu. If my uncle and his family are also visiting Cebu, then we also give them their presents there. If we do not meet up with them, other arrangements will be made: either we send their *pasalubong* with someone who is going to Manila, or someone will pick these up in Cebu.

In most cases, the *balikbayans* do the distributing, though others might help in cutting apart the boxes. As can be expected, the boxes and their contents take center

stage. According to Harlika, “for sure, the owner, the passenger” opens the packages, as well as hands out the *pasalubong* (T11). While this is going on, Lambert and Harlika report, the people are

L: Oh, they’re mainly concentrated. Of course.

H: They pay attention on what you’re doing. (T11)

Alicia relates that her relatives are sometimes

Talking and helping, or they do the opening, or they do the cutting. They cut the ribbon, the tape or whatever. And then, when it’s open, we take out the things from the box and distribute. I distribute. ‘This is for—’ [do they start looking for stuff?] No they don’t do that. Or but sometimes, one box is specifically for a certain person, so [*motions pointing at the box and to take it*]. ‘Oh, that box is for you.’ So you give it to him. (T7)

At her house, Dulce describes the scenario: “I just ask my children to rip. ‘Okay you open’ . . . I just have three children over there left now. So all of them, ‘okay, you help.’ They help each other. ‘Oh this is for you.’ And each one of my grandchildren have one . . . bag, paper bag, whatever, plastic bag [*laughs*] to put all the stuff, for their collection, you know” (T10). In my experience, relatives are commonly gathered around while we uncover our boxes. Sometimes, the men might help in cutting the rope and tape. Then, we start distributing. Recipients will eventually have a pile of their *pasalubong* near them. Once, my uncle and his family received so many things that they, afterwards, put them all together in one of the empty boxes and brought that back with them to Manila. When I go home by myself, I actually open my boxes privately in my room. I put together all the presents for each person or family and hand them over later.

To simplify the distribution process, some *balikbayans* wrap their *pasalubong* in newspaper or plastic bags and write the recipient’s name on them. Alicia admits, “I do

sometimes, usually, not in all cases” (T7). Dulce explains,

They won't be scampering because, as much as possible, we try to label. We label the stuff. But sometimes, there are those that I'm no longer interested in making some labels . . . The things that they requested from me, perhaps, to buy from here, they should be labeled. Whatever love that I should have for somebody, specific things for each one. I label. (T10)

Marking the *pasalubong* beforehand makes it easier for *balikbayans*, as they only have to look at the names and not have to think about it. At the same time, it prevents any confusion or conflict among the recipients. As Judy points out, “*Ang uban wa may ngan pero katong sa akong brother-in-law naanay ngan. Para bu di na ka mopili kay naana may ngan. Di mao na nay para imo* (“Some don't have names but those of my brother-in-law had names. So that you don't choose because they already have names. So that's what's for you”)" (T5). This method also allows the distribution to proceed more quickly, as the travellers do not have to rummage through their things. I do not label my presents but, when relatives send some *padala*, they do identify these. For instance, my aunt wrote my cousins' names on masking tape and stuck them to the pairs of shoes she was giving them. As for the medicine that she was sending to her sister, she placed it in a shoebox, sealed it with plenty of tape, and wrote the name on it.

As the distribution of *pasalubong* progresses, the participants might be doing other things, as well. Dulce says that people are “conversing and sometimes the attention is so focused, once in a while, what they have in the box. Very excited” (T10). At the same time, she continues, “Yeah, I'm just watching. I feel happy with all smiles, watching. Sometimes also have to do things. I think I remember I'd go something like, ‘Could you open that?’ I also instruct them, ‘You look into that part’” (T10). When

Dulce's relatives receive their presents, they put them on. "even the shoes" (T10). According to Alicia, recipients are "cooking. Or eating the chocolates or eating the candies or eating the whatever. Or trying on things. . . . Well, some they try on, sometimes they put aside" (T7).

The recipients also recall the opening of *balikbayan* boxes as a lively occasion.

Isabel recounts, while RJ jokes:

- I: Yes, I was there—
 R: With a big production number.
 I: When the boxes were opened. They just handed it to me. Well, of course, we were excited 'cause like—
 R: A genie coming out.
 I: We don't know. We know for sure they're gonna give us something 'cause, like I said, we always expect something from them. And, yeah, the box was the center of attention 'cause everybody was anxious—
 R: 'Cause they expected Bill Clinton to jump out of the box.
 I: What they're giving out. (T8)

According to Judy, when her brother-in-law visited, "*Pag-abli sa usa ka [box], didto ko. Nagubot ang mga bata. Kay nakita sa ila. Wa man niya ablihi*" ("When one [box] was opened, I was there. The kids went wild. Because they saw theirs") (T5). While everyone is eager to find out what they will receive, the children and younger adults are especially so. Just as on Christmas, they might be asked to help in distributing the gifts, too. Before it is over, though, they are usually too busy playing with or trying on their own presents to continue helping. *Balikbayan* boxes, then, are like giant presents, whose unwrapping is highly anticipated. Their foreign origins add to the festive feel of the opening.

With their *pasalubong* in hand, the recipients demonstrate, according to Alicia,

“gratitude, happiness. Show on their face, smile, laugh, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha [*feigns laughter*]” (T7). Lambert says they react “with glee, with joy, some” (T11). Dulce describes: “They’re happy about it. These are gifts anyway. Some of the things they requested are there, so they’re happy for all those things brought home for them. And there are items that they didn’t, never mentioned at all bringing home that are there. ‘Oh this is what I need. Oh, Mama, thank you. So you guessed what I need’” (T10). Isabel remembers how she felt, while RJ again teases her:

I: I—
 R: This is it!
 I: Was happy. I was thankful, I was happy.
 R: This is it!
 I: ‘Cause I didn’t know any better at the time.
 R: All we got is a sample!
 I: Well, I didn’t know it was a sample.
 R: Just a sample! [*laughs*]
 I: Well—
 R: Three-year old sample!
 I: No, all these small perfumes, like in the vial—
 R: Yeah, samples!
 I: We’re so happy at the time, we didn’t know any better.
 R: ‘Not for resale’ samples!
 I: It’s free, ‘cause it was free. (T8)

Thus, upon receiving their presents, most relatives and friends are glad and grateful, particularly when they receive what they ordered. When they get something extra, that makes it even more special. For those who are not part of the immediate family or the closest circle of friends, little tokens, such as the samples mentioned by Isabel, are appreciated. When the gifts are unexpected or greater than expected, such as the towels my aunt gave to the loyal attendees of my grandmother’s death anniversary novena, the recipients can be ecstatic, shrieking and jumping for joy.

However, there are times when people are less than enthusiastic. This might occur when recipients do not receive what they requested. This might also happen when the *pasalubong* is somewhat inappropriate. Alicia recalls:

Well, I should expect them to be pleased. Most of the time. Other times? I don't know [*laughs*] . . . Well, sometimes, you give cosmetics or lipstick to some of the friends, it turns out they don't use make-up at all. [why don't you know that?] Not me, *pero like sa asawa ni Wade, dad-an ni Inday ug make-up man kaha to, di man diay mag-make-up* ("but like Wade's [her nephew] wife, Inday [her sister] brought her make-up. I think, and she doesn't wear make-up") [*laughs*]. (T7)

In this particular example, my cousin, Wade, had recently married and those of us in the US, including Inday, had never met his wife. It is understandable then that she would make such a mistake. When they have been away for long periods of time and the family gains new members or the existing ones have developed different tastes, it is easy for *balikbayans* to err in their choices of *pasalubong*.

Guests may also be dissatisfied when they receive nothing. Lambert recounts, "some have no gift . . . They don't have enough. They pout like this. You try to compensate with your dollar. So, you have a lot of dollar bills. That's what I do. Man, I was so broke" (T11). This dilemma may arise when unexpected guests show up, and *balikbayans* are compelled to remedy the situation. Even when they do get presents, some people may still feel discontent. Instead, they begrudge the *pasalubong* that others receive. As Judy explains,

Depende, naay uban [masiyá]. Mao bitaw na . . . butangan na lang na ug ngan kay katong naay ngan imo to. Ang-ang mokuan pa ka atong uban. Kasagaran angayon man gyud na . . . Kanang chocolates—ana uy, angay, tagsa-tagsa o. Naay uban pareho-pareho na lang, para wala'y maglalis—kanang moingon 'kadto ganahan ko atong iya.' Bisan butangan ug ngan,

mokuan pa man gyud atong uban. 'Ay, mas ganahan ko ato.' So, mas maayo na lang nga pareha man. Unsa pa man imong kuanon.
 ("It depends, there are some [who are envious]. That's why . . . they put names so that those with your name are yours. So you can't ask for others. Many make it even . . . The chocolates—it's like that, even, one each. There are some who make it the same, so that nobody bickers—when they say 'I like what's his/hers.' Even though they have names, some still [argue]. 'Oh, I like that more.' So, it's better to make everything the same. What else are you [going to say]?") (T5)

Since some relatives display their petty natures on what should be a warm occasion, some *balikbayans*, therefore, prevent such jealousies by giving similar or the same number of gifts.

The *balikbayans* I spoke to have mixed emotions about the opening of boxes and handing out of *pasalubong*. Alicia confesses that she feels "nothing [laughs]" because "it's expected" (T7). When asked if the recipients' reactions affect her, she responds, "not really. I don't care [laughs]. In a way, it makes you feel good" (T7). Unlike Alicia, Dulce cares about her family's opinions:

I feel that, whenever I return home, I expect that they should be happy because the love is from my heart, that I should be bringing something for them to make them happy. If I could not give anything, I feel unhappy, you know. If I see I miss somebody, maybe given something that's [not] as important as she would probably expect me to give. 'Did you bring like this, Mama? Do you have like this?' 'You should have told me' [laughs]. (T10)

Lambert is also concerned about overlooking some people, but she is pragmatic about it: "I feel lost. You feel happy you're able to provide but then you're not happy 'cause you're not able to provide for everybody. Mainly, as long as you provide your own immediate family, who cares about the rest? You're not a millionaire to make everybody happy" (T11). In my case, I do not like to give presents out of obligation. While I do not

think that there are as many expectations of me as of my mother and my aunts. I do feel pressured to have *pasalubong* for certain relatives, even though I do not have the money or might not want to buy them anything. Fortunately, my relatives in the US have repeatedly saved me from my predicament, as they do send gifts for these people.

In order to avoid any displeasure or covetousness, Lambert, Harlika, and Madrona admit that they sometimes split their *pasalubong* and do two different distributions. The main apportionment, which is for the immediate family and close friends, takes place

L: Usually in the bedroom 'cause, in the living room, the neighbors can see, too [laughs].

M: And you don't have anything for them.

H: Or they'll start asking for some little thing.

L: [We] try to do it in the living room the ones that are to be given away. And the secret ones you're saving for, like, friends, we usually [distribute] in the room.

H: Yeah, we usually have to separate them.

M: We have separate baggage for giveaways and relatives.

H: Sometimes, relatives have no *pasalubong* and you feel guilty.

.....

L: You feel guilty. 'Oh my God, she's here and I don't have any.'

H: They just sit around. They don't really go into the box or anything like that.

L: You know how you get the little bar of soaps from the hotels, the little thin ones? I give those away [laughs]. (T11)

To a certain extent, I think that many *balikbayans* have this sort of double arrangement, especially when they have to deal with distant relatives and neighbors. It could be that there is a *bienvenida* or welcome party for these travellers, which would explain the presence of so many people. Or, it could be that they come on their own accord and can not exactly be turned away. In these cases, *balikbayans* have to resort to what these sisters do, which is to separate the *pasalubong* into different boxes. Those that are

reserved for the people closest to them might be hidden in the bedroom, and those that are for others might remain in the living room. While the assemblage is present, the travellers might open the boxes in the living room and postpone the ones for family members for when there is more privacy. Taking this kind of clandestine action might also be necessary to prevent jealousy amongst relatives, especially if *balikbayans* happen to buy more things or something more expensive for certain people. As Judy pointed out previously, some relatives would rather have what others receive. By isolating some of the gift-giving, *balikbayans* can dispense their *pasalubong* away from the watchful eyes of their more envious kin.

It can be an awkward situation for *balikbayans* when there are so many guests—particularly unexpected ones—upon their arrival. As Judy explains,

Naa man say relatives nimo, unya wa nimo maapil ug palit ug pasalubong. Unya moanha diha unya wala kay ikahatag, naa man sad ing-ana. Sulti-an lang, 'wa koy kwarta, akong gi-da igo ra sa akong pamilya.' Kay naa lagi sa ilang huma-huma nga basta gikan didto, naa gyud nay kwarta. Naa may uban nga moingon, 'tuga-i lang ta 'g... dollar lang nga souvenir.'

(“There are also your relatives, and you didn’t include them in shopping for *pasalubong*. And then they come there and then you have nothing to give, there’s also like that. You just tell them, ‘I have no money, what I brought is only enough for my family.’ Because it is really in their mind that if from there, they should have money. There are some who say, ‘just give me... a dollar for souvenir.’”) (T5)

Judy also affirms that, “*Ay, o, naa* (“Oh yes, there are”)” neighbors who descend on the travellers (T5). Rhea clarifies:

Depende man sad nga neighbors. Kung suod nimo nga neighbors, imong hatagan. Pero kung di nimo suod nga neighbors, nganong mohatag man ka? Depende lagi na kung asa ang lugar siguro. Akong nabantayan is that, if neighbors come to your place kay tungod ana, para naa silay

madawat, para nako. . . . kana bang mga less fortunate gyud ba—yeah, that's the right word.

(“It depends on the neighbors. If you are close to these neighbors, then you give them something. But if you're not close to them, why would you give them something? Maybe it depends on where the place is. What I've observed is that, if neighbors come to your place because of that, so they can get something, for me. . . . [it's] those who are really less fortunate—yeah, that's the right word.”) (T4)

There are, thus, some distant relatives and neighbors who seek out the newcomers, with the expectation that they will procure a little something. As these people are likely not a part of the plan or budget, the *balikbayans* might be unprepared for the onslaught.

Many *balikbayans* feel guilty, as Harlika and Lambert do, when people show up and they do not have presents for them. Sometimes, what may happen is that the *balikbayans* will dip into their boxes. As Rhea points out,

Most of that case, it's usually *pagpalit gyud nila anang butanga, para gyud na sa ilang family* (“when they bought that thing, that's for their family”). *Naa may ni-anha, so sigihan lang na niya 'g kuha ug iya lang nang ingnan iyang family, 'sige lang, mamalit lang 'nya ta ana'* (“Somebody comes, so s/he keeps taking from it and s/he'll say to her/his family, ‘that's okay, we'll just buy that later’”). As I've said, there's duty-free where you can buy it. And I'm sure that that *balikbayan* has the money to spend. . . . But, for sure, they are not part of the plan *nga hatagan pero, naa na man sila, so hatag* (“of who to give but, since they're already there, so they give”). (T4)

While some travellers may acquiesce to the imperative of furnishing *pasalubong*, even to unanticipated guests, and give away those that are intended for their family members, this is probably quite rare. This may happen if the ones asking are relatives or people for whom they have truly forgotten to shop. However, the majority are more likely to do what Judy and Lambert refer to, which is to dole out dollar bills. As Filipino Americans become seasoned *balikbayans*, they become more equipped for such surprise visitors and

bring extra little giveaways, such as the mini-soaps mentioned by Lambert. Used clothes and other secondhand objects are also useful for this purpose.

While many unsolicited guests might show up during the opening of *balikbayan* boxes, some of the intended recipients may not be in attendance. This might be due to work or other commitments. More likely, it is because these relatives and friends are not part of the travellers' immediate circle and prefer to offer them some privacy with their loved ones. Sometimes, it might even be that these people do not know of the *balikbayans'* homecoming or are not expecting anything. As Rhea discloses, "... it's fine with me if I don't receive anything from my friends. . . . *Mas mo-appreciate gyud ko nga, pag-mabalik sila dinhi, katawag sila* ("I appreciate it more that, when they return here, they call")" (T4). In cases when recipients are not present, according to Alicia, their *pasalubong* "stay there. They remain in the box" (T7). Other arrangements will usually be made to ensure that they receive their gifts: either the recipients will pick them up at a more appropriate time, or their presents will be delivered to them. For instance, Judy was working when her brother-in-law opened one of his boxes. So, "... *gipakuha didto, pero naanay ngan* . . ." ("... he told me to pick it up there, but it had my name . . .") (T5). Rhea explains how it happened with her:

Via tunol gyud na usually. It's either nga ikay paadtoon sa ila, or silay moadto sa inyo. Ana. Kay depende man sud na sa tawo . . . Katong ako-a, gusto niya nga moadto ko sa ila, unya maulaw man ko kay hibaw-an sa tanan namong neighbors, kahibaw man sila nga bag-ong abot ni siya. So, kung moadto ko, obviously ang mga mentality sa mga tawo, 'ay, mangayo ni ngadto' or 'a, naa ni siyay pasalubong.' Unya maowaw man ko, so di gyud ko moadto, maghuwat ra gyud ko nga moabot ra na nga butang. It's always via tunol . . . Nahitabo to kay gipadala sa ilang helper ang ako-ang pasalubong, unya the next day, nagkita mi. Pero siya'y niadto sa

amo-a. Pero pagkahuman na, after dugay-dugay na siyang niabot, ako na say niadto sa ila. Unya didto, kaon na ko 'g daghang chocolate. (“It’s usually by handing it over personally. It’s either they’ll ask you to go to their house or they’ll go to yours. Like that. Because it depends on the person . . . For me, she wanted me to go to their house, but I was embarrassed because all my neighbors would know, they know that she just arrived. So, if I go there, obviously the mentality of the people, ‘oh, she’s going to ask for something over there’ or ‘ah, she has a *pasalubong*.’ And I was embarrassed, so I wouldn’t go there, I just wait for that thing to arrive. It’s always by handing it over . . . What happened was they sent over my *pasalubong* through their helper, and the next day, we saw each other. But she was the one who came to our house. But afterwards, after she’d been there for a while, it was my turn to go to their house. And there, I ate lots of chocolate.”) (T4)

Alicia recalls that she used to give *pasalubong* to her former officemates: “When I visited the office, I gave them something. Or I send something to them, like chocolate and makeup and things” (T3). Personally, I give my friends their *pasalubong* when we get together.

In addition to distributing their own *pasalubong*, *balikbayans* also have to deal with the *padalas* in their charge. Sometimes, as Alicia relates, the owners “meet me at the airport . . . for the boxes, if I bring the box for somebody” (T7). This was the case when she brought a box for her friend, Manny; his wife, also a friend, showed up at the airport in Cebu, as arranged. This might also be the case when there are *padalas* for people in Manila and the *balikbayans* have connecting flights; the two parties can get together while the passengers are awaiting their connections. Otherwise, the newcomers will inform the recipients sometime after their arrival. Alicia continues, “For the envelopes, I call them. Either pick it up, meet somewhere, or whatever” (T7). According to Dulce, “. . . we just call on the phone that they have *padala* and that’s it.

They come over to the house to pick up” (T10). As the *balikbayans* have already been generous enough to convey their presents to the Philippines, the recipients will commonly not want to inconvenience them further and will, therefore, claim their *padala* from the travellers’ places of lodging. For example, when my cousin sends something for her family, her siblings will pick it up from our house. Conversely, when my mother asked my cousin to convey something to my brother and me, I had to go to their house. When Isabel asked me to give something to her brother-in-law in Manila, we agreed that I would bring it when I visited Manila a month after my arrival in the Philippines. I had them pick it up at my uncle’s house, where I was staying, though they still had not come by the time I left Manila.

The Curtain Falls: The End of the *Balikbayan* Journey

After days, weeks, or months, *balikbayans* have to conclude the homecoming process and return to the United States. During the last few days of their stay, these visitors might increase their shopping activity and begin packing. They may buy things for themselves. Dulce procures, “the native foods, like *bagoong* (“tiny fish in brine and sold in bottles”), the sweets. Like smoked *bangus* (“milkfish”)” (T10). Alicia obtains “refrigerator magnets, native angels for Christmas tree, T-shirts for souvenir, foods, pastries, native delicacies. We always bring that every time we come back, like *otap*, *polvoron*, *salvaro* [local cookies and snackfoods]” (T3). She adds, “Yeah, and some clothing. Cheaper there, and it’s different” (T7) (see Figure 4.9). Madrona enumerates her acquisitions:

We can bring fruits, dried mangoes and cookies, coconut cookies and *polvoron* (“sweet made of powdered milk and sugar”). All food and *pasalubong*, like clothes for babies, clothes for boys, dusters—they are cheap there—house clothes [see Figure 4.9]. What else? Slippers, I buy slippers there, too, rubber ones. Filipino toys like those *carabaos* (“water buffalos”) and roosters . . . Sweaters . . . You know those pots? I got those from the Philippines, too. The decorated pots, the painted pots, those are rubber, used tires. One bag of mine, I filled up with those, about 1½ dozens . . . (T1)



Figure 4.9 Dusters my aunt bought in the Philippines

I like to shop in the Philippines, as everything is so cheap when the prices are converted to dollars. Since I do not buy brand names when I am in the US, I might as well get cheaper things in the Philippines, such as clothes, shoes, and books. I also choose fabrics and have them tailored there. *Balikbayans*, thus, acquire for themselves native foods,

crafts and souvenirs, as well as various bargains.

However, just as *balikbayans* have to bring *pasalubong* for their family and friends in the Philippines, they have to do the same thing when they go back to the United States. In most cases, these gifts will consist of native foods and local handicrafts for which people in the US may be longing (see Figure 4.10). This might



Figure 4. 10 Dried mangoes and local cookies to bring to the US

include, as Madrona mentions, “dried fish, coconut cakes, *bibingka* (“sweet rice cake”), *tupig* (“burnt rice cake”), food stuff. Sometimes, . . . bags, sweaters from Baguio,⁵ and other *pasalubong*. We cannot bring plants, I would like to bring some orchids, but we

⁵ A well-known vacation spot in the mountains of northern Luzon.

cannot bring them” (V1). Madrona adds, “Why? Because your relatives here, like your sisters, order you, ‘When you come back, will you buy me like this? Will you bring like this? Will you bring me a mortar?’ Sometimes, the mortar we use to mince the garlic, that, too I bring” (T1). I do not really buy too many *pasalubong* for relatives and friends in the US. If I see some bargains, I might buy some clothes for my family. Once in a while, I get some native jewelry, purses, and T-shirts for my friends. Usually, I only buy plastic balloons for my nieces and nephews. Oftentimes, my relatives may request specific things. For example, Gayle, my sister-in-law, may order a certain brand of shampoo, while my sister may want shoes or household items. I do my best to find them, though it is not mandatory that I do. If these requests are cheap, then I do not charge my relatives; otherwise, I do. Friends in the US may also give money to the *balikbayans* and ask them to buy them certain things in the Philippines. For instance, my aunt bought a certain kind of dried fish for her officemate (see Figure 4.11).

In my experience, though, it is usually my relatives in the Philippines who buy things for relatives in the US. Judy and my brother will usually fill my family’s requests for native delicacies. My cousins sometimes have presents for my aunts, usually cookies and other sweets. This is also the case for Madrona. She gets “wrapped *padala*, you know, from relatives there to relatives here. Mostly dried fish, dried squid, those tiny shrimps, *bibingka*, *puto*, *suman* [all three are made of sweet rice], and that *patupat*—that one wrapped like bag, *tupig*—the burnt rice cake like a tube, in a tube, *bucayo*—coconut candy” (T1). Sending these native delicacies is a way for Filipinos to reciprocate for the *pasalubong* that they have received from their relatives in the US. As Judy explains,



Figure 4.11 Sweet dried fish my aunt bought for her co-worker

Depende pero mao man gyud nay kasagaran, nga mohatag gyud ka. Ang-ang di na gud mo magkita sa for pila sad ka years. Kung unsay i-panugon. . . . Pagkaon kasagaran, panagsa ray dili pagkaon. . . . Ang-ang kay kung gamit, mas daghan gud sila didto, mas advanced sila. Unya lahi man . . . ang pagkaon diri ug didto, di ba? Pilipino gud diri gud. Mao na kasagaran pagkaon gyuy ipada. Naa [didto], pero lahi man gyud nang hinatag sad nimo. Pareho ra gud na sa ilang gipada diri gud, basta gikan lang didto.

(“It depends, but that is how it usually is, that you give. Of course, you won’t see each other again for how many years. Whatever is requested. . . . Food usually, it’s rare that it’s not food . . . Because if it’s things, they have more over there, they are more advanced. And it’s different . . . the food here and there, isn’t it? It’s Filipino here. That’s why it’s usually food that’s sent. They have it [there], but it’s different when you’re giving it. It’s just the same as what they send here, as long as it’s from there.”)
(T5)

Just as distant relatives and friends ask *balikbayans* to convey their *padalas* to the

Philippines, the same thing might happen on the way back. Similarly, it is commonly the sender's responsibility to get their *padalas* in the hands of the *balikbayans*. For example, my mother's friends called me occasionally to make sure that they could give something to her. Madrona also has people asking her to take *padalas*, though her husband does not like her to bring anything at all, whether it is for herself or others. She narrates:

Like Onofre, he doesn't like to bring anything back. He's lazy to carry it. You know, one time, he came home with only Colgate, toothbrush, and shave, no more. He gave everything, pants—it's good he didn't give all his briefs—his shirts, he gave them all, except the shirt that he had on. He didn't want to bring anything home. He goes, 'Why do you bring all that?' . . . 'We have all those things in America,' he says. He will be angry, 'What's that?', when I'm wrapping. That's why [when] I wrap my things when I come back here, he better not be around. Or if somebody comes, 'Oh, will you please give this to my sister in America?' And then we'll find out . . . it's dried fish. He would say, 'Let's eat that. That will not reach America. We have a lot of those Filipino foods in America.' He doesn't like bringing things here. . . . 'Give them to the people. Feed them. Don't let them give them to you because we have the same food like those in Filipino stores.' So he doesn't want to. (T1)

It is quite difficult to decline, though, especially since *balikbayans* do not have as much to carry en route to the US. Also, most Filipinos like to be as accommodating as possible, especially since they rarely get a chance to get together with these people.

The *balikbayans'* boxes are usually nowhere near as full outbound as they are inbound. While the travellers do bring back to the United States some native goods for themselves, as well as *pasalubong* and *padalas* for others, they still do not have as much luggage as on the way to the Philippines (see Figure 4.12). As Madrona describes, "boxes are empty, except for some few *pasalubong* from people for loved ones here" (V1). The *balikbayan* boxes are certainly not the focus anymore. Sometimes, these

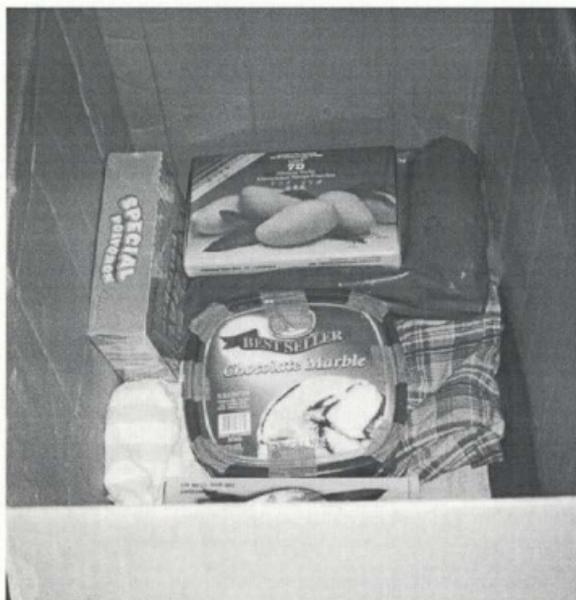


Figure 4.12 My aunt's box for return trip to the US

cartons do not make the return trip, as they may already have been discarded once they were opened or used for other things. Isabel does not believe that these packages are reused: "To the US? I don't think so 'cause by then, when it got to the Philippines, it'll be all worn out" (T8). Similarly, Dulce claims:

No, I don't. Because *balikbayan* means it's intended for the Philippines, but sometimes, if necessity commands it, . . . but not the box that you brought home to the Philippines, then bring it back here. If you ever use that again, . . . must be new, the box. But normally, we don't bring the box, as far as I'm concerned. They just are stuck there for some other purposes. (T10)

While it is true that some boxes fall apart, many are still functional. They can survive at

least one more trip, especially since their contents are not likely to be as heavy on the way back. If people have suitcases, they may only bring enough to fill those or buy additional smaller bags to fit their purchases. However, numerous *balikbayans* utilize the same cartons that they bring to the Philippines, though not as many. According to Alicia, she will use “maybe one box” on her return and “dispose of it” afterwards (T7). When travelling in groups, some family members might share the same box. For example, when my aunts went home together, one aunt did not buy too many things. So, she packed her clothes in her suitcase and her acquisitions in my other aunt’s box. Since at times I have stayed in the Philippines for so long, my boxes have usually been used for storage and I have to find alternative containers. Unlike in Los Angeles, where *balikbayan* boxes can easily be acquired, it is more difficult to obtain large and sturdy boxes in Cebu. On my various trips back to the US, I have used an oversized duffel bag given by Rhea, a small but heavy-duty liquor box from the *sari-sari*⁶ store next door, and some big but somewhat thin cartons from the grocery store. I had to pay for the boxes. Only once was I able to use a *balikbayan* box that I brought to the Philippines for the

⁶ *Sari-sari* means various or varied in Tagalog. *Sari-sari* stores are the Filipino versions of corner stores, except that there is a proliferation of them, more than just at street corners. Sometimes, there might even be two or three next to each other. These stores sell various necessities and snackfoods in individual servings. At these places, for example, buyers can buy just one egg, a cup of cooking oil, a piece of candy, etc. This system is convenient when you may need something but do not want to go to the grocery store. But, more likely, these stores are useful for the many people who can only afford to buy a little at a time. As *sari-sari* stores are essentially neighborhood stores, the owners know most of their customers. Before, they often allowed customers to buy on credit, which can be paid upon payday or when they have money, but this practice is no longer so common.

return trip.

Upon their departure, *balikbayans* may take the final opportunity to show their generosity by giving money to certain family members. Allan reveals:

Paglarga, akong gitagaan ug kwarta si Tita Melod for Yangyang ug kay Junjun. . . . Nganong gitagaan nako 'g kwarta? Kay wa man ko 'y pasalubong nila. Kalimot man ko.
 ("When we left, I gave money to Tita Melod [his aunt] for Yangyang and Junjun [his cousins]. . . . Why did I give money? Because I didn't have *pasalubong* for them. I forgot.") (T2)

Even if they have already given presents to these people, *balikbayans* may still hand over some dollars or checks, especially to their parents, children, or siblings. My mother and siblings usually provide my brother with some money. Sometimes, travellers might leave their extra pesos, only keeping enough for airport fees and food purchases. The *balikbayans* are often sent off by a group of relatives, though there may not be as many people as when they arrived. There may be some teary goodbyes, especially if the visits are few and far between. The visitors then board their planes, which will take them to their adopted homeland, where they will continue their long-distance relationships with their family and friends until it is time for another *balikbayan* visit.

The Cast: Various Roles in the *Balikbayan* Box Process

When Filipino Americans decide to visit the Philippines, they set off a chain of events that involves many people. Their practice of bringing *balikbayan* boxes especially affects several others. Various groups, both in the United States and the Philippines, fulfill certain roles, which could be either active or passive. While none of these responsibilities are necessarily specified or obligatory, they are what have emerged after

decades of *balikbayan* visits.

Naturally, the principal characters in this transnational custom are the *balikbayans*, since it is their decision that triggers the numerous activities. As the travellers, they have to schedule their trip, purchase their tickets, and get their passports ready. They usually have to inform their relatives and friends both in the US and the Philippines of their impending journey. They then have to figure out what to give as *pasalubong*, either by asking the intended recipients or choosing for them. *Balikbayans* proceed to go shopping, after they have some sort of plan of how to pay for their purchases. They also buy the *balikbayan* boxes, collect the *padalas*, and pack. They make arrangements to get to and from the airports. Once in the Philippines, returnees distribute *pasalubong* and cash and ensure that the *padalas* reach their destination. They also catch up with their relatives and their friends. During their stay, they often have to pay for groceries, outings, shopping, and other expenses. Closer to their departure, these travellers tend to purchase native foods for themselves and *pasalubong* for those in the US. They pack these, along with the *padalas*, either in the same *balikbayan* boxes or in new bags. Once in the US, they again have to dispense with the *pasalubong* and *padalas*, as well as give updates on those in the Philippines.

The *balikbayans'* family in the US may help make arrangements for the trip. My aunt, for example, usually finds out how much the tickets cost and picks them up for us. More commonly, these relatives are responsible for taking the travellers and their boxes to the airport, as well as picking them up upon their return, just as my brother-in law, Gil, does for me. In addition, those in the US generally buy presents for relatives in the

Philippines. Dulce's daughter, for instance, sends "gifts to her sisters and brother" (T10). These relatives may be involved in other aspects of the *balikbayan* box process, as well. According to Isabel, she has helped "buy the box and then packing . . . Some *pasa[lubong]* to bring to the Philippines. Buy the box, buy some things for the box, and pack" (T8). Relatives and friends may also send *padalas* or letters and checks; it is their duty to ensure that they deliver these items to the travellers before they have finished packing.

Family members and friends in the Philippines may make requests for *pasalubong*. They do this through phone calls, letters, or emails, which they or the *balikbayans* initiate. It is usually the family's responsibility to provide the visitors with transportation from the airport, though friends can also do it, as in my case. Relatives commonly prepare food for the travellers' arrival, make sure they are comfortable, and update them on the local happenings. They also usually set up the travellers' accommodations, either in their own houses or in local hotels. Sometimes, the locals might have to plan part of the *balikbayans'* itinerary. For example, when my family and I stayed in Manila for a week, my aunt and uncle provided us with food and lodging and arranged a couple of day excursions and an overnight trip. Even when we were no longer in Manila, they were also in charge of travel plans to other islands. Relatives and friends regularly suggest activities and might pay sometimes, though the *balikbayans* are more likely—even expected—to be the financiers. The locals also send *pasalubong* and *padalas* for those who are unable to visit. Finally, relatives or friends help the *balikbayans* pack, as take them to the airport.

In addition to the various roles performed by *balikbayans* and relatives and friends in the United States and Philippines, there appears to be a distinct division of responsibilities among the males and females in each group. As in many family-oriented customs, the bulk of the tasks fall solidly on the women. According to Dulce,

Sometimes, it's the female who does it. They [the men] just accompany you to the shop and then . . . they carry the boxes. I don't know. It's the practice now for women being so used to the practice of giving, purchasing the boxes. Both of you go down, but oftentimes, like me, the first time I went for those boxes, I went myself with my sister, but not my husband went with me then because he was attending to some other concern. (T10)

As Dulce suggests, gift-giving in the *balikbayan* context has emerged as a primarily female domain. Women have become accustomed to doing the shopping and wrapping of presents in other circumstances, and this function has essentially been extended onto the larger scale of *balikbayan* boxes. Isabel and RJ delineate the duties of males and females:

- I: Oh, yeah, shopping for the women and packing for the men. Well, in normal situations, yes.
 R: The packing?
 I: Oh the carrying. Yeah, you're right, the carrying.
 R: Men do nothing. The men are lazy.
 I: It's just that women like to shop and men just have the strength to carry the box. (T8)

When it comes to preparing the *balikbayan* boxes, women do practically everything, including the shopping, the collection of *padalas* from relatives and friends, and the packing. The men, on the other hand, usually only perform the tasks of driving the women to the stores and lifting the boxes.

Alicia agrees that the women are the ones in charge of *balikbayan* boxes. She

maintains. "Men don't like to bring anything, if possible. Don't want to be bothered with those things. That's why the women do it for them. The men won't do it" (T7). As described by Madrona, Onofre's negative attitude about bringing back *padalas* and foodstuff from the Philippines corroborates this. Alicia's implication is that women are forced to do what is necessary, as the men are unwilling to do it. When families travel together, the female members are often the ones doing the shopping and packing. Madrona, for example, is the one who fills up and packs the boxes, even when her husband or son goes with her. Her husband, Onofre, would rather only take his clothes and toiletries (T1), while her son, Gil, does not want to deal with *balikbayan* boxes. Of course, Madrona's gifts "cover" everyone, so that is why Onofre and Gil do not have to worry about it. Even Madrona's brother, who picks her up in Manila objects to the boxes, as they are too bulky (T1; V1). Women also have the responsibility of putting the *balikbayan* boxes together, even when they are not the ones travelling. Oftentimes, the mother, wife, or sister usually of the male passenger does the job for him. For instance, after Joseph's vacation in the US, his sister-in-law was the one who packed a box for his mother (FN3). Also, when Madrona's brother went back, she and her sisters took care of the boxes (T10; T11). The same thing happened when my uncle visited recently; my aunts were the ones who got his boxes ready. Clearly, the women are the ones who regularly carry out the majority of the tasks involved in the preparation of the *balikbayan* boxes, sometimes in spite of the men's resistance. If the women do not take control, the obligation to give *pasalubong* might not be fulfilled.

Women are also the more active characters in the other events surrounding the

balikbayan visit. They are more likely to be the ones scheduling the trips, purchasing the tickets, and getting the passports ready for the rest of the group, while the men are relegated to driving to the airport and carrying the boxes. However, the males might take a more dominant role while in the airport. For example, when I travelled with my family, Allan was the one who checked us in and obtained our boarding passes. When we arrived in Manila, he led our younger brother and his brother-in-law in procuring our luggage. He also dealt with the Customs official by bribing him. Once we were outside the passenger area, my uncle had porters ready to help us. He was the one who handed them their \$20 tip, though it was my mother who gave him that money. Once outside the airport, the women again take over. They are usually the ones who have to interact more closely with the relatives and friends, though the older male *balikbayans* might spend time with the local men. The female *balikbayans* tend to be the ones planning the various outings. They also ensure that the *padalas* are delivered to their recipients. When it is time to return to the US, the women commonly shop for *pasalubong* and do the packing.

On the Philippine side, the local women are also often in charge of many of the activities. They customarily prepare the rooms and food for the arrival of the visitors, as well as arrange for their pickup from the airport. They accompany, entertain, and generally ensure the comfort of the travellers. In my experience, when I have come home with other family members, my aunt (my mother's sister) makes many of the arrangements. Otherwise, when I am alone, my brother and sister-in-law get everything ready, while my female friend picks me up. The local men might drive the *balikbayans* from the airport, as Madrona's brother does, and help with the boxes, as my cousins do.

Sometimes, the women also assist with the itinerary. For example, when my family returned together, my aunt (my uncle's wife) organized many of our outings and took care of the logistics. She even had to call her travel agent many times on her cellular phone for last-minute plans or changes. When it is time for the *balikbayans* to return, the local Filipinas commonly purchase and pack the *pasalubong* and *padalas* for relatives and friends in the US.

Of course, there are exceptions to these roles. For instance, men can be more involved in the *balikbayan* activities, if they so choose. My older brother, Allan, was certainly quite active in preparing our travelling papers and escorting his family around Cebu. Then, since another older brother is the only one in my immediate family who still resides in Cebu, I turned to him for many of my needs. In addition, age is a contributing factor to the fulfillment of these duties. Older Filipinos and Filipino Americans—male or female—tend to be more dominant participants. So, while there is a general pattern as to who performs what, there is no actual script to the *balikbayan* performance.

Conclusion

The practice of bringing *balikbayan* boxes when visiting the Philippines has evolved into a custom, particularly for Filipino Americans, while the packages themselves have emerged as distinct cultural icons. Though these cartons may appear ordinary and nondescript, a great deal of effort goes into them. There are, in fact, many activities involved in fulfilling the *balikbayan* box imperative, not just as they apply to the boxes themselves but to the events surrounding them. The process, as I have closely

described it in this chapter, highlights the steps involved in what has become an automatic process. While there are no actual rules, a free-form script has developed from years of performing. From preparations to the climax to the ending, there is a logical plot, though sometimes with minor variations. Each year, thousands of *balikbayans*, their relatives, and their friends act out the custom. They uphold the tradition every time they visit. Thus, when it is time for a *balikbayan* sequel, the stage is already set and the scenes are re-enacted. In the following chapter, I look at the confluence of commodities and interpersonal connections in the *balikbayan* box custom. I show that immigration to the United States dislocates Filipinos and that these boxes are metonyms of their desire for (re)connections. I argue that this gift-giving custom is a nuanced reflection of the *balikbayans'* quest for societal relations, both in the US and in the Philippines.

CHAPTER FIVE

Boxed In or Out?: *Balikbayan* Boxes as Metaphors for Filipino American Dislocation

To most Filipinos, their families are of the utmost importance. They are extremely loyal to them and possess a strong sense of responsibility towards their well-being. Because of their desire to provide financially for their families, overseas Filipinos often make the greatest sacrifice, in that they become disconnected from the very people to whom they were closest. While in foreign countries, they have new and different experiences which, to varying degrees, alienate them from their families and friends. The act of visiting the Philippines allows these *balikbayans* to reconnect with their homeland, while the gift-giving serves as a tightening or renewal of bonds to their loved ones. However, they can never be truly at home, for they are caught between the nostalgia for their old homes and the reality of their new homes. The architects of the *Balikbayan* Program recognized this and designed a scheme which treated the *balikbayans* as tourists in their native land and offered consumable versions of home. Thus, just as *balikbayan* boxes are essentially transitory, so are the people who use them.

In this chapter, I first briefly discuss the importance of family to Filipinos, which greatly accounts for their migratory propensity. I then examine the experiences of immigrants in the United States and how these serve to widen the distance that separates them from their relatives and friends in the Philippines. I also talk about *balikbayan* visits and the opportunities they offer to renew old ties. In addition, I demonstrate how

balikbayan boxes and their contents are tangible agents of reconnection. I show that these boxes help to lift *balikbayans* from their liminal status and re-incorporate them into Filipino society, albeit temporarily.

All in the Family

Despite nationhood and a republican form of government, the Philippines remains a kinship-oriented society. While clans are no longer as isolated or independent as in ancient *barangays*, they continue to be the bases for social and political interactions in the country. As in many cultures, family and kin are the overriding influences in a Filipino's socialization. However, family solidarity or "clannishness" is also an integral, often expected, component of life (see Jocano; Lynch, "Perspectives"; Murray; Steinberg, Philippines). More often than not, the interests of the kinship group prevail over the well-being of the community or the country. This narrow, self-serving outlook accounts for the lack of national unity, political factionalism, and rampant nepotism, all of which contribute to the Philippine's persisting economic underdevelopment and high poverty levels.

At the core of this kinship system is the nuclear family. In most households, though, parents and children are joined by extended relatives of varying generations. As the Philippines is a bilateral society, these relatives can be from both the paternal and maternal sides. In addition to relatives by blood and marriage, the circle is further expanded by *compadrazgo* or ritual kinship. Numerous dealings—be they personal, business, or political—are accomplished through or for this web of connections. While

the entire network is accorded a certain degree of loyalty, the chief allegiance is to the immediate family.

The family is often viewed as the ultimate source of security and a haven for unconditional support. It safeguards its members from the dangers of society and assists whenever problems arise (Gochenour 17; Mulder 22, 37; Panopio and Rolda 48, 55). To enable the unit to maintain these functions, the good of the family almost always outweighs individual wishes and everyone is obligated to ensure that the household thrives. Thus, from an early age, a Filipino's duty to one's family is deeply ingrained. Children are taught about proper conduct and commitment: they "are constantly reminded about [their] responsibilities to each other and to their parents by those who are older" (Jocano 78). Foremost among these lessons is the *utang na loob* ("debt from within; debt of gratitude") they owe their parents for giving them life, loving them, and making sacrifices for their future (Krasno 6; Mulder 22; Panopio and Rolda 55). Though this debt can never truly be repaid, children are required to give their parents complete respect and unquestioned obedience in return. They are also told to do the same for others who are older than them. As adults, they are fully expected to contribute to the family's well-being; usually, this takes the form of financing the education of younger siblings and, later on, supporting their elderly parents.

It is this sense of duty towards the welfare of their families that drives Filipinos to seek better opportunities through migration, either as temporary OCWs or permanent immigrants. Once abroad, overseas Filipinos remit some of their earnings to their families in the Philippines (see Pertierra). For instance, Rachel, a nurse recruited by a

Houston hospital in the early 1990s, was sending back \$600 a month shortly after her arrival (Posadas 39). Juanita, who took care of Isabel's children and household for a few years, forwarded \$300 to \$500 regularly. My brother, Allan, and my sister give a monthly total of \$150 to our brother. Those in the Philippines readily admit that overseas Filipinos are a great help to the relatives they have left behind. According to Mario Tagarao, who was mayor of Lucena City, Quezon in 1986:

Yes, in fact when they have a relative there the standard of living of the parents, of the brothers and sisters, the impact is very visible. If a family has a relative in America, the relatives send money here to the parents. In fact take the case of my father, my father is 93 years old. . . . I have a sister in America, who sends my father \$400 per month. You know how much that is in pesos? I have seen, especially the teachers who migrated there, they help their brothers, their sisters, their parents and they are supporting their nephews and nieces in attaining education. . . . The average sent monthly is probably \$200. It would support two relatives to attain higher education. (Denton and Villena-Denton 123-124)

Dolores Sandoval, district school supervisor of Lucena City, agrees:

In fact, they are helping us. . . . They know when to send money, voluntarily, because they know we have a hard time here. My sister is continuously sending to my older brother who has a very meager income. . . . When my daughter was studying nursing they sent more than ten thousand pesos [\$1200]¹ for tuition. (Denton and Villena-Denton 124)

Thus, through these remittances, parents continue to sacrifice for their children, and children show their devotion and *utang na loob* to their parents and relatives.

¹ This conversion given by Denton and Villena-Denton. It was probably the exchange rate in 1986, when the book was written. At the current rate of about P50 to \$1, \$1200 is approximately P60,000.

Coming to America

While out-migration may benefit families financially, it also has its drawbacks. The steady departure of thousands of Filipinos annually means that relatives and friends are constantly being separated from each other. However, these people are not only kept apart by the oceans and miles but also by their new and divergent experiences. This disconnection is especially difficult for the migrants. Though they earn wages that they could never have dreamt of in the Philippines and can easily afford material comforts, they also have to endure loneliness, homesickness, and culture shock.

Madrona's experience is a good example of the travails and triumphs of Filipino migration. She remembers coming to America in 1967, when she was 31 years old. Recruited to teach, she chose to be assigned in Ohio. When she arrived, Madrona was greeted by the cold autumn air of the Eastern United States, a far cry from the hot tropical climate of the Philippines. She recalls:

My superintendent . . . came to meet me at Pennsylvania Airport, with his secretary, holding my picture [*laughs*] because he hadn't seen me in person. . . . It was only October and I was already trembling with cold. I couldn't even answer him . . . I didn't know it would be that cold. [I was wearing] just a light sweater. Well, I expected that my sweater will do, but you need to have thick coat and boots. But my superintendent was good because, about the second day, he came with a coat, with a fur coat. He was so nice. I think it was the coat from the wife. And then, he gave me also boots and the gloves. That made me feel warmer. (T1)

Even Madrona's Special Education students could not help but notice her ill-adjustment to the frosty weather. She recounts, "Oh, my students called me the walking teddy bear because I had double jackets. It was so cold in winter [*laughs*], I didn't want to go for PE" (T1).

However, the temperature was not the only thing that Madrona found chilly in America. Though her superintendent was thoughtful enough to pick her up at the airport, arrange for her lodgings and transportation to school, and give her winter clothes, her reception was less than welcoming at her boarding house. Madrona relates:

I went to Ohio with that old lady there. And the first afternoon she asked me, 'Where are you going to eat dinner?' She . . . wouldn't feed you. I looked at her. Oh, she was eating French fries, steak, but omigosh I didn't know where to eat. 'If you want to eat,' she said, 'there's a store in that corner.' So I went to the store. There was no restaurant. I bought grapes and chocolate; that's my dinner. Until the next day, when we had a meeting in school, and then we were given a good lunch. She was selfish, that old lady. You know what I was thinking? I said, 'Come to the Philippines, even we are poor. I will take you to the closest restaurant and I'll feed you. Or I'll cook you some.' But she won't feed you—that's a different culture. I was complaining, and then they said, 'That's ours. We don't invite people especially when they are not really included in the meal prepared.' (T1)

In this poignant example, Madrona viewed her landlady—and, by implication, Americans in general—as “selfish” and inconsiderate, characteristics which are antithetical to the cherished Filipino values of generosity and hospitality.

There were no other Filipinos, though, with whom Madrona could commiserate or who could have eased her culture shock. According to her, there was “nobody. That's the problem. I didn't have relatives, I was the only Filipino there” (T1). Isolated from the world she knew, Madrona was lonely in her new surroundings:

Oh, I cried and cried and cried. Especially my house is like a mansion, you know, with an old lady. And the house is situated by the Ohio River and the train. And every time the train pass by, I just look. No passers by, no people, very quiet place. So the quietness of the place, oh my, almost killed me. I cried and I said 'Amor, my baby.' Gilmore was only 13 months or 12 months when I left him . . . I missed my big family because every time we ate, we had a long table, you know, and brothers and sisters

are around and we started eating, we laugh, it was a time for socializing. (T1)

The dreariness of rural Ohio and the seeming aloofness and independence of the American people contrasted starkly with the generally gregarious and easygoing culture of the Philippines.

After a few months of autumn crispness and winter gloom, the advent of spring brought some cheer into Madrona's American experience. She says, "my son and my husband followed, February. I came here October and they followed February the next year, 1968" (T1). Though reunited with her loved ones, life as immigrants remained challenging. Madrona narrates,

I moved to another apartment. And then my husband said, 'Oh, is this America?' Because the restroom is upstairs and we were down, the low, those apartments that are not very, very good. So, after about few months, I moved again to a better place. Then he was able to find a job, surveyor in Pennsylvania. So, he had to commute and left Gilmore to a babysitter. It's very hard, it's a very tough life. We had to go to the Laundromat with Gilmore. It was very cold. (T1)

Unlike in the Philippines, where extended family members and domestic helpers assist in bringing up the children, washing the clothes, and doing other chores, Madrona and her husband had to do it all themselves.

Madrona taught for two years in Ohio. She continues, "I got pregnant with Vicky. And to be pregnant, they don't want you to teach. Only up to four months. . . . I quit my job there and came to California. I was assured to come back and still get my position. But the weather is terrible there. I couldn't" (T1). In California, Madrona and her family were finally surrounded by family and other Filipinos. She replies,

Yeah, we have relatives here. My husband's aunts and uncles are here. And brothers. So, we stayed in Indio, in Calipatria before we came to L.A. . . . Of course, I got pregnant with Vicky so I couldn't work. So I did the housekeeping, right this house. We rented one room, it's forty dollars. And the others are all relatives, too. They were working and they give me money. I launder for them, I cook for them. They give me money. And your uncle was the driver for those who are seeking jobs [*laughs*]. Until he find a job in the bakery as a custodian. That's it. Then when we saved a little money and they wanted to sell this house, then we bought it. (T1)

Thus, Madrona and Onofre served as a support system for their relatives, something they themselves could have used when they were in Ohio. In the warmer climate of California and among a larger Filipino community, Madrona and her family thrived. After giving birth to her second child, she began to teach for the Los Angeles Unified School District until she retired twenty-two years later. As Madrona mentions, she and her husband were able to purchase the house in which they had been renting a room since moving to L.A. They have also bought a few other houses since then. Madrona's and Onofre's hard work clearly paid off as, now in their retirement, they live comfortably off of their Social Security and rental incomes (see Figure 5.1).

Madrona's story is typical of the Filipino immigrant experience in America. When these settlers first arrive, they encounter numerous hardships and have to make several adjustments in their adopted country. They may have to become accustomed to dissimilarities in terms of the basic necessities. When it comes to accommodations, for instance, many new immigrants find themselves residing with relatives. As most Filipinos enter the United States via family reunification, it is only natural that they stay with their kin. This is not so much a problem, as Filipinos are used to having extended



Figure 5.1 Madrona preparing her *balikbayan* boxes

relatives in their households. However, there may be some awkwardness when these immigrants and their family members have not seen each other for a long time and have different expectations of each other. This was the case for my family. When we immigrated, my mother, four siblings, and I lived with my unmarried aunt in a three-bedroom townhouse. However, my aunt had been in the US for almost twenty years. My mother had not seen her in that time, and some of us had never even met her. Accustomed to living alone, it must have been quite a shock for my aunt to be suddenly sharing her home with a large family that she barely knew. We, the children, were

probably not what she expected, as we were all pretty independent and not prone to acting differently or tiptoeing around others. After a few months, the relationship between my aunt and my family became strained. She eventually moved to her own apartment, though she is now again living with my mother and another aunt.

Living arrangements can be even more difficult for those who are in the US with work visas or illegally. Some start out staying with distant relatives and friends. Unlike closer kin who might be obliged to provide for their family, others are not necessarily so. While there are many Filipinos who "readily roll out the welcome mat even on the basis of a phone introduction or referral" ("100 Things" 7), others are not so generous. Some relatives may take their cue from the Filipino custom of taking in distant relations, usually from the provinces, but treating them as just a step higher than the domestics. For many of the new arrivals, who tend to be educated and "citized," this kind of second-class arrangement is hard to take. However, as they are in a strange land and have not had time to settle, most have no choice. For relatives and friends who do treat the migrants with hospitality, the novelty wears out after a prolonged period of time. Relationships can become tense, especially when it takes a while for the newcomers to find jobs or move out on their own. Many Filipinos also come to the US by paying certain agencies who promise to obtain employment and work visas for them. After being charged for recruitment, processing, airfare, training, and other fees, these hopefuls also often pay an exorbitant amount for tight accommodations, shared with many others from the same agencies. As for those who do not know anyone in the US, many end up living in dingy apartments until they can find good-paying jobs.

Immigrants may also have to adjust their dietary habits. Most Filipinos are accustomed to eating rice at every meal, while many Americans tend to have bread, cereal, potatoes, or pasta as their staple. At the same time, many of the ingredients Filipinos need for cooking their native cuisine may not be available. Those who live in California, particularly Los Angeles and San Francisco, are fortunate because the large Filipino population has given rise to Filipino stores. Places with a sizeable population from other Asian countries are also favorable, since their markets tend to sell some of the same products. However, those who live in sparsely-populated states or in the suburbs have to be more creative or flexible with their food and might even have to endure the culinary criticism of other parties. As Madrona recalls,

That's the problem because I couldn't take the bread in the morning. Oh I remembered, after five months, my friend from the Philippines, another teacher came. So, we stayed in the same place. . . . And the two of us had to go buy rice and liver in the morning. We fried the liver, and we eat rice. And our landlady, Rita—that was my friend—overheard her talking to the secretary in school, saying 'You know, the . . . Filipina teachers are eating rice and liver in the morning. Can you imagine that?' [*laughs*]. Yeah, because . . . we didn't have Filipino foods. That's what I missed. (T1)

Most Filipinos do learn to eat American or other ethnic foods, though the younger immigrants are likely to be more experimental than the older ones. However, the strong desire for native edibles accounts for the proliferation of Filipino stores and *turo-turo* ("point-point") restaurants in places like Los Angeles and the *balikbayan* practice of bringing back Filipino delicacies from their visits.

Because the Philippines is equatorial, moving to the United States involves a change in climate, as well. Though California, where most Filipinos live, is sunny, there

is a still a variance in temperature, particularly in the winter months. The difference in other states is much more obvious. Thus, immigrants are required to add to their wardrobe, which is an additional expense, or be caught unprepared, like Madrona was. Most newcomers are unlikely to be able to afford the latest fashion. Even though the Philippines is not too far behind the latest fads, the trends might not be entirely the same. This can be a problem for the younger arrivals, as their schoolmates could be very vocal in their comments. When I was attending junior high and high school, some new immigrants could be picked out by their distinctive style, or what is perceived as their lack of style, and were labelled “FOB” or “fresh off the boat.”

Once in the US, going places also requires minor adjustment. Since they are new in the country, immigrants are unlikely to own cars or know their way around. They might have relatives or friends who can help them. For example, when my family came, my two aunts initially drove us to get our IDs and to other such important appointments, as well as to see the sights. Madrona also had someone to take her to work. She relates, “My superintendent arranged Ms. Beattie to pick me up every morning to go to school. I remember paying her twenty-five dollars a month for the ride, which is good” (T1). When they do not have access to carpooling, newcomers have to rely on public transportation. In the Philippines, jeepneys, tricycles (motorcycles with a passenger cab attached to their sides), and *tristikads* (“bicycle version of tricycles”) are the most common modes of everyday, short-distance land travel. These vehicles, or a combination

of them, usually take passengers to their doors or as close² as possible. In the US, buses are the way to go and are complemented by subway or rail systems in major cities. As these have designated stops, Filipinos and other riders might have to walk quite far to reach their destinations. They also have to study their routes meticulously, as any mistake will result in a retracing of the journey or an even longer walk. This is especially true in Los Angeles, where the transit system is not too well-developed. In such a sprawling metropolis, the commute can be extremely long and tedious.

Aside from differences in the basics, immigrants face an even greater challenge when it comes to lifestyle and convention. An obvious behavioral transformation involves household chores. As I mentioned previously, the presence of extended relatives means shared responsibilities and makes domestic work easier to handle for most Filipinos in the Philippines. Those in the work force do not have to worry about tasks awaiting them at home, as those who are unemployed tend to do most of the work. In addition, as many of the recent arrivals belong to the professional and middle-classes, they are accustomed to having domestic helpers to cater to their needs. Thus, coming to the US and learning to do the chores is a drastic change for many Filipinos. This was certainly true for my family. Alicia, my mother, had been working since she was 16 years old, so the domestic labor was left to her mother and sisters. When she had a household of her own, there were usually at least two helpers to take care of us and the house. Needless to say, none of the children knew too much about cleaning. With nobody to do

² Many houses are not along the roads and can only be reached on footpaths.

it for us once we were in LA, we were all forced to do our share. I learned to cook, my sister and brother washed the dishes and pots, we did our laundry, and so on. We did not really do the chores well, which probably also added to my aunt's frustration, but we managed.

Once they are exposed to the general American public, many of the new immigrants are dismayed. Though Filipinos are Westernized in some ways, many of the values and realities they encounter in the US clash with their strong, predominantly Catholic sensibilities. The American penchant for individualism and independence often runs counter to the Filipino emphasis on family closeness and loyalty. Older Filipinos will almost always point to the lack of deference towards and regard for the elderly as a sign of the lack of family values. As Dulce expresses,

... it's really a real shock, culture shock. That's what I don't like. Because, we have really to be frank: with people here who have been raised in the Philippines, we have so much respect for parents, for the elderly people, but not so much with people raised here or in the United States. And that's otherwise that the parents have been raised in the Philippines before, who have reared children here have ingrained in them the real Filipino culture—to be respectful, to do the *amen*, you know, *mano*³ [motions]. *Po*,⁴ answering with *po*, although there's no *po* in the United States language, the English language, but they could say it such a manner that you miss, sometimes that's missing. (T10)

³ As a greeting, younger Filipinos will bring the older person's hand to their forehead. This is the *amen* or the *mano* and is a sign of deference.

⁴ According to "100 Things," "*po*, [*ho*.] *opo*, *mano po*" are "speech suffixes that define courtesy, deference, final respect—a balm to the spirit in these aggressive times" (24 July 1998:3). *Po* or *ho* are used almost in the same way as sir or ma'am.

In addition, most newcomers are appalled by the prevalence of foul language, premarital sex, teenage pregnancy, and divorce. Many Filipinos are even mortified by the American tendency towards frankness or brutal honesty when dealing with others, as they themselves are sensitive to *pakikisama* ("smooth interpersonal relationships") and keeping face.

The variance between the two cultures is magnified when Filipino parents and their American-raised children disagree. While many parents do attempt to instill Filipino values in their children, they are not always as successful when they are so far away from the society which reinforces the lessons. Thus, when young Filipino Americans adopt some of the American norms, many parents are often at a loss. At the same time, their Filipino pride prevents them from seeking outside help, as this would bring *hiya* or shame to the family (Posadas 101). This is not to say that all American values are bad, but that they may be perceived negatively by Filipinos when they collide with the ideals of their homeland. For instance, when I was in the Philippines, an aunt and I had an altercation over her family's lack of respect for my family's personal space and possessions. Though my brother and sister-in-law had long been suffering under their encroachment, I was the first one to confront it. When explaining it to my mother over the phone, my aunt commented that I was just too "*Amerikana*," as if that was the reason for the disagreement. While this particular conflict occurred in the Philippines, it mirrors the battles between traditional Filipino immigrants and the younger, American-reared generations. These kinds of tensions can then rupture the family unity, or at least the façade of it, so highly-prized by Filipinos.

Hard work also accompanies immigration, even for the aged. For instance, Juanita came to the US when she was in her 60s and looked after her grandchildren. Later on, in her early 70s, she worked for Isabel as a live-in nanny and housekeeper. This work imperative applies to much younger migrants, as well. My brother, Allan, for instance, was 19 years old when we arrived in the US. He had to forego the college education that he started before he left the Philippines and worked at a warehouse to help support our family. Only now, fifteen years later, has Allan been able to resume his studies, taking one night class at a time. Our sister, then 18, faced the same circumstances. Halfway through college when we immigrated, she also had to obtain employment once in the US. Unlike Allan, though, she shortly began to take night classes at the city college and eventually transferred and became a full-time university student. Though both Allan and our sister lead comfortable lives now, immigration clearly required them to make sacrifices in their youth.

In addition to adjusting to different living conditions and societal values, immigrants suffer tremendous loneliness and homesickness. This is especially the case for those who come to the US alone, as Madrona did. However, even those who are joined by family still miss the Philippines, their remaining relatives, and their friends. I remember how miserable I was when my family came to the US. I cried a great deal, especially when I was writing to my old schoolmates. My pain was eventually eased by new activities and friends. For those who immigrate when they are older, though, it is much more difficult. For example, Dulce immigrated when she was 60 years old. Despite the fact that she came with her husband, is residing with their daughter and her family,

and has siblings who live an hour or two away, she still longs to go home. She admits, "I'll be one year here in October, and I plan to go back because I feel homesick for my other children. And, also, I still want to experience the life that I used to live there [laughs], like not having to do all the things you do in here [laughs]" (T10). Coming to the US in her retirement years and having to babysit her grandchildren probably does not make American life too appealing.

Fortunately, for today's immigrants, there are now numerous ways to alleviate their homesickness. Many times, I have told my newly-arrived niece that she is lucky in this respect. When my family came to the US, the only way to keep in touch with those in the Philippines was through letters. Though phone calling was a choice then, it was expensive. Later on, long-distance phone companies began to offer discount and reward plans to their Filipino consumers (Okamura 392; Posadas 142). Within the last two years, a cheaper option has emerged: prepaid phone cards. Though cards have been available for a few years, it is only recently that they have begun catering to Filipinos and at bargain prices. For those who do not have access to these cards, the Internet offers alternatives. Through websites such as net2phone.com and paltalk.com, anyone can call from his or her personal computer to a phone in the Philippines for just under 20¢ a minute, while PC to PC calls are free. Without cost, one can also send text messages from the Internet to mobile units, such as cellular phones and pagers, in the Philippines. Electronic mails and e-cards are easy, cost-efficient ways to communicate with the old country, as well.

In addition, Filipino immigrants stay connected to the Philippines through "daily newspapers, popular weekly magazines, and television news and entertainment programs

that make their appearance in Filipino American communities very shortly after their publication or broadcast in Manila” (Okamura 392). These media lessen the distance by keeping Filipinos abreast of the affairs in the Philippines and comforting them with familiar cultural depictions. Also, Filipino American newspapers and magazines report about Philippine events, contain news and features about Filipino American people, activities, and interests, and provide Filipino American perspectives to US headlines (see Bonus). Furthermore, Filipino stores sell cassettes and CDs and rent movies and videos from the Philippines, all of which contribute to making immigrants feel more at home.

However, the personal problems of culture shock, lifestyle adjustments, loneliness, and homesickness are not the only negative aspects of immigration to the US. Because of their ethnicity, Filipinos are subject to the more serious threats of prejudice and discrimination, as well. For early immigrants, the injustices were very blatant, as described in Chapter Two. Their harsh working and living conditions were compounded by the racist attitudes of the American public. Like other Asian immigrants and people of color, they were targets of namecalling, exclusionary acts, anti-miscegenation laws, discriminatory practices, and racial violence (Bogardus 51-62; Clifford 74-89; Cordova 115-120, 191-195; Melendy 38-42; Pido 91; Posadas 20-24; and UCLA AASC Staff 63-71). Unlike these pioneers, recent Filipino immigrants no longer have to contend with legislatively-sanctioned discrimination, but they still face certain forms of prejudice. The namecalling and stereotyping persist, for example. Activist Steven de Castro writes, “‘What’s up, monkey?’ ‘Hey Ching Chong! Hey eggroll!’ ‘Here comes the gook!’ If you are Filipino in America, that is what you grow up hearing in the schoolyard. All you

want to do is belong, but black and white classmates never let you forget that you will never belong in America” (304). A university student from Hawaii tells a similar story:

Throughout my days at elementary school I had an acute fear that someone would discover that I was Filipino. It was open season on Filipinos. There were the ‘book book’ [sic] jokes, other derisive nicknames created by students, and a large number of stereotypes expounded and attributed to Filipinos. They were labeled as being stupid, backwards, and capable of only the most menial jobs available. (qtd. in Revilla 101)

What makes this student’s account even more significant is that it resembles the experiences of her father twenty years before.

Outside the schoolyard, racism towards Filipinos becomes more subtle and is combined with sexism. As de Castro continues,

A white man will say to you ‘Oh, you’re Filipino? I love your women!’ or he will smile and start off a story, ‘I remember when I was in the navy...’ Every Filipino knows how the white man’s story goes: how he went whoring out of Subic Bay, and fucked some underage sister, and he thinks that proves what a man he is, and he never for one minute thought about the misery of our sister’s life that forces her to sell her dignity to some dumb drunk piece of shit like him. And that’s the first indignity. The second indignity is that this guy is telling this dumb story to you and is saying, ‘I love your women!’ (304)

I, myself, cannot remember how many times I have heard men saying, “I love Filipinas” or “Filipinas are beautiful.” I recall a particular incident at a diner, when I was approached by an old man (he was 50 or older and I was about 20), who proceeded to tell me that he likes Filipinas and that he once had a Filipina girlfriend. Evidently expecting me to be flattered, he went on to ask me to go to the beach with him, and by bus!

In addition to these derogatory views of Filipinas, there are other cases of stereotyping and racism, as well. Emedita Quintos, a Maryland physician, reports: “They

see a female, a tiny Filipina. And they seem to, not everybody, but there were a few patients who did not want female foreigners to attend to their needs. It made me disappointed. It made me a little disillusioned. But, when you have spunk, you stick to your guns that's all" (qtd. in Denton and Villena-Denton 141). In another case, "a college educated newcomer went to a government employment office to find a job and was advised to look for work as an agricultural laborer. The disappointed job-seeker said, 'He simply asked me if I were a Filipino and without opening my folder he gave me an address of a vegetable grower'" (Takaki 64). Some of these stories of discrimination are covered or discussed in the Filipino American community newspapers. While he was doing his study, according to Bonus,

much space in the papers was given to exposing and challenging the blatant forms of racism and sexism expressed, among others, by talk-radio announcer Howard Stern ('They eat their young over there'), a character in the television sitcom *Frasier* (November 29, 1994, episode: 'For that amount of money, I could get myself a mail-order bride from the Philippines'), and superintendents of Filipina nurses (who ordered them not to speak Tagalog at work). (214)

These periodicals, then, become the sounding boards for the issues affecting Filipino Americans, where, as Bonus testifies, "Opinion pieces [try] to make sense of these unexpected and unfamiliar situations, at times exposing painful individual experiences at work and in social settings to measure the extent of the dark sides of the American dream" (214-215).

For Filipinos in America, the most common complaints involve professional barriers, particularly for those in the medical services. As discussed in Chapter Two, one of the objectives of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 was to alleviate

occupational shortages and, consequently, numerous Filipino health practitioners immigrated to the US. However, when the rate of unemployment increased a decade later, medical associations were successful in lobbying for bills, which made it harder for physicians to qualify for admission to the US (Posadas 37-38), while individual states instituted tougher licensing requirements. The complications are evident in the following testimonies:

'In Los Angeles, there are several hundred Filipino unlicensed physicians working in jobs that are totally unrelated to their knowledge and expertise.' Dr. Jenny Batongmalaque told the California Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. 'They have no opportunity to review or to attend review classes. They cannot afford to pay the tuition and they have no time because they have to earn a living to feed themselves and their children.' A Filipino attorney told the committee, 'Filipino doctors are accepted as professionals as defined by the Immigration and Naturalization Service and the Department of Labor. However, when they come here, they are not allowed to practice that profession under which they were granted the visa because of the State's strict licensing procedures. That's an inconsistency.' (Takaki 61)

Fe Patalinghug, a physician's wife, attests to the difficulties during the licensing process:

I tell you how hard it was. He was on training and I was not working. We [had] these four kids. I seldom see him, because it's different when he was on training. He has to go on 24-hour duty. After that, in order to earn a little more—his salary was just not enough for all of us, he has to do some kind of moonlighting. So we don't see each other for two, three nights. And then it was hard for me because I didn't drive. And I didn't know yet the places. I don't know where to buy this, where to buy that, so it was hard. I had to call him sometimes in the hospital to come home and buy me this. I have no more milk, I have no more rice. (qtd. in Denton and Villena-Denton 147)

Filipinos who practice in other health-related fields, such as pharmacists and veterinarians, encounter the same or even greater obstacles (Takaki 61-63).

These kinds of hurdles are not limited to the medical professions, either. Statistics show that, though Filipino Americans tend to have more education than members of other ethnic groups, they have lower occupational status and earn less. Sociologist Jonathan Y. Okamura expounds:

This unequal treatment especially affects professionally trained and college educated immigrants who encounter occupational downgrading from their previous positions in the Philippines. The 1986 survey of Filipino immigrants reported that while substantial percentages of employed men (20.1 percent) and women (34.2 percent) held professional or technical positions in the year before immigrating, these proportions had declined dramatically after two years in the United States for both employed men (9.0 percent) and women (15.3 percent) (E-W Population Institute 1990: 12-14). Occupational downgrading also is evident in the increased number of the 1986 immigrants in blue collar work. While relatively low percentages of male (5.7 percent) and female (9.0 percent) immigrants held service or recreational jobs prior to immigrating, these figures had increased tremendously two years later for both men (33.3 percent) and women (24.3 percent). (396-397)

Such underemployment is a problem for both immigrant and American-born Filipinos.

Besides this widespread form of discrimination, Filipino Americans have also been victims of a few racially-motivated attacks. Prior to World War II, such occurrences were more prevalent and specifically aimed at Filipinos, who were viewed as economic and amorous competition (Bogardus 51-62; Cordova 115-116; Melendy 40). Recent incidents of racial violence tend to be more random and are directed at minorities in general. They include: the police brutality against Rodin and Minerva Rodríguez at their store in Jersey City in 1989 (de Castro 306-307); the arson of Norberto Bautista's South Everett, Washington home in 1996 (Posadas 147); and the beating of Syracuse University student Derrick Lizardo and his friends at a local restaurant in 1997 (Posadas 147). The

latest, somewhat high-profile, hate crime was the shooting death of mail carrier Joseph Iletto in August 1999. An hour after white supremacist Buford Furrow fired at a Jewish community center and wounded five people, he approached Iletto and shot him several times. According to the Washington Post, “[US Attorney Alejandro] Mayorkas said that Furrow has told investigators he decided to kill the man on a whim after spotting him standing next to a postal van and concluding that he was either Hispanic or Asian. ‘He stated that the postal worker was a good ‘target of opportunity.’” Mayorkas said” (Sanchez A01). Though extreme episodes like these are rare, the threat to Filipino Americans is, nevertheless, real.

For many Filipino immigrants, though, the financial rewards more than compensate for these hardships. Madrona explains what it was like for her in 1967: “In the Philippines, to be a teacher, you just get a little pay, you know how teachers are. I got paid about 350 pesos a month, which is just about . . . less than 10 dollars now. Before, it’s like about 20 dollars” (T1). In comparison, her US paycheck was huge. She recalls: “My first pay was 492 dollars. My principal came to the yard, Physical Education, and handed me my check. ‘Ms. Mara, your first check.’ And I looked, and I jumped. When I went home, I computed and then I wrote to my dad. He was already computing my pay. It was only . . . four pesos to a dollar then” (T1). In the Philippines, the wages are so low that family members often need to pool their resources to survive; it is difficult for even the professionals to move away from their families and live on their own salaries. In the US, however, earning the hourly minimum can be sufficient, and that amount is already

high when compared to what people make in the Philippines. There are also many more choices when it comes to jobs in the US. As Isabel explains:

Over here, there's more opportunity 'cause, if you just work hard, you could make money . . . In the Philippines, you have to be a college graduate to find a job. Not only that, to land a real good job, you need to have graduate with honors and you have to have your Master's. Over here, they don't really look for those things. Even a high school graduate can land a good job, right? (T8)

Initially, immigrants might not be able to enjoy their earnings, as they might have some debts to pay off. According to Madrona, for instance, "my first paycheck, I had to pay my fare [*laughs*]. And to pay my sister-in-law because she borrowed some money from the fellow teachers because, to come over here, you have to spend for baggages and pay for all this paper" (T1). Eventually though, immigrants are able to taste the fruits of their labor, sometimes even literally. With her first paycheck, Madrona indulged her taste buds: "Of course, I had to keep some to buy some Butterfinger . . . Because, there in the Philippines, I didn't taste those stuff, chocolate bars. I went there to buy grapes, those things that I haven't really tasted in the Philippines a lot" (T1). In addition, Filipino Americans may purchase cars, furniture, appliances, and other material comforts. Many eventually become homeowners. These things are not so easy to acquire in the Philippines. As Isabel declares:

Yeah, the quality of life definitely is a lot better than the Philippines 'cause, over here, you could pretty much get whatever you want. As far as economy, it's hard in the Philippines even if you make a lot of money. Let's say you work for a bank where I used to work, you can't still afford to get a car. Unlike here, you could do that. So, as far as economy and also the stuff that you can buy here are a lot better than in the Philippines. (T8)

Alicia agrees: "You can buy anything you like here. I remember the time, when I was still working in the Philippines, I had to get a loan in order to buy a refrigerator. Don't make enough money to buy some of these things, which we take for granted here" (T7).

However, one of the greatest satisfactions that immigrants derive from their higher paychecks is that they are able to help their families in the Philippines. As indicated earlier in this chapter, many Filipinos are able to remit a few hundred dollars a month, and this amount is more than enough to make their relatives live more comfortably. This can make the anguish of separation and other difficulties more bearable for many newcomers. As Madrona declares, the US is "much, much better because I can send money. I can help my brothers and sisters. Some of them are still going to college at that time" (T1). Later on, she was also able to help with her mother's medical expenses. Similarly, my cousin was able to pay for her siblings' schooling and her father's hospital bills. She also had her family's house renovated and refurnished. For OCWs, many of whom are from poor families, the remittances are needed. According to Nene, her friend was gratified by the results of her contractual employment. She narrates:

Kana sila pobre man na sila, unya ningadto siya'g Japan. Mao na nakatrabaho siya, unya nahaw-as sila sa kalisod. Unya nalipay siya ba nga . . . wa na sila mag-antos. Sa una, gutom bitaw kuayo sila, lisod kaayo. Manuroy ra gud na siya'g mga kinason, kalbasa kay iyang mama manginhas ra man. Unya mao na nalipay gyud siya nga nakatrabaho siya didto'g Japan. Unya pag-uli niya, nakada siya'g daku-dakong kwarta. Nakatukod sila'g balay. Arang-arang na sila.
 ("Them, they are poor, and she went to Japan. And she was able to work and they arose from their poverty. And she is happy that . . . they are not suffering anymore. Before, they were so hungry, it was hard. She used to go around selling shells, squash because her mother only foraged for

shells. And that's why she is so happy that she was able to work over in Japan. And when she came home, she was able to bring a big amount of money. They were able to build a house. They are better off now.") (T6)

Unfortunately for these OCWs, as well as temporary workers and TNTs in the US, remittances are mostly used to improve their families' statuses rather than on income-generating investments. As these Filipinos are not immigrants and do not have the advantages that go along with that position, they either have to continue being separated from their families or go home, with no job prospects, to a family who has become accustomed to a higher standard of living (see Pertierra).

Legal immigrants to the United States, however, are in a much better situation. As indicated in Chapter Two, many are following relatives who are already here, while others are coming with their families or are soon joined by them. Though, in some cases, the wait for certain family members to obtain their visas are as long as ten to twenty years, at least immigrants have the possibility of being surrounded by their loved ones. Again, this is a benefit that diminishes the hardships of migration. OCWs and TNTs, on the other hand, have no such hope of ending their separation from their families. Once immigrants are reunited with their families, they also see an end to their scrimping for remittances, as their relatives will finally be able to help themselves to better futures.

With good wages in their pockets and thoughts of reunification on their minds, Filipinos proceed to build their lives in the US. As they make friends and get involved in other activities, the pangs of loneliness and homesickness are slowly alleviated. In California, many of the people whom immigrants meet will be *kababayans* or countrymen. In the buses or on the streets, it is not unusual for strangers to ask, "*Pilipino*

ka ba? (“Are you Filipino?”)” Friendships can blossom from these encounters. Immigrants can also make friends through the various Filipino organizations, ranging from “hometown and provincial associations to alumni, trade, and religious clubs” (Bonus 21). The activities of these groups are often announced and covered in the Filipino American papers. These organizations are usually responsible for celebrating Philippine holidays, such as Independence Day and Rizal Day,⁵ and traditions, like *simbang gabi*⁶ (“night mass”), in the US. Of course, immigrants also befriend people from other ethnicities and participate in non-Filipino-oriented pastimes. All of these people and events contribute to the acclimatization of Filipino immigrants and to their success in the United States.

The Twilight Zone

In his study of rites of passage, anthropologist Arnold van Gennep highlights the tripartite pattern of these ceremonies; they consist of “preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and postliminal rites (rites of incorporation)” (11). In many ways, the experiences of Filipino immigrants parallel the various stages of rites of passage. For example, migrants, in their preparations for their departure from the

⁵ This holiday commemorates the death of Dr. Jose M. Rizal by the Spanish firing squad in 1896. His novels, *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*, exposed the atrocities of the Spanish rulers, particularly the friars. Considered to be the national hero, his death is said to have aroused the Philippine movement for independence.

⁶ Also known as *misa de gallo* (“mass of the rooster”), this is a novena of dawn masses held prior to Christmas. In the US, they are actually celebrated in the evenings.

Philippines, saying their goodbyes, and getting exit stamps on their passports, experience separation. The transitional stage primarily consists of the airplane flight, and the filling out of arrival forms and the receipt of entry stamps could be construed as incorporation. Having been admitted by immigration officials, these Filipinos have concluded their journey from the Philippines to the United States.

However, as members of American society, immigrants continue to be “liminal” and “ambiguous” persons. According to anthropologist Victor Turner’s definition, they “elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space”: rather, they appear to simultaneously occupy several categories, yet still be “neither here nor there” and “betwixt and between” (95). As permanent residents of the US, these Filipinos are no longer considered foreigners or outsiders, but neither are they full participants in the system. Without the ability to vote, they have no control over how their cities, states, and country are run; they have no say on laws that affect their lives. They retain this status for at least five years, at which point they are eligible for citizenship. In the citizenship process, immigrants are just like neophytes, in that they have to prove their merit by answering questions about US history and government. If they pass, they are then sworn in as citizens in a mass initiation. Ideally, naturalization should mean that immigrants have successfully crossed a migratory threshold and can now be fully-incorporated members of their adopted country. But, the United States is far from perfect and, as discussed earlier in this chapter, many are still judged by the color of their skins in this country. As Posadas points out, “whether foreign- or native-born, Filipino Americans have been defined as non-white in the United

States, defined as 'other' than the majority in a way that is generally pejorative and frequently racist" (146). Because of such color-coded prejudices, Filipinos in America—be they residents, naturalized citizens, or citizens by right—cannot really escape their liminality.

As immigrants and persons of color, Filipinos are primarily positioned at the interstices or margins of American society. Like other liminal beings, they tend to have no status, rank, wealth, or power. While there may have been distinctions in social standing when they were in the Philippines, those disappear once they come to the United States. Instead, they are usually perceived by the mainstream as homogeneous: they are all Filipinos, Asians, persons of color. However much some elite Filipinos might want to duplicate the class stratification of the Philippines and reclaim their privileged positions in it, they are unlikely to succeed since, for minorities in the US, the proverbial "glass ceiling" remains an obstacle, be it socially, economically, or politically. Therefore, for Filipino Americans, "transition has . . . become a permanent condition," except that, unlike the mendicants and monks cited by Turner, it is not of their own choosing (106). Frequently relegated to the same degraded status, many immigrants then "tend to develop an intense comradeship and egalitarianism" (Turner 95). Filipinos who might never have consorted with each other in the Philippines are regularly brought together by their shared circumstances in the US; they find *communitas*, an "unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders"

(Turner 96). In their case, the powerful figures are those who belong to the ethnic majority.

In order to come to terms with their cultural liminality, Filipinos often turn to the familiarity of easily-identifiable national and cultural identities from their previous, more clearly-defined existence. Rick Bonus discovers this in his ethnography of Filipino American newspapers:

Many readers inform me of how much it means to them to feel 'at home' in a place they have already considered their new home but where they are also still regarded as guests by most people around them. 'I am a citizen of this country now, supposed to be not a foreigner anymore, even though many think I am,' one earlier generation Filipino American reader told me, 'but that doesn't mean I've forgotten where I come from.' Reading about Filipinos, whether from California, other parts of the States, the Philippines, or elsewhere, for these respondents, points to some fundamental ways of dealing with a strong sense of disconnectedness or displacement brought about by immigration and separation. In a world of heightened movements and impersonal arrangements, these Filipinos use the community press to reconnect with each other, not so much to bring the pieces back to their original whole as to reconstruct what used to be and still are discrete aspects of their lives into different forms and products. At the same time, the newspapers also serve as vehicles for the collective sense making of their conditions and experiences here. (212-213)

In their adjustment process then, Filipinos clamor for—even cling to—tangible elements of their preliminal phase. Sometimes, this nostalgic tendency can lead to a sort of meta-Filipino-ness. Isabel confirms this heightened appreciation: "I think I'm more Filipino now than when I was in the Philippines. Because before, when I was in the Philippines, I don't like to watch Filipino movies. Now, I watch Filipino movies and listen to Filipino music, which I don't in the Philippines" (T8). Thus, immigrants consciously bring the Philippines to the USA and continue to reconcile their past with aspects of their new

home. As another of Bonus's respondents sagely reflects. "'I've traveled far already, . . . but I always want to be reminded about my former home. It matters in understanding myself here'" (213).

However, though Filipinos and other minorities are on the peripheries of society, the American majority can be wary of them. This may be because "in-groups" view "out-groups" as posing a threat to their power and dominance. According to Turner, "from the perspectival viewpoint of those concerned with the maintenance of 'structure,' all sustained manifestations of *communitas* must appear as dangerous and anarchical, and have to be hedged around with prescriptions, prohibitions, and conditions" (109). Prejudice and discrimination maintain the status quo, and Filipinos are certainly not immune to them. Yet, because of a deep-seated cultural inferiority complex, in which "America can do no wrong" (Cordova 230), many Filipino Americans often turn a blind eye. Even when faced with racially-motivated violence, most contemporary Filipinos "probably think themselves more likely to be attacked or shot for being in the wrong place, at the wrong time, than for being non-white" (Posadas 147). While other minorities organize and fight for their rights, the Filipino community in general seems to have accepted its subordinate position in the ranks of American society. True to liminal form, Filipinos are often "passive or humble" (Turner 95), meekly grateful for whatever the United States has to offer. Thus, despite the fact that they are one of the largest immigrant groups in the US, Filipino Americans remain essentially invisible in the political and economic arenas, especially in comparison to other Asian groups. They continue to be the "forgotten Asian Americans" (see Cordova).

In the ritual process, the transitional period is often a prelude to an elevation in rank. The humiliation and abasement that characterize this phase prepare the neophytes or initiates for the responsibilities and privileges of their new position. While this might hold true for some immigrants, particularly Caucasians, this is not the case for Filipinos, however much they attempt to conform or assimilate. Instead, the improvement in social standing occurs away from the United States and back in the land from which they have been disconnected because, as discussed in Chapter Three, *balikbayans* are usually accorded a higher status.

When they return to the Philippines, Filipino Americans are reincorporated into their old society and briefly overcome the liminality brought on by immigration. However, they acquire another kind of liminality because, by definition, *balikbayans* are also “ambiguous.” Cultural historian Vicente L. Rafael explains it thus:

As a *balikbayan*, one’s relationship to the Philippines is construed in terms of one’s sentimental attachments to one’s hometown and extended family . . . At the same time, being a *balikbayan* depends on one’s permanent residence abroad. It means that one lives somewhere else and that one’s appearance in the Philippines is temporary and intermittent, as if one were a tourist. (“Your Grief” 2)

Balikbayans, then, straddle the two worlds of their native and adopted lands, yet not quite fully integrated in either. For them, the sense of “betwixt”-ness has become “an institutionalized state” (Turner 107). While *balikbayans* are continuously liminal, they do temporarily and partially become “post-” during their visits to the Philippines.

Clearly, most Filipinos have become hyper-liminal beings as a result of their migration to the United States. They have been dislocated from the people and culture

that they hold dear. Their return to the Philippines as *balikbayans* is often a reflection of their desire to be (re)connected—to family, friends, homeland, and culture. Madrona, for example, went home for the first time because “I felt so homesick. I just felt so homesick, that’s why. And I didn’t teach summer school, so I said I’d go. Plus my mom and my brothers and sisters are always writing me. ‘Please come home, we miss you, please come home.’ So, I went home” (T1). She continues, “You cannot get out from your roots—you always go back. I always go back. There are things that are sentimental, like I always go to the old house” (T1). Judy’s account corroborates this longing, “*Pero kato sad sa akong brother-in-law sad, ang iya lang mingawon kuno siya sa mga bata. Mao tong nibakasyon siya* (“For my brother-in-law, his [reason] was that he misses the children. That’s why he came for a vacation”))” (T5). This craving for membership is consistent with Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory, as encapsulated by Cruz, that “people do things in response to certain needs: physiological, safety, love, self-esteem and self-actualization” (9). Thus, as Cruz explains, “Tourists are trying to fulfill some kind of need when they travel. For instance, those who visit friends and family are addressing their emotional (love and sense of belonging) needs. Others, such as those who climb mountains, may be motivated simply by the need to reach their potential (self-actualization)” (9). Therefore, having been separated from some of their loved ones and not exactly feeling like they belong in their new surroundings, Filipino Americans visit the Philippines in order to renew or reinforce old affiliations.

Balikbayan boxes play a great role in the returnees' reconnection with their families and communities. In his discussion on rites of territorial passage, van Gennepe points out that

. . . foreigners cannot immediately enter the territory of the tribe or the village; they must prove their intentions from afar . . . This preliminary stage; whose duration varies, is followed by a transitional period consisting of such events as an exchange of gifts, an offer of food by the inhabitants, or the provision of lodging. The ceremony terminates in rites of incorporation—a formal entrance, a meal in common, an exchange of handclaps. (28)

As former members of the community, *balikbayans* are not complete strangers and, thus, could forego the preliminary stage (or, at least, not have to go through a prolonged one). However, they do go through the remaining rituals. Boxes filled with *pasalubong* facilitate *balikbayans'* re-entry into the society, as "exchanges have a direct constraining effect: to accept a gift is to be bound to the giver" (van Gennepe 29). In return, these visitors receive food and housing. The initial sharing of food and drink marks the *balikbayans'* re-incorporation. Thus, though these events are not necessarily formal or sequential, the various ritual components are obviously present.

The Gift

Much of the literature on exchange agrees that there is no such thing as a "pure gift" for "prestations which are in theory voluntary, disinterested and spontaneous . . . are in fact obligatory and interested" (Mauss 1). In his anthropological studies on the Trobriand Islanders published in the early 1920s, Bronislaw Malinowski describes "pure gifts" as a category that includes "the gifts of husband to wife and of father to children"

(59). Forty years later, he recants his argument, acknowledging that he is guilty of “tearing the act out of its context, of not taking a sufficiently long view of the chain of transactions”: and that, instead,

the really correct account of the conditions—correct both from the legal and from the economic point of view—would have been to embrace the whole system of gifts, duties, and mutual benefits exchanged between the husband on one hand, wife, children, and wife’s brother on the other. It would be found then in native ideas that the system is based on a very complex give and take, and that in the long run mutual services balance. (59)

Thus, according to both Mauss and Malinowski, gifts are not given freely; rather, they belong to an intricate system of exchange and reciprocity usually based on relations and obligations.

Gift-giving implies a relationship between the giver and the recipient. As sociologist David Cheal puts it, “a gift is a ritual offering that is a sign of involvement in and connectedness to another” (152). In the act of giving, the donor is maintaining or initiating an association with the other person, who is then obligated to accept or be viewed as rejecting the giver’s overtures of friendship and intimacy (see Mauss). In addition to the obligation to accept the gift, the recipient is also constrained to repay the gift. In the gift-giving dialectic (as opposed to commodity exchange), however, repayment does not constitute a dissolution of obligation; instead, “it recreates it by reaffirming the relationship of which the obligation is a part” (Carrier, “Gifts, Commodities” 124). It is precisely the centrality of this renewing quality which leads anthropologist Annette B. Weiner to propose replacing the reciprocity approach to exchange with what she terms a “model of reproduction,” arguing that “norms of

reciprocity' must be analyzed as part of a larger system—a reproductive system—in which the reproduction and regeneration of persons, objects, and relationships are integrated and encapsulated” (71).

For *balikbayans*, the boxes they bring with them are sites for the “reproduction” of their affective ties in the Philippines in that these packages primarily contain *pasalubong* for the people that *balikbayans* care about the most. For example, Madrona brings presents for her siblings, nieces, and nephews, as well as her mother when she was still alive (T1, V1), while her sister, Dulce, hands out gifts to her children, grandchildren, and in-laws (T10). Monty gives presents to “friends and cousins, mostly cousins” (FN1) (see Figure 5.2), while Joseph bears *pasalubong* for “family, relatives” (FN3). In



Figure 5.2 Monty at LAX with his *balikbayan* box and other luggage

addition, *balikbayan* boxes usually include goods for distant relatives, neighbors, and other members of the community with whom returnees have some kind of relationship, but on a far less intimate level. According to one of the women at LAX, she has presents for “neighbors ‘cause they always come and ask for something” (Anon. FN2), while Alicia brings articles for old officemates and neighbors, though she does not always deliver them personally (T3, T7).

In a kinship-based society like the Philippines, it is logical that the bulk of the contents of *balikbayan* boxes are intended for immediate family members and other relatives. As sociologist James Carrier states,

Gift transactions within stable relationships are obligatory, however. Family and household members are expected to do things willingly for other members and to accept willingly what other members do for them. . . . Even when there is little affection among close kin, they are obligated to continue to transact with each other, and generally do so. (“Gifts, Commodities” 124)

When in the United States, some Filipino immigrants fulfill their obligations through their remittances. However, the more personal way of displaying their affection and commitment is through their *balikbayan* visits and gifts. While it is understandable for *balikbayans* to bring presents to their close relatives, they are also usually compelled to give to extended kin, even if they are not too fond of some of them, because they want to maintain family solidarity or, at least, the appearance thereof.

Oftentimes, it is difficult for Filipinos in America to show their regard for the people who are so far removed from them or, as Cheal refers to it, “under conditions of ‘intimacy at a distance,’ where substantive values are problematic” (164). In these

circumstances, care becomes commodified, and nowhere is this more exemplified than in the *balikbayans'* boxes. These cartons are brimming with presents that signify the returnees' affections for and connections to people in the Philippines. However, rather than consumerism displacing family values as was Anna Jarvis's complaint regarding Mother's Day (see Schmidt), *balikbayans* use it to reinforce or reestablish relational ties. In this case, economics preserves and sustains family unity, instead of threatening or destroying it.

Balikbayans can show their devotion in obvious ways, such as Madrona's bringing of "Pampers for my ailing mother" or her sister who "one time brought home pillows, even pillows, because they are very soft. And my mom is disabled, so she has to have soft pillows" (T1). More often, though, this affection is expressed in terms of giving satisfaction. As Alicia declares, "You bring stuff to please them. That's the essence of giving gifts, to please them, to give them things which they cannot afford to buy there" (T3). Allan, for example, brought cigarettes "*para pasalubong*" ("for gift") to Joey because he likes cigarettes" (T2). He also gave basketballs to his neighborhood friends "*para makaduwa ug basketball ug gay hilig ug basketball among barkada*" ("so that they can play basketball and because our buddies are fond of basketball")" (T2). Sometimes, it is easier for *balikbayans* to please relatives because, as mentioned in Chapter Four, they make requests for specific things. Dulce, for instance, strives to meet her family's expectations: "Well, we try, we try hard. Because . . . as much as possible, being a grandmother, I want to please my grandchildren. That's it, you'll experience this when

you will grow as old as I am, maybe when you become a mother or what” (T10).

Therefore, with their *pasalubong*, *balikbayans* aim to satisfy and delight their loved ones.

While the tangible gifts provide pleasure and gratification to the recipients, it is the consideration and effort behind them that testify to the *balikbayans*’ love and friendship. For Alicia, the *balikbayan* boxes that bear these *pasalubong* “symbolizes ties, family ties. To me, it is. You remember them, you think of their needs, that’s it. Yeah, that’s what they want, that’s what they need . . . Or I buy stuff which I [*emphasis*] think they would want or I think would be good for them or I think could help them” (T7).

With an eye towards satisfaction, the thought that goes into these presents is indicative of, perhaps even correlative to, what *balikbayans* think of their recipients. However, though “the art of true caring and friendship is to know what will please one’s loved ones”

(Hendry 13), this awareness can be difficult from across the ocean. In this case, the act of giving—not just the gift itself—becomes more meaningful. Rhea explains:

When you’re much longer to that place, I guess it’s proportional ‘cause people miss you a lot. So, in return you give them something so they’ll know you were thinking about them, too. . . . What I mean is that, *pag naa kay ihatag gud sa usa ka tawo, maski unsa pa na siya ka gamay, maski unsa na siya ka barato* (“when you have something to give to a person, no matter how small, no matter how cheap it is”), the fact *nga pag-uli nimo dinhi, imo siyang nahinumduman* (“that when you came home here, you remembered him/her”), that’s already something. Thinking of buying something for that person is a sign that you were thinking of that person already, you still remember that person. And I’m for sure that those past years or past days that you were not in the home or you were not here, you surely miss those people around you. And by bringing something, it’s just an exchange of it. (T4)

The significance of the gesture is, therefore, not lost on the recipients. As Judy adds,

... mura'g kanang hangop sud na ... sa kanang nagda bitaw. Mura'g bale sa kadugay na gud sa panahon gud, unya karon pa siya ni-uli, unya gidad-an ka ana. Bisag unsa, basta gikan didto, bisag used pa, basta gikan didto, malipay man gyud ang dad-an. O, kay layo gud kaayo na, no. Layo'g gi-adto-an, unya dugay na kaayo nga wa mo magkita. ("... it's like the rapture ... of the one who is bringing it. It's like, after such a long time, and then s/he's just coming home now, and s/he brought you something. Anything, as long as it's from there, even if it's used, as long as it's from there, the recipient will be happy. Yes, because it's so far away. S/he went so far away, and then it's been so long that you haven't seen each other.") (T5)

These *pasalubong*, then, embody the presenters' consideration and affection. As Dulce encapsulates, "You have your love in that box for people back home because you purchased something for them ... It symbolizes something about love for people back home" (T10).

However, the gifts that are distributed during the *balikbayans'* visits are only the conspicuous end results of a complex, sometimes lengthy, process. Aside from the thought involved in the selection of the *pasalubong*, there is a multitude of other activities involved in the *balikbayan* box practice, as described more fully in the preceding chapter. While all of these steps contribute to the successful performance of the custom, this attention to detail is just as much a manifestation of the returnees' desire for reconnection as the presents themselves. In *Wrapping Culture*, anthropologist Joy Hendry bemoans that "[w]e have been so concerned recently with the notions of 'deconstruction' and 'unpacking' that we have failed to take enough notice of the construction itself, of the value of the packaging that we so quickly throw away" (7). In the *balikbayans'* case, the gifts certainly tend to take center stage and, while they do reveal something of the givers'

intent, it is perhaps the overall preparation and execution that is more telling of the *balikbayans'* sentiments.

For example, I have come to see the manner in which *pasalubong* are packed as an allegory for the types of relationships *balikbayans* have with those in the Philippines. The gifts have to be arranged in such a way that the more delicate items will be protected during transportation. The first to go in are usually the heavier and sturdier objects. These serve as the foundation for the boxes, just as the *balikbayans'* more substantial connections ground them despite the dislocating effects of immigration. The leading placement of these things mirrors the primary position held by the people closest to the returnees. Also, since they are the first to go in, this means that they will not be left behind, just as immigrants are unlikely to abandon their deepest bonds. Next, the breakables are carefully wrapped in clothing or other soft objects (T7). Similarly, Filipinos give greater attention to their fragile associations, as those often have to be coddled. This safeguarding proves that, despite the extra effort, these objects and persons remain indispensable. In addition, the rest of the soft materials are placed on the sides and tops of the boxes to provide more padding. In the same way, *balikbayans* have to be careful of their affiliations. Finally, the lighter articles are put on top, while small and malleable things become fillers. Likewise, returnees will have minor or superficial ties and they may not be too concerned about these. These items and individuals will be allowed in, only if there is available room for, just as the boxes have weight restrictions, so are the *balikbayans* likely to have limits as to how many associations they can successfully sustain.

Besides the arrangement of the contents, other aspects in the preparation of the *balikbayan* boxes show the returnees' wish to be reincorporated smoothly into their families and communities in the Philippines and the essential role of these parcels in achieving this goal. As described earlier, *balikbayan* boxes are flat when they are purchased from the stores and need to be assembled. Because these cartons will be carrying up to seventy pounds of goods, travellers like the ones interviewed in Chapter Four put tape—duct tape, packing tape, or other kinds—all over these containers, particularly at the seams and corners. This allows the boxes to keep their shape and ensure that they do not fall apart. In the same way, relationships have to be molded and, since immigration physically severs Filipinos from some of their loved ones, they have to be fortified, as well. So, while the tape seals these packages, their contents serve to secure the *balikbayans'* connections in their native land. And, just as some Filipinos tie twine or other types of rope around these cartons to provide further support for the boxes and make them easier to carry, returnees have to reinforce their affiliations as much as possible, too. They do this through their *pasalubong* and other means. At the same time, the ropes are visible reminders of the ties that bind *balikbayans* to the Philippines (see Figure 5.3).

With the use of Pentel pens or markers, travellers label their cartons with their names and destination addresses; some also include their addresses in the US. This information obviously serves as identification, just as the boxes themselves mark the returnees as *balikbayans*. Others also write “fragile” or “handle with care” on their packages if these have not been preprinted already. While these words refer to the



Figure 5.3 Packed box as allegory for the “ties that bind” *balikbayans* to the Philippines

delicateness of the contents, they are also descriptive of the travellers’ relations with those in their native land, as well as their social status when they are visiting. Since *balikbayan* boxes are so common and uniform, some returnees put ribbons or other colored objects on them. Combined with the varying hues and styles of the tape, rope, and markings, these make the packages more distinctive, so that they can be quickly discerned and retrieved amongst the chaos at the luggage carousels. Similarly, returnees have to be able to rise above the disorder brought about by immigration. Though *balikbayans* are often perceptibly different from the locals, they are still recognizably Filipino and, indeed, they would need to retain some of their Filipino-ness to ensure more

harmonious fellowships with those in the Philippines. In going through this process, travellers' hope to accomplish their goal of maintaining the integrity of both boxes and relationships.

There are also other steps, frequently included in the *balikbayan* box tradition, which aid in the maintenance of the returnees' ties in the Philippines. For example, as discussed in Chapter Four, the labelling of the *pasalubong*, the giving of equivalent presents, and the separate distributions allow the *balikbayan* to give out the presents with a minimum of confusion and argument as to whom the gifts belong to. These precautions and solutions help to support and cement the *balikbayans'* bonds in the Philippines. Immigration is already such a disruption to their relationships with these people that, by circumventing or allaying possible disappointments, returnees expect that their homecoming would be the opposite and be a genuine re-union.

In accordance with practices described in the gift-giving discourse, recipients in the Philippines, particularly kin, are obliged to return the gesture and reaffirm the association. Some might reciprocate in the form of going-away presents. According to Alicia, "They're not obligated, but . . . because of the Filipino sense of gratitude, they buy something, some food stuffs and items to take back home here, like pastries and other stuff" (T7). This is rare, though, and might only happen if the *balikbayans* were unable to partake of these foods during their stay. Usually, the locals procure the native delicacies and anything else the *balikbayans* want while they are still visiting. More often, as discussed in the previous chapter, recipients give *padalas* to those who were unable to visit the Philippines. For the travellers, reciprocation goes beyond mere merchandise.

The primary form of remuneration is the hospitality that the locals offer them. Relatives and friends usually provide the returnees with or arrange for accommodations, transportation, and meals for the duration of their stay. Though it is more common for the *balikbayans* to pay for their and everyone else's expenses, some natives might treat them to dinner or an outing once or twice. According to Isabel, "Usually, if they come over, we just go out, we treat them outside, like we just bring them to dinner" (T8). If they cannot afford to do so, locals are always helpful in their suggestions for places to go and things to do. Oftentimes, they even take time out from their jobs, in order to spend time with and entertain the travellers. As Rhea exemplifies:

I always give my time, that's all. If that person needs company, I could always give that person my time. That's all I could give 'cause I don't have money. I could give them material maybe as days go by. I could give them if I have money. I could treat them out, I could buy some stuff that that person can remember when she goes back. Yeah, I could give, but most of the case, it depends on who the person is. If that person is really close to me, why not? Yes, I've done that. A puppy, I treat her out, books, shirt, and of course time, most of it time. 'Cause I don't have money, as I've said. (T4)

So, rather than reciprocating in the form of material goods, most locals do so in kind, with their warm reception, accommodation, transportation, meals, time, and anything else to make the returnees' visit as comfortable and enjoyable as possible. Therefore, as Levi-Strauss points out, "goods are not only economic commodities, but vehicles and instruments for realities of another order: influence, power, sympathy, status, emotion" (63). *Balikbayans*, then, exchange consumable goods for immaterial benefits, which, in turn, are the bases of their relationships to family and community.

Temporary Connection

Though exchange and reciprocity continue throughout the *balikbayans'* stay in the Philippines, the *balikbayan* boxes cease to be the center of attention and are often disposed of as soon as they have been opened and their contents distributed. Just as the boxes are disposable and temporary, so are the returnees' reconnections with their relatives and friends. When they are in the Philippines, Alicia elucidates,

You catch up on stories, you catch up on what's happening, you catch up on everything—what happened between this time and that time before and this time now. . . . Not exactly [the same]. Because you can't develop that exact closeness in such a short span of time. And besides, you're out most of the time. You're not with them. What's closeness? It's relative. Like Joey [her son], we're still close. It's just that we don't know what has been happening, all the little things that's happened while we're both away from each other, but we still feel the same degree of closeness. . . . There's not much time to really catch [*emphasis*] up with everything that has been happening, but it doesn't mean that the closeness is not there. You're still close in terms of feeling, of emotion, of attachment. It's still there. (T7)

So, when Filipinos immigrate, their affection for those left behind is not diminished. However, they do lose the intimacy that comes as a result of constant companionship. During their visit, *balikbayans* recapture some of that familiarity, but the limited time frame prevents them from fully regaining the same degree of cohesion as prior to immigration. Furthermore, the visitors' departure again distances them from these people and the relationships revert to the status quo.

At the same time that they are getting reacquainted with their relatives and friends in the Philippines, *balikbayans* often become accustomed to certain elements of the Filipino lifestyle, which sometimes make them want to extend their stay. Madrona explains: "You know, if you go home, sometimes you don't feel like coming back

because, there, you have a maid. I didn't even prepare my coffee. . . . I like that. And they have to go to the market, buy these fresh foods—fresh fish and vegetables, you know the food that you usually do not eat here—the vegetables and the fruits” (T1). I, too, enjoy many things about being in the Philippines. Similar to Madrona, I like having other people to do the housework and being able to eat Filipino foods. I also like the fact that everything is so inexpensive. The best part for me, though, is seeing my friends and being with my loved ones after such a long interval. Other returnees, particularly those who have not been in the United States for too long, are even more content and happy in the Philippines. Dulce articulates: “Oh, I feel very much at home because the Philippines is really a real home for Filipinos who have been raised in there. People . . . born here, of course, this is home, United States is home for them. But I still prefer the Philippines as my home” (T10).

However, while there are many positive aspects to being in the Philippines, many *balikbayans* also find some parts unappealing. For example, according to Madrona,

Sometimes I think of going home. We tried that when we just retired to go there six months. But not even six months yet and I told my husband . . . ‘Let’s go home.’ I miss the comfort, you know . . . It’s too hot over there and dusty because of the tricycles by our place. Our house is by the university and high school, elementary. It’s too busy and I couldn’t sleep at night. It’s too much, the noise. And I don’t have a car there, so I have to ride a tricycle. (T1)

While such negative aspects deter many *balikbayans* from staying in the Philippines for too long, there are also reasons which lure them back to the United States. Most returnees have their immediate families, as well as new friends, in the US, and these people almost always guarantee their return. As Madrona acknowledges, she comes back

to the US because “my family is here [laughs], my house is here, my husband is here. It gets lonely, you know. And now, especially now that I have a grandchild, this little bitty guy here. I miss him a lot there, so I have to come home” (T1). In addition, immigrants have their jobs, houses, and possessions in the US. Moreover, many relish the easy access to capital, as well as the numerous possibilities for upward mobility, self-improvement, and other endeavors. The longer they have been in the country, the more Filipinos adapt to the American lifestyle, as well. Thus, despite their ties to the Philippines, most *balikbayans* prefer to return to the United States. According to Madrona, “It is much better here. . . . It’s much, much better” (T1).

Therefore, because of their Filipino heritage and US residency, Filipino Americans are pulled into two directions emotionally and culturally. This bifurcation in affection must have been evident soon after the start of their exodus to the United States in the late 1960s, since the Marcos administration began taking advantage of it less than a decade later. Rafael asserts that, from the inception of the *Balikbayan* Program in 1973,

. . . balikbayans were treated like tourists in their land of origin. As consumers of the Philippines, balikbayans like other foreign visitors were to be accorded deference and generously accommodated by local officials.

For the balikbayans, the Philippines was served up as a collection of consumable goods orchestrated by the Department of Tourism. Tourist spots, native handicrafts and local food were packaged as fragments of the bayan available for purchase. Alienated from the nation, balikbayans returned to encounter commodified versions of their origins now similarly rendered alienable as tourist objects destined for other places. Within the general rubric of tourism, their strangeness was reworked into a manageable, if not entirely familiar, presence by the state. (3)

The Marcos regime, therefore, constructed *balikbayans* as tourists and consumers. Aware that immigrants are inclined to remain in the United States, the brains behind the original

program preyed on their nostalgia and translated the homeland into purchasable, transportable versions.

Because *balikbayans* are treated as tourists by the government and the citizens, many buy into the tourist traps; they observe the spectacles, view the sights, frequent the beach resorts, and shop at upscale malls. Thus, the splendors of the islands, as well as their reconnection with their loved ones, are probably what stand out from their travels, while any unpleasantness fades into the background. As usually happens in the process aspects of memory-making, the negative aspects are minimized or disappear, while the positive remain and are sometimes exaggerated. So, even if *balikbayans* witness the pollution and the poverty, they are more likely to remember the Philippines as an unspoiled paradise, and they prefer it that way. Therefore, spurred by the tourism industry and abetted by the paradisiacal photographs featured in Filipino American community newspapers, the returnees' memories of home have become commodified, mostly coming from the stuff of which promotions are made.

In addition to selling island destinations, the *Balikbayan* Program serves up accompanying souvenirs. While generic memorabilia, like T-shirts and keychains, are available, the native arts and crafts are more popular among returnees (see Figure 5.4). For instance, Madrona procures

... some souvenirs from Baguio like those *buri* ("native palm") fans, and carved wooden—like the eagle there—all those carved wooden things. Yeah, I got it from there. The birds from the Philippines, the carabaos, just little things that will fill up the bags because it's empty [*laughs*]. . . . And, of course, the fine brooms from Baguio. I also brought coconut midrib broom. And also my icons for Virgin Mary from Manaoag. (T1)



Figure 5.4 Native carving brought by Madrona and Onofre

Many times, the travellers buy symbols of a particular region. According to Allan, for example,

Pagbalik nako, akong gida is crafts, shell crafts, and Santo Niño⁷ figurines, at saka yung . . . Cebu delicacies. . . . Twenty ka small Santo

⁷ The *Santo Niño de Cebu*, or the Holy Child of Cebu, is the patron of the island of Cebu and is one of the well-known icons in the Philippines. Legend has it that, when Magellan landed in Cebu in 1521 and converted its people to Christianity, he gave a statue of the *Santo Niño* to Queen Juana, the ruler's wife. When the Spanish came back in 1565 to colonize the islands, the natives fought back and the conquerors burned the villages. Amongst the ruins, they found a *Santo Niño* in a wooden box; this is believed to be the same one given by Magellan to Queen Juana. This statue is now housed at the Basilica Minore del Santo Niño in Cebu City and is a pilgrimage site for millions of people. Every year, on the third weekend of January, Cebu City holds the *Sinulog* Festival in honor of the *Santo Niño*. Filipinos from all over the country and the world

Niños . . . tapos three big ones. Kay it represents Cebu man. Gay it's native craft sa Cebu. 'Cause I'm proud of Cebu. 'Bisaya to 'bay'⁸ [laughs].

(“When I returned, I brought crafts, shell crafts, and *Santo Niño* figurines, and also those . . . Cebu delicacies. . . . Twenty small *Santo Niños* . . . and then three big ones. Because it represents Cebu. Because it's native craft of Cebu. 'Cause I'm proud of Cebu. 'I am Bisaya, friend' [laughs].”) (T2)

Indeed, the Philippines has a wide array of local handicrafts to choose from and, as “100 Things” points out, they are “portable memories of home. *Hindi lang pang-turista, pang-balikbayan pa!* (“Not just for tourists, also for *balikbayans!*”)” [translation mine]. (7)

Many returnees acquire these objects to show pride in their origins and to remind them of their native land. While some of these are given to friends and relatives in the US, most are displayed in their homes (see Figure 5.5). According to Posadas,

Although few can afford the cost of importing heavy pieces of furniture from the Philippines, most Filipino Americans add Filipino elements to their decor. The ubiquitous wooden *carabao* (Philippine water buffalo), paintings of Filipino scenes, dolls in traditional dress, wall hangings of carved wood or woven fabric, *piña* cloth placemats and napkins, *capiz* shell trays and lamps, maps of the Philippines, and even the Philippine flag can recall the old home in the new. At Christmas, decorations brought from the Philippines or sent by relatives and friends will be hung on the family Christmas tree along with the latest collectibles from the local Hallmark store. (58)

join in the celebration. *Sinulog* time actually accounts for one of the highest *balikbayan* arrivals in Cebu (*Santo Niño de Cebu Assoc. Intl.*).

⁸ A well-known slogan, meaning “I am Bisaya, friend” or “This is Bisaya, friend.” The Visayas is the central region of the Philippines, of which Cebu is the biggest city. The people and the language are called Bisaya.

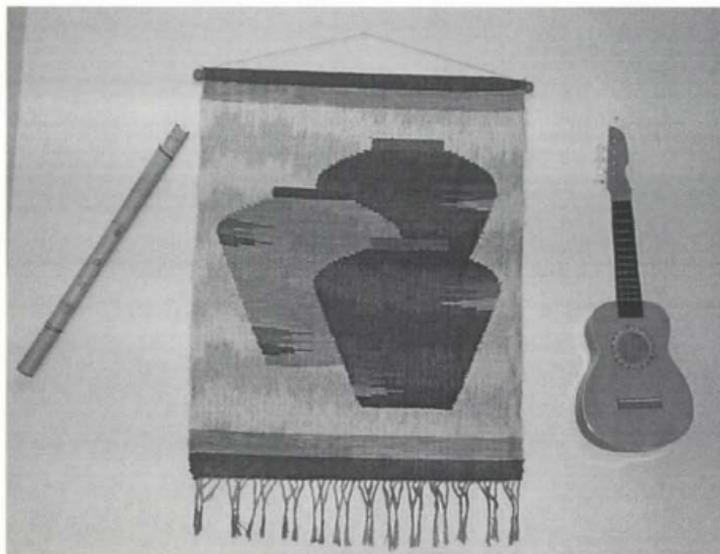


Figure 5.5 Reminders of home in the US

At the same time, these handicrafts can be used to teach younger and US-born Filipino-Americans about their heritage. “I show them to the kids. I tell them about them,” says Madrona. “‘This is the eagle, this is the Filipino national bird, the eagle.’ I have a sampaguita there, which is the national flower” (T1). However, though these things embody ethnicity and remembrance for many *balikbayans*, most of them have become standardized merchandise and, therefore, rendered somewhat inauthentic.

While handicrafts are suitable mementos of their visits, *balikbayans* much more commonly buy the native delicacies of the Philippines to bring back to the United States, as discussed in Chapter Four. The practice of buying these local treats is so prevalent that

there are huge selections, even separate displays, in grocery and department stores, as well as in airports. The preponderance of edibles in the *balikbayans*' acquisitions is quite apropos, since they exemplify the homecoming experience. With these food items, *balikbayans* and their relatives and friends literally have a taste of the Philippines while in America. They consume and ingest these products, just as returnees devour the Philippines and what it has to offer. In the same way that returning to the Philippines satisfies the *balikbayans*' sentimental yearnings, these delicacies feed a hunger for something distinctly Filipino (Figure 5.6). However, just as there is a time limit to the *balikbayan* visits, these victuals satiate the taste buds and stomachs momentarily and only while supplies last. Once they are gone, some consumers are left craving for more, just as



Figure 5.6 Native delicacies momentarily satisfy the craving for something Filipino

some returnees will eventually want to visit again. Food is the most fleeting of all souvenirs, as it is gone as soon as it goes in your mouth. Similarly, *balikbayan* trips are transitory—over as quickly as they begin. But, just as the taste—or the memory of it—might linger, so do the impressions of their visits.

Conclusion

Filipinos belong to a society in which the family is preeminent. The family unit, in this case, includes extended matrilineal and patrilineal kin, as well as those affiliated ritually by *compadrazgo*. Members of the clan, and particularly the nuclear family, are economically, socially, and emotionally interdependent. Since the family is considered to be the source of identity, security, and protection, it deserves utmost loyalty and commitment. The welfare of the household comes before individual desires. In keeping with this duty to promote their family's success, many Filipinos decide to migrate and improve their fortunes in foreign lands.

However, while migration is generally undertaken to benefit their families, it keeps Filipinos far away from the very people to whom they are so close and devoted. The United States, which has the largest overseas Filipino population, is literally on the other side of the world. Once in foreign countries, Filipinos undergo a host of experiences, which diverge from those of the typical Filipino in the Philippines. Immigrants to the US encounter differences in the basics, such as food, clothing, shelter, and transportation. They find an even greater contrast in customs and overall lifestyle. Many Filipino Americans are most noticeably impressed by the higher wages and the

material comforts and alarmed by the lack of family unity and prevalence of crime and licentiousness. As these immigrants settle in, they find suitable employment, make new friends, and acquire numerous possessions. They adapt to their new surroundings and cultural milieu. Undoubtedly, this acclimatization brings about personal changes, which add to the physical distance that separates them from those in the Philippines.

When they immigrate to the United States, Filipinos become liminal beings. Though they complete the actual journey, as well as the citizenship process, they are not truly embraced by American society in general. Whether they try to assimilate or not, they are invariably considered "other" because of the color of their skins. Because of such prejudices, Filipino Americans are unable to fully and freely take advantage of everything the US has to offer. While they do reap economic benefits way beyond what they would have received in the Philippines, they remain outsiders in the place they have chosen to make their new home. Though they have new lives in the US, most immigrants do not relinquish their ties to their native land. They preserve their relationships with relatives and friends in the Philippines, at the same time that they are making new friends and families in the US. They continue to appreciate Filipino culture and uphold the values ingrained by that society, while adapting to American society and adhering to some of its principles. They strive to teach their US-born children about Philippine culture, as well as instill them with Filipino values. Therefore, the transnational existence of Filipino Americans has resulted in a cleavage of affections and a duality in identity and loyalty.

As *balikbayans*, Filipino Americans occupy yet another ambiguous position. By definition, they are a part of and apart from the Philippines. Though they are former residents, they now make their homes elsewhere. However, when they visit, returnees do become post-liminal and are reincorporated into their families and communities with the aid of *balikbayan* boxes. On one hand, *balikbayans* feel an obligation to bring the *pasalubong* contained in these cartons because, according to Monty, the people in the Philippines “expect” it and would be “depressed” otherwise (FN1). Thus, returnees are compelled to do what they perceive as their duty. At the same time, this imperative goes beyond the tangible performance and is, instead, about the underlying values and connections that it represents. *Balikbayan* boxes contain presents for the people about whom *balikbayans* care the most. In the act of gift-giving, returnees are “showing love” (Cheal 166) and reinvigorating and reproducing their relationships with family and friends. This custom is so essential that, “even when you don’t have it, you can find means to give them, to make them happy because you see them only once in several years” (Alicia T3). In this light, then, *balikbayan* boxes can be seen as care packages. They serve as vehicles with which returnees fulfill obligations to, show affection for, and renew ties with relatives and friends.

For the duration of their stay in the Philippines, *balikbayans* and locals execute an intricate dance of exchange and reciprocity. However, while returnees are tempted by the reconnection with their loved ones and the re-familiarization with their culture, their attachments and lives in the US also beckon to them and almost always prevail in the

sentimental tug-of-war. *Balikhbayans* come home to the Philippines, only to leave again.

As Filipino American author, Jessica Hagedorn, poignantly writes:

It is a journey back I am always taking. I leave one place for the other, welcomed and embraced by the family I have left—fathers and brothers and cousins and uncles and aunts. Childhood sweethearts, now with their own children. I am unable to stay. I make excuses, adhere to tight schedules. I return, only to depart, weeks or months later, depending on finances and the weather, obligations to my daughter, my art, my addiction to life in the belly of one particular beast. I am the other, the exile within, afflicted with permanent nostalgia for the mud. I return, only to depart: Manila, New York, San Francisco, Manila, Honolulu, Detroit, Manila, Guam, Hong Kong, Zamboanga, Manila, New York, San Francisco, Tokyo, Manila again, Manila again, Manila again. (“Homesick” 187)

Clearly, immigration creates a dichotomy in the lives of Filipino Americans, and *balikhayan* boxes are symptomatic of this dislocation. As Judy sums up, “*Bisag unsa na nila kadugay didto, mo-ari gyud sila. Unya mao na kanang, mostly, mo-da gyud anang balikhayan box. Kay para sa ilang relatives* (“No matter how long they have been there, they still come here. And that’s why, mostly, they bring that *balikhayan* box. For their relatives”)” (T5). Returnees, thus, convey these packages across the Pacific to signify their love for those who remain in the Philippines. However, the closeness that these visitors achieve during their stay is as impermanent as the cartons that help to reactivate these relationships. Ultimately, *balikhayans* themselves are as transient as the boxes they carry. In the next chapter, I continue to discuss the significance of *balikhayan* boxes. I demonstrate how, as a result of US-Philippines relations, *balikhayans* and their boxes have been positioned as neo-colonists and promoters of US cultural hegemony.

CHAPTER SIX

The Box Stops Here: *Balibayan* Boxes as Sites of Neocolonialism and US Cultural Hegemony

"Groups who are disempowered, whether by sex, race, or religion . . . are taught to internalize the impropriety of their culture or language," according to Pauline Greenhill (58). As discussed in Chapter Two, an American-style public educational system promoted the idea that America is the "land of milk and honey" and, coupled with inequitable trade policies, directed Filipino tastes towards all things American (Constantino, History 291-293, 306-307). Consequently, most Filipinos have romantic notions about the United States. When they immigrate, they discover that some of their ideas are true, but they also experience numerous difficulties. Despite these negative aspects, though, most immigrants continue to hold favorable impressions of the US. When they visit the Philippines, Filipino American *balibayans* often occupy the position of neo-colonizers. By bringing their selectively positive stories of immigration and "Made in the USA" goods, they unintentionally perpetuate the colonial hegemony of the US. In doing so, they ensure the continued domination of the Philippine hinterland by the American heartland.

In this chapter, I examine Filipino Americans' perceptions of America before and after immigration. I suggest that their colonial indoctrination blinds them to systemic biases against them. I also discuss how *balibayans* and their boxes uphold the economic and cultural dominance of the US in the Philippines. I demonstrate that, in their effort to

impress or please those who remain in the Philippines, returnees are re-colonizing their native land and maintaining the allure of America.

Land of Milk and Honey

The century-long history between the Philippines and the United States, as reviewed in Chapter Two, has created a “special relationship” between the two. While many Filipinos continue to believe in the American propaganda that the US has a sisterly interest in Philippine affairs and that the two countries have a special alliance, the uniqueness of the association actually lies in the fact that the Philippines is the only former colony of the US.¹ As such, the Philippines is at the disadvantaged end of an unequal partnership, in which the US has been dominant and reaping countless political and economic benefits at the expense of the Philippines and its people, who continue to struggle in a state of indebtedness and underdevelopment. In the almost fifty years that the US occupied the Philippines, American trade policies and American-style education transformed Filipinos into “entrenched fanatics of ‘the American dream of success’” (San Juan, *Philippine Temptation* 80), as well as aficionados of American commodities. The effects of such indoctrination continue to this day, well after the actual American occupation of the Philippines. Compounded by mass media, which are filled with American images and advertisements, Filipinos remain subject to American capitalist objectives.

¹ Along with the Philippines, Guam and Puerto Rico were also ceded to the US after the Spanish-American War. While the Philippines has since become an independent nation, Guam and Puerto Rico remain territories of the US.

Such inculcation has given Filipinos wondrous and bountiful ideas about America, which contrast starkly with the impoverished reality of the Philippines. Before they immigrated, for example, Harlika and Lambert, fancied the United States to be a fantastic place:

- H: Omigosh, you know what my opinion was?
 L: Ooh, in the postcard, when I was going to school in high school, ooh looks so beautiful. It looks so pretty. Like I was imagining it immaculate, no dust, no leaves, no nothing. No, really! That was my—
 L: Postcards. So beautiful.
 H: Uh-huh. You know I used to read the Plain Truth, you know the Plain Truth magazine?
 L: That's a magazine.
 H: My dad used to subscribe.
 L: Subscribe that.
 H: Plain Truth. They were pretty. Yeah, like the colored pictures. Really pretty. I thought the roads were all marbled, colored marble. That's what I was imagining.
 L: That's what I was imagining, too. (T11)

While Lambert and Harlika obtained their ideas from the print media, their older sister,

Dulce, primarily got her notions from the cinema. She reveals:

Oh, I was given a very beautiful image of America, which is true up to now. [From] my readings, and because the Americans came over to the Philippines to influence our culture and they have given us a lot about their country and all that, and through movies [*laughs*]. That it's really a nice place to get employment because of the climate and everything. You know, the comforts of living provided by the country itself. And most probably, because right now I'm talking as an immigrant, as a senior citizen. I really have the image that I would perhaps be availing of benefits that the US government will have to give senior citizens or elderly people. . . . Well, it's really because I was given the idea before, as I said, as per films—American movies and all that. I love the beautiful place, you know, which is not true as far as [our] country is compared to the US. Everything is in here really, and I really wanted to experience actually what they mean by the United States being a place of milk and honey. That's it [*laughs*]. (T10)

Today, there are considerably more American publications and popular magazines available to Filipinos than were to Harlika and Lambert in the 1960s and 1970s. Filipinos also have more access to films, not to mention television shows from American networks and cable companies. In this age of computers, Filipinos can easily log on to numerous Internet websites as well. From these various media, Filipinos gather their information about and form pictures of the United States.

At the same time, these flattering views of the US have so permeated Philippine society in general that many Filipinos cannot refer to specific sources for their assumptions. In the ordinary course of life, they have absorbed these perceptions. Isabel, for example, was influenced by “family and friends” to believe that America is “the land of bread and honey [*laughs*], something like that. Here, there are more opportunities . . . The difference between the salary in the Philippines and here is just the dollar sign. Pretty much that. And it’s something new, something new that I wanna find out how it is, that I’ve never been here before” (T8). Thus, whether from extensive discussion, passing comments, or hearsay, some Filipinos acquire their opinions from the people around them. There are also others who feel that this is just something they know. Juanita claims that she conceived “*sa sarili ko* (“by myself”)” the idea that the US is “*maganda* (“beautiful”)” and a place where “*maganda ang buhay* (“life is beautiful”)” (T9). Due to the pervasiveness of these concepts, many Filipinos have unconsciously assimilated them into their psyches.

These preconceived images of abundance, in addition to the economic necessity described in Chapter Two, have lured Filipinos to immigrate to the United States. According to Madrona, “My dad usually say, ‘Go to America for greener pasture.’ ‘Because America,’ he says, ‘is flowing with milk and honey’ [*laughs*]. . . . He was still there, had never been here. But he read a lot. He read a lot about America [*laughs*]” (T1). Isabel came to the US “to look for work. Why? Oh, because they have better opportunities here, as far as pay. They pay, you know, it’s more money here” (T8). Similarly, thinking that the US is “a better place than the Philippines. Economically,” Alicia immigrated “in ’85. For better opportunities for my kids. Better job opportunities and better education. I could not afford it anymore with kids being in college and going to private school. ‘Cause I’ve heard that there are student aids of some sort here” (T7). To most Filipinos, therefore, America is, as Lambert encapsulates, “the land of opportunity, land of paradise, land of plenty, land of people” (T11).

When Filipinos come to the United States, many of their expectations are substantiated. Some, like Madrona, find the US to be picturesque. She recalls her impression: “Well, America, I thought, was like paradise [*laughs*]. And that everything is colorful. Like when you watch television in the Philippines, everything is Technicolor—the mountains, the trees. But when I went to Ohio, of course, it was autumn, fall, and the trees, the leaves are turning yellow, orange, and red. And they’re beautiful” (T1). Fortunate enough to witness the kaleidoscopic display of fall foliage in the Eastern United States, Madrona was dazzled by sceneries so unlike anything she had seen in the Philippines. For the majority of Filipinos, who end up in California, they do not

experience the same kind of surrealism. They may, instead, be struck by the organization of the cities and other such developmental aspects. For instance, I remember when we arrived in Los Angeles. It was evening, and I thought the city looked so mesmerizing from the sky, sprawled out in neat blocks and full of twinkling lights. Dulce, too, was delighted by the groundwork. She says:

The first time I came over to the United States in 1983, I loved the place because the facilities are all there, like transportation here. And then even the roads, when it comes to infrastructure, you know, the roads are so wide and I said, 'Oh, I'd love very much to drive in here.' 'Cause I used to drive in the Philippines, I'd like to experience driving in here in America, but which experience was never given me 'cause I was a tourist then and I didn't have the driver's license and it was just a short time that I had to stay here. (T10)

Compared to the narrow, dusty, sometimes unpaved streets in the Philippines, those in the US seem quite opulent. In addition to the physical features of the US, Filipino immigrants like the availability of jobs and, especially, the wages that go along with them, as indicated in Chapter Five.

However, some Filipinos are also disappointed by the real America. As Lambert exclaims, "And then you came here and you go to the ghetto, and you see all the dirt and the gutters that are really stuck with leaves. And then you go to the beach and they're stuck with bottles and needles, the whole—shoot, no good!" (T11). My niece echoes the sentiment. Recently arrived from the Philippines, she confesses that what she has seen of Los Angeles—mainly the area where she lives—does not seem like America to her. When I took her and other relatives for a stroll down a tree-lined, moderately upscale, commercial area in northern California, then she admitted that that was more like what

she envisioned. Also, as described in the previous chapter, Filipinos face numerous hardships, especially at the outset. Thus, Madrona's initial Technicolor impression of America was countered by the coldness of the weather, the indifference of her landlady, her utter loneliness, and her extreme homesickness (T1). While the immigration of her husband and son alleviated Madrona's desolation, it generated other concerns, such as the care of their young son (T1). For this family, those early years in Ohio were difficult.

Despite the struggles, the majority of post-1965 Filipino immigrants that I interviewed still perceive their experiences in the US favorably. As Juanita declares, "*sa palagay ko rin, mas masarap ang buhay dito kay sa Pilipinas*" ("in my opinion, life is more wonderful here than in the Philippines") (T9). Harlika and Lambert concur:

- H: Hmm. It's okay. I mean, I'm so used to it. The system is okay, living conditions—
 L: The thing about US is they're paying me while I'm on my leave [laughs]. For I'm on my back leave, workman's comp.
 H: In general, that's a good thing, huh? The system, the government system.
 L: Health insurance, Medi-Cal.
 H: I think compared to all of the third world countries, that's a good thing. (T11)

Thus, the US offers numerous benefits. As Gil hammingly describes, "The United States is the greatest nation on earth. The most powerful. California has like the gross national product larger than most small countries. We use up the most resources in the world, spend the most, buy the most, export the most" (T11). For the most part, then, it appears that America still lives up to its image.

The positive attitude toward America is significant considering the challenges many Filipinos face on a daily basis, including the racism and prejudice discussed in

Chapter Five. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this could be because most Filipinos view such incidents as “individual” circumstance, rather than happening to the “group.” Also, this could be due to an internalized sense of inferiority and an inability to see such injustices as wrong. Or, it is possible that some immigrants might not have a clear understanding of what discrimination or racism is. Alternatively, Filipinos may not necessarily measure their accomplishments within the American context. That is, they do not compare their status with those of their counterparts from other ethnic groups but, instead, to their previous situations in the Philippines. This attitude corresponds with those of earlier immigrants. According to historian Ruben Alcantara’s interpretation,

If I were to tell the story of the Filipino in Hawaii through the eyes of the Sakadas, I would find that the Sakadas felt that they were successful because they would look at things very differently from the way their children would look at things. . . . They (Sakadas) see things in relationship to the hardships of the past. And they see where they are now and they say, ‘We have triumphed.’ And they also say something else, ‘. . . If I did not leave, what would my life have been?’ And so, they measure things in a different frame of reference. . . . They have succeeded the way they have defined it and they feel good because of having triumphed. (qtd. in Cordova 35)

Since most immigrants are financially and materially better off in the US than in the Philippines, then they can only be grateful for the opportunities given them. In this light, it is not so surprising that most Filipino immigrants continue to regard America as “the land of milk and honey.”

The extent to which immigrants gauge their success within the Philippine setting is evident in their reluctance to return to the Philippines unless they have “made it” in America. According to anthropologist Minda Cabilao, “The decision to stay overseas in

spite of the difficulties experienced can be partly explained in the light of strong Filipino values of *hiya* (shame) and fear of losing *amor propio* (self-esteem). That is, it would be very shameful to go home still a poor man” (36). San Juan concurs:

Floating in the limbo of indeterminacy, the Manongs (‘Manong’ is the Ilocano term for ‘brother’) decided not to reveal to their folks back home the pain of alienating work and exploitation by contractors and hustlers. Both their pathos and craft of survival are distilled in this statement: ‘It was always an emergency and I was never ready to go back’ (Vera Cruz 24). (Philippine Temptation 95)

No matter how unbearable the conditions abroad are, Filipinos would rather persevere than let it be known what dire straits they are in or to come home a failure. This attitude accounts for why Filipinos are not too vocal, or even concerned, about their lower occupational status in the US. As sociologist Alicia Pingol elucidates, “Like the contract workers who become domestics, permanent migrants do not mind so much the demotion in status as long as they can send home their substantial dollar earnings. Their sense of importance and self-worth are [*sic*] still rooted in their home communities” (103). Thus, Filipinos are willing to be downgraded in their employment and social status and to live with unsatisfactory conditions as long as there is an improvement in their and their families’ economic situations and social standing in the Philippines.

Made in the USA

During their visits, *balikbayans* leave behind the ordeals of immigration and revel in their improved social position. For many, there is opportunity to further cement their and their families’ increased standing by personally demonstrating their affluence to the members of their home communities and allowing the people around them to directly

evaluate their achievements. The primary means through which *balikbayans* showcase their prosperity is their *balikbayan* boxes. As demonstrated in Chapter Three, these cartons have become so ubiquitous that they serve as uniforms for the returnees. As



Figure 6.1 *Balikbayan* box from the USA serves as uniform and status symbol

Dulce points out, “whether you like it or not, you’ll be identified by the box or whatever because . . . you have come home from somewhere else and you’d be carrying lots of luggage and bring back home to the Philippines” (T10). These packages have also become status symbols, in that they indicate that their bearers have the resources to fill them up with material goods and, therefore, belong to a higher socioeconomic category.

Because of this signification, some *balikbayans*, according to Dulce, intentionally use these boxes “for distinction purposes. . . . Because in there, it will be written ‘from USA’ and, once you have that, oh boy, they’ll probably believe it, too” (T10). Thus, *balikbayan* boxes do not only distinguish returnees from the rest of the Filipino population, but are indicators of the *balikbayans*’ success, as well (see Figure 6.1).

As described in Chapters Three and Four, *balikbayan* boxes are brimming with *pasalubong* for family, friends, and other community members. While they contain a variety of commodities, there is a preference for designer goods, usually per the recipients’ requests (see Figures 6.2 and 6.3). According to Alicia, “Oh yes, they ask for brand names, designer things, designer labels. Like Nike. . . . Reeboks, oh any. They specify the brand—Florsheim” (T3). Madrona’s relatives ask her for “some brand, like Nike shoes, Reebok shoes, Guess watch, jeans” (T1). Lambert, Harlika, and Gil corroborate this. Speaking in a childish voice, Lambert mimics the requests of her nieces:

- L [*in a whiny voice*]: ‘I want a Barbie doll, Auntie.’ ‘I want a watch, I want a purse.’
 H: Reeboks, brand names. Specific brands, yeah.
 L [*whiny*]: ‘I want jeans. Guess jeans.’ H: [...?...] the sticker ‘Made in USA,’ that has a—
 G: Nike.
 L [*whiny*]: Ni-ke [*pronounces it ‘Nee-kee’*].
 G: Ni-ke [*copies Lambert*].
 L [*whiny*]: They ask Ni-ke.
 H: That has a brand name, ‘Made in USA,’ yeah. (T11)

Though these special requests may make shopping easier for *balikbayans*, they can also complicate it. First, the travellers have to go out of their way to look for those specific objects and brands. Second, and more importantly, brand names are very expensive and



Figure 6.2 My aunt's *pasalubong* included Barbie dolls



Figure 6.3 Guess bags another aunt gave as gifts

many Filipino Americans do not even possess such commodities. As Lambert points out, “They have better ones than we do. They have better clothes than we do” (T11). Thus, sometimes, returnees may be forced to go beyond their financial capabilities. With the recipients’ desire for designer objects, then, *balikbayan* boxes can evolve from a merely costly endeavor to an exercise in exorbitance. As sociologist Linda Richter asserts, “Gift-giving to relatives in large extended families actually constitutes in many cases the *Balikbayans*’ greatest travel-related expense” (80). Indeed, the total outlay for presents can reach several hundred, even thousands, of dollars. Consequently, as RJ recognizes, *balikbayan* boxes “symbolize *gastos* (“expense”)” to the travellers (T8).

However, though some returnees bring *balikbayan* boxes because they “like to show off” (Anon. FN2), all of them are, in fact, reinforcing the colonial status quo. As discussed in Chapter Two, the United States, during its occupation of the Philippines, deliberately instituted economic and educational policies, which programmed Filipinos to accept American superiority and transformed them into avid consumers of American products. This reconditioning of native minds and sensibilities has been so thorough that Filipinos, to this day, continue to lust after anything American. The craving for brand names is indicative of this indoctrination. Many Filipinos do not only believe that designer labels are more expensive, but they also equate them with US manufacturers. Because of this notion of equivalence and interchangeability, recipients are more than satisfied with American-made *pasalubong*, even if they are not specifically branded. Hence, Alicia, brings “anything, as long as it’s ‘Made in the USA.’ Well, that’s what the

people want” (T7). Madrona also concurs and gives “‘Made in the US.’ the name brands. ‘Made in the US.’ Shirts, too, it has to be ‘Made in USA’ [laughs]” (T1).

Most *balikbayans* are aware of their recipients’ liking for American goods, and some use this knowledge to maneuver around the ordering system. For instance, when questioned if she buys what is asked, Alicia responds, “Not necessarily [laughs]. Because sometimes what they ask for is too expensive [laughs some more]. [I] get other labels, get other names, get substitutes. As long as it’s “Made in US” (T7). According to Madrona, “Yeah, I buy sometimes . . . if I have money. . . . My brother sometimes ask for whisky [laughs] . . . but it’s very expensive, so I just buy him the . . . Seagram” (T1). Thus, both Alicia and Madrona find cheaper alternatives, but make sure that they are still American products.

Since they particularly want American-manufactured products, many recipients are not so subtle in verifying their gifts’ authenticity. As Alicia has observed, “They always look for the brand. They always check the label to see if it’s ‘Made in USA.’ Yes, they go [acts out looking at the label inside a shirt]. ‘Ah, made in US’ [acts out smiling and nodding]” (T7). If their *pasalubong* are fabricated elsewhere, the locals might be disappointed and, according to Madrona, remark, “‘Oh, this is from China, this is from Japan’” (T1). Harlika agrees: “If it’s made in China or Taiwan, better not give it to them” (T1). Gilmore adjoins, “If it’s made in the Philippines, you better take the tag off” (T1). Since, as Allan points out, “*ang mga tao dili malipay kung dili ‘Made in the USA’* (“the people won’t be happy if it’s not ‘Made in the USA’”)” (T2), *balikbayans* feel

compelled to humor them. So, Madrona explains, “You know you have to. That’s why when I shop, I look at the tag and say ‘Made in USA’” (T1).

Recipients cite various reasons for liking commodities that are “Made in the USA.” Joseph, who has received *pasalubong* from *balikbayan* relatives, acknowledges that some goods, such as “designer clothes—Versace, et cetera,” are cheaper to buy in the Philippines but, according to him, there are “more choices” in the US (FN3). In addition, he readily admits that he would rather receive gifts that are manufactured in the US

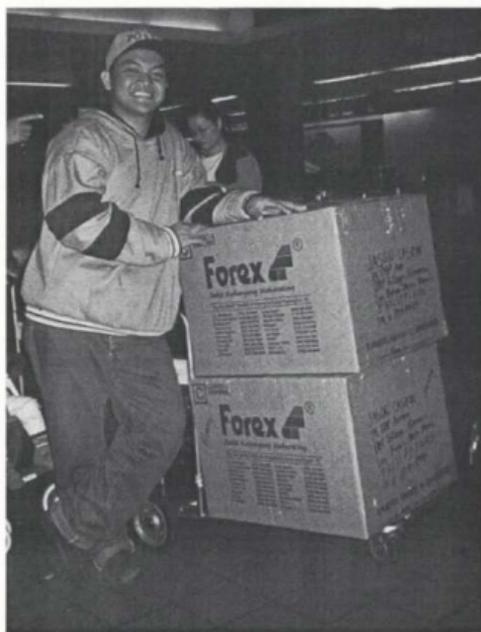


Figure 6.4 Joseph, a tourist to the US, prefers “Made in the USA” goods

because they are of “better quality,” “more comfortable,” and “also for the designs” (FN3) (see Figure 6.4). Harlika suggests that Filipinos have this preference “because they have tried US products before and they’re good products” (T11). Madrona replies, “They say it’s also more durable, that’s what they think. Shoes especially, they said. That’s what they said, it’s more durable. And, of course, they will not pay; it’s free” (T1).

More likely, however, this predilection is the ongoing consequence of US colonialism. As Alicia indicates, “people have a mentality that anything made in US is good, is better quality. Maybe it’s a carry-over from the times when we were under the Americans” (T3). She adds, “it’s what you call the colonial mentality of the people. We used to be under US and we thought that anything made in US is better than what we have” (T7). Rhea agrees: “Yeah it’s like that ‘cause if I’m given a T-shirt obviously from other country, obviously I’m proud to wear it. As I said, colonial mentality” (T4). Therefore, most Filipinos conclude that if things are “Made in the USA,” they will automatically be of higher quality. They believe this even when they have no proof. As Allan reasons, locals desire American products “*gay wa pa sila kasuway ug sul-ob ngu ‘made in the USA.’ Mas maayo sa paminaw nila* (“because they have not experienced wearing ‘made in the USA.’ They feel that it’s better”)(T2).

Colonialism also accounts for the prevalence of canned corned beef in *balikbayan* boxes (see Figure 3.5). When Allan visited, for example,

Nagdala pa ko ug mga carne norte² kay nag-sale ang Fedco ug mahal ang carne norte sa Pilipinas. Nagda ko ug carne norte kay lami ang carne

² *Carne norte* is what Filipinos call corned beef. *Norte* might be short for *norte Americano* or north American, i.e., from the United States. American soldiers probably

norte ug gusto nila ang carne norte ug dili kaayo sila kakaon ug carne norte didto tungod sa kamahal. Tanan ganahan didto kay mahal man, wa gud kaayo sila nakakaon nana.

("I also brought corned beef because Fedco had a sale and corned beef is expensive in the Philippines. I brought corned beef because corned beef is delicious and they like corned beef and they cannot eat corned beef much because of its expense. Everyone over there likes it because it's expensive, they don't get to eat it much.") (T2)

While Filipinos do indeed like corned beef, it is not entirely true that it is too expensive and they do not get to eat it much there. According to Rhea, this perception is incorrect. She explains that there are cheap brands of corned beef in the Philippines, but it is the fact that they are from the US that makes those brought by *balikbayans* special. Rhea also says that many Filipinos believe that imported ones are somehow better, probably because they taste differently and have different packaging. She adds that they can tell that they are imported because they have barcodes (FN4).

Balikbayans know, though, that American-manufactured things are not necessarily better than those made elsewhere. For instance, while Alicia maintains that, "Yeah, I think, particularly most of the goods are better than in the Philippines" (T3), this does not mean that they are fabricated in the US. She continues:

Although right now there are many products which are actually made in the Philippines, but sold here in the US. Some of these products are manufactured there, but not sold within the country. They are sent back here in the US to be sold here. Here, we don't care about labels. We don't care how and where they are made. But, when you bring the stuff there and they see that it's 'Made in the USA,' to them it's good. It's not for us, but it's for them. (T3)

brought canned goods, including corned beef, to the Philippines, especially after World War II.

Thus, while immigrants purchase products regardless of where they come from, people in the Philippines tend to be more conscious of the origin of their *pasalubong*. So, when Isabel was still in the Philippines, she was happy to receive anything, even sample perfumes, because she “figured they come from the USA, it will be made from the USA” (T8). Now that she lives in the US, she knows better: “Most of the, especially toys are made from China” (T8). She continues, while RJ also offers his opinions:

- I: Well, it's just a status quo. [If] it's 'Made in the USA,' it's, you know, better.
- R: If it's 'Made in the USA,' that means it was made in Mexico.
- I: Oh, right now, 'Made in the USA'—
- R: Sucks! It means it was made by illegal aliens.
- I: Now, it's no big deal 'cause stuff made from China are less expensive and same quality, I think. (T8)

Thus, “Made in the USA” is no longer as significant as it used to be. Due to increased economic globalization, many of the American brands or products that used to be manufactured in the US are, these days, being produced in foreign countries that do not have so many restrictions on businesses and provide access to cheap labor. As Alicia indicates earlier, the Philippines is one of these places. The goods from these places, as Isabel mentions, are just as good as and often cheaper than those from the US, and immigrants are actually more likely to buy these for themselves.

Immigrants are not the only ones who understand that brand names or “Made in the USA” tags can be deceiving. Some people in the Philippines recognize this, as well. Rhea, for instance, comprehends that “it's no longer true now” that foreign goods are always “much superior in quality” (T4). She points out that “other countries also imitate or trick people. It's of poor quality. Like, for example, people write 'Nike' or 'Asics.’

even though it's not true" (T4). Thus, the presence of brand names does not necessarily guarantee that these commodities are genuine. According to Allan, the T-shirts that he brought to the Philippines were "'Made in the USA,' printed with 'Guess,' 'Donna Karan,'" but he admits that "*mas barato to akong gipalit* ("the ones I bought were cheaper") [*laughs*]" (T2). Indeed, they are a bargain at four or five pieces for \$10, which is why many *balikbayans* do, in fact, give them as *pasalubong*. However, since designer labels are usually quite expensive, it is highly unlikely that these shirts are authentic. Instead, they are probably knock-offs or factory seconds. Thus, in addition to many US products now being manufactured in other countries, there are also goods that purport to be branded or "Made in the USA" which are actually fakes or rejects.

Yet, despite the existence of and knowledge about imitations, the recipients' craving for name brands and "Made in the USA" commodities remains. The perceived superiority of American goods is difficult to efface. As Rhea claims, "You can never erase that to us. Yeah, it is always good when you are wearing branded names" (T4). This persistent mentality is precisely why the gifts in *balikbayan* boxes have to originate from the US. "Currently," Richter reports, "there is a campaign on to get *Balikbayans* to do their special gift-shopping in Manila so the economy can benefit of their largesse and they in turn are spared the hassle of transporting gifts" (80). Considering that returnees spend an inordinate amount of money on *pasalubong*, making their purchases locally would greatly boost the economy, and they would still be able to obtain American-made products or brand names, particularly if they shopped at duty-free stores or high-end department stores. As Madrona relates,

Even my brother, Rick, the one who comes and gets me all the time in his car in Manila, if he sees what's inside like corned beef and everything, [he says.] 'You know that it's cheap here, too. You have all these things to carry with you, packing them.' He brought me to this Numero Uno grocery store in Manila. It's a big one. It's much bigger than the supermarkets here. They have all kinds of selection, too—the American—and they are cheap. (T1)

However, as evidenced by the recent closing of many duty-free stores, the campaign has not been too successful. Because locals continue to prefer products that come directly from the US, *balikbayans*, Gil contends, are obliged to bring “corned beef that’s cheaper to buy over there, but you gotta bring it from here [laughter]” (T11). The majority of recipients probably still believe that, as long as commodities are bought in the US and transported in *balikbayan* boxes, the more authentic they will be.

By complying with the demands of their recipients, *balikbayans* think that they are gratifying their relatives and friends but, at the same time, they are actually re-colonizing them. As indicated in Chapter Two, the original American subjugators preached the excellence of America and anything American for decades. *Balikbayans* are essentially doing the same thing with their *balikbayan* box practices. Since they tend to be highly educated, many post-1965 immigrants, who comprise the majority of today’s returnees, are cognizant of the Filipinos’ colonial mentality. Having lived in America, they are also aware that goods that are “Made in the USA” are not necessarily superior in quality. Yet, they do little to dispel this perception during their visits. Moreover, some returnees consciously give things that are not genuine, but they do not disclose this fact. Perhaps, passing off their *pasalubong* as real is advantageous to *balikbayans*, as they would then appear more successful. However, they are missing the opportunity for consciousness

raising, which might then be the first step towards true national independence. Who better to debunk any misrepresentations than those who have heard and seen both sides? Granted, there are many returnees who could not provide such illumination, since they themselves remain under the cloud of colonial dogma. In addition, most *balikbayans* do not want to be bothered with such serious matters and, instead, are looking to enjoy their homecoming. But, by simply sharing what they know about these commodities, returnees can broaden the minds of their recipients and be personally benefitted, as well. By demystifying the allure of American products, they could escape the imperative to always bring “Made in the USA” goods. With their silence, then, *balikbayans* are perpetuating the beliefs with which Filipinos have been inculcated and, thus, act as accomplices in the continued subjugation of Filipinos. They have become the Philippines’ neo-colonizers.

When *balikbayans* do speak up, they only serve to further entrench Filipinos in their adoration of America because, almost always, they only bring home stories that corroborate the notions of many Filipinos. For instance, Dulce describes her exploits:

When I tell them the first time especially, [I] make a picture of the United States out of words, like describing where you went to, like . . . Universal Studios, Disneyland, Marineland and all places. Like attending parties most of the time, you being given the special treatment over here because there’s a Filipino community over here, especially from Urdaneta, our place in Pangasinan. . . . I have to relay to them that I have met our *kababayans* (“countrymen”) over there. They’re so happy to meet me once again because I’ve not been with them for so long and they too with me, you know. Like having reunion with our classmates back in high school who were in the United States for so long a time, forty-five years so to say. So, I relay stories like these. And my co-alumni is already a bigwig in the United States, income-wise. That certainly gives an idea to those people back home that the United States really is a place of milk and honey. (T10)

In addition to tales of fun activities and encounters, returnees praise the quality of life in the United States. According to Josefina Vera, a retired teacher, her relatives in the US “call it paradise.” She goes on:

That is what they say, the living conditions there are good; food, fruit, milk are cheap. The only expensive [things] are clothing. So they order their clothes here. The money you earn there is not big in dollars, but in terms of comfort their life is much better there. But, no maids, no help, you have to do everything after coming home from your work for the day. (qtd. in Denton and Villena-Denton 114)

Carlos Patalinghug, a physician, relates:

I told my friends when I went home, after ten years we went home, in 1981, they were asking me about the honey and milk of America. And I said, ‘Yes, there’s a lot of honey, and there’s a lot of milk, but America is work! That is USA. USA is work! You’ll get honey and milk.’ That’s what I was trying to imply. If you work, you’ll get honey and milk. Before I came here, yes I thought that when you come to America you just get this opportunity, but, it is really work! There’s no place for lazy people in America. (Denton and Villena-Denton 148)

Judy has heard similar reports about working in the US:

Kanang maayo ilang trabaho didto, wa naglisod sa trabaho, ing-ana ba. Unya maayo ba gyud ang in terms sa salary nila. Pero kuan lang gyud ang oras ba, di gyud pareho diri nga maglangay-langay ka, mag-apas gyud ka sa oras. . . . Nindot, gawas lang sa oras, diperensiya kay sa diri. (“That they have good jobs there, they don’t have any difficulties with work, like that. And, in terms of salary, it is really good. But it’s just the hours, it’s not like here where you dawdle, you are trying to catch up with the time. . . . It’s nice, except for the hours, it’s different from here.”) (T5)

In their narratives, returnees certainly extol the merits of life in the United States.

While *balikbuyans* sometimes mention the difficulties of migration in their accounts, these are often vague, passing remarks or occur as postscripts. For example, though Patalinghug referred to the need for diligence in the US, he did not elaborate on

the hardships he and his family had to endure during their early years, such as having to fulfill an internship requirement and being forced to get a second job just to support his family (Denton and Villena-Denton 147). In other cases, talk about negative situations only serves to distinguish the quality of life in the US from that of the Philippines. When Alicia tells them, “I don’t have money anymore because I don’t have any more rent income” or “Because of the credit system, we abuse, we go into debt” (T7), locals are unlikely to be sorry for her but, instead, be impressed by the fact that she owns credit cards and rental property, both uncommon possessions in the Philippines. Such accounts as Alicia’s do not carry tremendous weight, since, as journalist Conrado de Quiros charges, “*balikbayans* from America” inundate the natives with “stories about how much life in America has proved what the *Reader’s Digest* says it is.” He continues:

They also bring us homilies, delivered with the proselytizing zeal of Thomasites,³ which are forceful for their use of contrasts. It’s too hot in the Philippines. It’s nice to snuggle by the hearth in America. There’s grime and smog in our streets. You can’t drive without anti-pollutants in the States. Filipino drivers are maniacs. American drivers follow traffic rules... You defer too much to authority here. You can talk man-to-man even with the president of the United States. (qtd. in Rafael, “Your Grief” 3)

As a result of such positive descriptions and oppositional criticisms, activist Leandro Alejandro declares, “a very rosy picture of life in the US is painted in most homes” (qtd. in Denton and Villena-Denton 108). Coming from their *kabayans* or countrymen,

³ American teachers who sailed to the Philippines on board the *S. S. Thomas* in 1901 (Agoncillo 372; Fajardo 342).

these tales add to, and even magnify, the mystique originally created during the American occupation.

Another reason that locals do not take the admissions of financial deficiencies seriously is because of the *balikbayans*' spending and living habits when they are in the Philippines. When returnees visit, according to Pertierra, "... not only must the trappings of affluence be maintained but a lifestyle of leisure the required mode" ("Cultural Economy" 17). So, like the tourists the Department of Tourism wanted to mold them into, most of them call on people, dine out, shop, and travel locally. They appear to lead rich and easy lives. As Rhea has observed, "I haven't seen *balikbayans* who don't spend much money here. They always spend much money" (T4). She adds, "They always want comfort" (T4). Alicia agrees: "You see that people who come home—the *balikbayans*—always have money to spend. Although we learned now that some of them come from credit cards. And, I think, there's also something about us Filipinos that, when we go home, we always try to show, we always have to live up to what they think, their expectations" (T3). Thus, returnees portray themselves as free-spending and free from worries and, in doing so, validate their improved social status.

However, such depictions are quite misleading, for *balikbayans* cannot always afford such "lifestyle[s] of leisure." Visits to the Philippines are costly endeavors. Madrona elaborates:

It is very expensive. It's expensive because, aside from the fare, of course I use the Visa or Mastercard. You have to pay for one year, then you go again after you pay. Plus, . . . you have to have your pocket money. . . . We're lucky that we have some rental properties there to put in the bank and then, when we go home, we just withdraw it from the bank. (T1)

In addition to the fare and local expenditures, returnees spend money on *pasalubong*, as well as disburse cash during their stay. All in all, the total outlay for homecomings can be quite enormous. Because of this, some immigrants are reluctant to return. Alicia admits, "That's why I don't like to go home to the Philippines. It's more expensive. I'd rather go to other countries and I don't have to spend so much. Every time you go out to eat, you bring other people with you. Last time we went out, it was usually between 15-20 people" (T3). Unlike Madrona, most *balikbayans* do not have access to rental money or other such liquid assets. Though a few returnees have cash on hand, many do pay their way with the aid of credit cards, as alluded to by both Madrona and Alicia. Some, like Lambert, might even use such resources as their "divorce money" or "*utang*" ("loan") from people" (T11). Thus, in order to appear successful and please their loved ones, many *balikbayans* overextend their financial limits and are forced into debt. However, by not being truthful about their limitations, *balikbayans* only preserve the belief that they are well-off. They also encourage the expectations that come with that assumption and, consequently, have to continue lugging boxes of *pasalubong* and spending too much money.

To Filipinos in the Philippines, the *balikbayans*' boxes, with their brand name and "Made in the USA" contents, are the embodiment of all that they think is good about America. Together with the returnees' positive stories of life in the US and their freespending when in the Philippines, these convey prosperity and fulfillment. Isobel R. Z. Sarmiento, a young student, points out that, "Though all the hardships and trials they

all go through, they come back to their homeland with that big box full of the joys and **only** the joys they have experienced” [my emphasis] (n.p.). However, as he cogently recognizes, these packages, as well as the tales and leisurely lifestyles furnish a biased depiction for American goods are not always better, life in the US is not perfect, and *balikbayans* are not made of money. With their superlatives, *balikbayans* present themselves as successful and are, then, accorded a higher status by the locals. In doing what they do, though, they provide fodder to the concepts already ingrained by the Americans and, thus, reinforce the colonial hegemony. Rhea acknowledges that, “I think we are being influenced by the American way that, if you come from this kind of country, you are really superior in a way from us, from people here in the Philippines. So, it’s like they are always the best—the Americans” (T4). With the aid of returnees, this “colonial mentality” prevails. Whether consciously or not, *balikbayans* are partially responsible for perpetuating the inferiorization of Filipinos and, thereby, continuing their enchainment to America.

The Magic of America

Sharing is an important aspect of Filipino culture and is reflected in such cherished values as generosity and hospitality. This likely stems from the deep-seated desire for “smooth interpersonal relations,” which Frank Lynch defines as “getting along with others in such a way as to avoid outward signs of conflict” (“Social Acceptance” 31). Already imbued with a strong sense of commitment to family and kin, Filipinos extend this consideration and cooperation to neighbors and, to a much lesser extent,

general society. Since migrants are considered to be better off than those who are left in the country, they are expected to share their good fortune with others. As previously mentioned, many do so with monthly remittances to their families. When they visit the Philippines, people turn to them for help as well. Madrona discloses: “There, I feel bad when neighbors come and borrow money. Neighbors get sick and they’re rushed to the hospital and they don’t have money, and I share, I do. Or there’s a death in the family, and they have no coffin to buy, I share, I give. So, it’s straining in the pocket” (T1). Whether real or perceived, *balikbayans* are seen as being more wealthy and are, thus, obliged to be munificent.

The more general—and cheaper—way that returnees demonstrate their generosity is through their gift-giving. The *balikbayan* box is “another way of sharing life’s bounty” (“100 Things” 24 July 1998:3). Isabel agrees, saying that these packages “symbolize, I think, sharing ‘cause you know that over here, c’mon, you’re more blessed than in the Philippines” (T8). As indicated in Chapters Four and Five, though the presents in these boxes are primarily for family and friends, they also contain goods for neighbors and other, less-connected, people. There is an obvious hierarchy to the gifts, though: the most important people receive the more substantive (often equated with new and expensive), while the rest get token offerings such as soap or used clothes and toys. Even with the used goods, as pointed out in Chapter Three, relatives and friends get to pick through them before they are given “ . . . to the people who are destitute. They are really destitute. They have no jobs. To the poor people. To the maids, too. Oh, they like that. They enjoy getting those, especially pants, jeans, they are expensive in the Philippines” (T1).

On occasions when *balikbayans* are compelled to give *pasalubong* to unexpected visitors, as described in Chapter Four, Rhea imagines that they tell the intended recipients, “‘*Sige lang gud. Ato lang ni ipanghatag ‘cause I still have the money to buy you what you want. Sila, di gyud sila makapalit*’ (‘‘It’s okay. We’ll just give these ‘cause I still have money to buy you what you want. Them, they can’t afford to buy’’)” (T4). She continues, “So it’s like giving, sharing. The point of sharing and giving is always there” (T4). In this way, then, *balikbayans* show their magnanimity to those who are less fortunate.

This charitable practice could be viewed as arising from the important cultural and religious principle of “compassion (*anvā*),” in which “any individual who has suffered a grievous blow at the hand of Fate or human injustice or who is (even through his own fault) in a helpless condition, deserves sympathy, pity, mercy, and, should he ask for it, assistance” (Lynch, “Social Acceptance” 40). In the Philippines, though, the economic situation is so terrible that virtually everyone requires financial aid. Overseas Filipinos do their part through their remittances and gifts. Thus, according to Michael and Jay of LBC, *balikbayan* boxes signify:

- M: For me, it’s like the Philippines is in continuous need of help.
 J: Exactly. It’s a helping hand.
 M: Yeah.
 J: Just a helping hand.
 M: Really. I mean, if the economy of the Philippines was okay, could stand by itself, would you think there would be any need for overseas Filipinos to be sending money, cargoes, like that? So, it’s symbolic of the state of the Philippine buck.
 J: That’s right . . . Because you don’t see the Japanese doing something like this. The Japanese living here or—
 M: Much in the same way as Mexico, Central American countries, you know where the economies are—
 J: Yeah, yeah, exactly.

M: You see all these Mexican and Latino immigrants—

J: And I think it also goes to the fact that we are Catholic. No, really, that these Latin American countries are Catholic, the Philippines is Catholic. We still, you know, there's this strong family support. (T12)

Michael and Jay are justified in their conclusion that the propensity to send *balikbayan* boxes correlates to the state of the Philippine economy, for such gift-giving is more prevalent in underdeveloped nations. While Jay touches on the similarities between the Philippines and Latin American countries, he fails to recognize that this comes as a result of their parallel histories of colonization by both Spain and the United States. Spain brought Catholicism and the colonial economy to these nations. Though the US did not occupy Latin American countries per se, as it did the Philippines, it had practically the same effect on them. Building on Spain's economic set-up, the US instituted trade policies and business practices for its benefit, but which have been mostly detrimental to these nations. Because of their colonial legacies and their continued exploitation by transnational corporations, the Philippines and Latin American countries are impoverished and are at the mercy of the US-led IMF/WB and US-based companies. Therefore, in the same way that the Philippines has been coerced into a state of mendicancy, so have Filipinos become reliant on the largesse of their expatriate relatives.

Though most overseas Filipinos are mindful of their responsibility towards their families' well-being and are also aware of the important role they play in keeping the Philippine economy afloat, filial obligations and compassion for others are not the only impetus behind their generosity. As I began to discuss in the previous section, success or the appearance of it is important for most Filipinos, and the *balikbayans'* sharing is just

as much motivated by this as anything else. With their boxes, they can declare, as RJ says, "I'm successful. I'm bringing gifts. I'm bringing gifts to the poor people" (T8). He continues, "It's *pagmamayahang* ("boasting"). 'I'm rich. I'm giving you, poor people, foreign aid'" (T8). This somewhat patronizing display is in keeping with their roles as neo-colonizers, for their "ambitions," according to Rafael, "lie in setting themselves apart from the rest of the 'natives' rather than affiliating with them" ("Your Grief" 3). By showing off their wealth and pointing out the inadequacies of the Philippines, returnees establish their superiority. In doing so, Rafael goes on, they "emerge as figures to be envied. Their easy association with Western consumer products and their access to a powerful North American state apparatus mark them as different: they represent the fulfillment of Filipino desires realizable only outside of the Philippines" ("Your Grief" 3).

However, while *balikbayans* want to exhibit their achievements, they also have to temper their braggadocio. They do this through "sop behavior" or when "a token item [is] given to assuage the disappointment of someone . . . who has not had success comparable to others" (Foster 177). This kind of giving is performed in order to prevent one's downfall through one's own hubris or the envy of others. Mauss touches on the origins of this kind of behavior: "Alms are the result on the one hand of a moral idea about gifts and wealth and on the other of an idea about sacrifice. Generosity is necessary because otherwise Nemesis will take vengeance upon the excessive wealth and happiness of the rich by giving to the poor and the gods" (15). In his study of Philippine values, Frank Lynch observes the same kind of belief. He notes that, "to claim success as a

personal achievement, to take pride in it, or to refuse to share it with others is to make oneself not only undeserving of good luck (which everyone is) but positively deserving of failure” (“Social Acceptance” 38). Operating under these notions, overseas Filipinos offer their oblations through their *balikbayan* boxes, which are either sent door-to-door or brought personally during their visits. Michael and Jay provide the following analysis:

J: . . . Filipinos here, who have become successful, it's a way, I guess, of removing their guilt. You know what I'm saying? You send something, and it's like, at least I gave something to them. I may be well-off here, they're having a hard time. I think that this is a way of—

M: Redeeming themselves?

J: Exactly, that's the word, redeeming ourselves. Because I do feel that. I have a better life here, you know. And, knowing that, in some way, if there's somebody I know is having a hard time in the Philippines, and then when I send money, I feel better knowing I was able to help. I think that's why. [Customers feel the same way?] That's one factor. I mean, you should see when people come here to send money or boxes. They do it sort of begrudgingly. They're like, 'Oh here I go again spending money and, those people there, they don't do anything except wait for my money.' 'Cause inside them, they're already feeling rude that they're doing this. (T12)

As Jay indicates, some migrants believe that their relatives merely look out for their monetary and material remittances, instead of looking for jobs or attempting to provide for themselves. Despite the danger of creating a culture of dependency, though, overseas Filipinos persist in their practices, rather than risk offending people or being seen in a bad light. As Jay acknowledges, “Of course it does. . . It [dependency] happens. But you still want to know that I have that. They cannot say anything bad about what I did, that I'm here being successful. I'm still sending them money. It's that kind of thing. People believe in that, in that thinking” (T12).

Whereas *balikbayans* are spurred by personal and cultural ideals about connections and obligations to carry out the *balikbayan* box tradition, the appeal of this practice to recipients is inspired by a separate, though related, set of beliefs. As I have been discussing in this chapter, as well as in Chapters Two and Five, the locals possess notions about America, which have long been instilled in them but are continually being reinforced by the media and the returnees. In particular, they view the United States as “a dreamland for many migrants as they perceive it to be a place where opportunities for the attainment of the ‘good life’ abound” (Cabilao 48). Though Filipinos know that other countries can also offer them better economic prospects, the US is perceived to be the ultimate destination. This is because, as Quiros articulates,

... Most of us are expatriates right here in our own land. America is our homeland whether we get to go there or not.

Nothing demonstrates this better than that the *balikbayan* does succeed in bedazzling the natives. If he flaunts his wares, it’s simply because he knows the audience will lap it up... (qtd. in Rafael, “‘Your Grief’” 4)

Whether nationalists, who are often critical of the *balikbayans*’ role in upholding America’s hegemony in the Philippines, like it or not, this transnational population represents the collective desires of the Filipino people. Rafael expounds:

Not only are *balikbayans* akin to American colonizers; even more dismaying is their similarity to the collaborators of the past. Their departure amounts to a kind of betrayal of national particularity. Yet, the fact that they are merely enacting a historical role laid out before them makes them far more intimate with the people who they leave behind. Proof of this is the fact that *balikbayans* are envied. They are recognized for what they are. It isn’t the case then that their interests diverge from the people, but rather they, rather than nationalist intellectuals, set the terms for the articulation of those interests. (“Your Grief” 4)

Thus, most Filipinos are impressed by returnees because they wish they could follow in their footsteps.

In this sense, America is considered to be a pilgrimage site for Filipinos who want to improve their lives, a magical place they wish to visit and, hopefully, inhabit. In pre-modern Japan, "a widespread custom was for a group of people to save money to send one or more representatives on an annual [religious] pilgrimage" (Hendry 36). Since not everyone can go, "in the interim all the members could have a small share in the experience . . . by receiving a gift from the area concerned" (Hendry 36). Similarly, many Filipino migrants (e.g., Madrona) have had to borrow money from kin, friends, and other sources to finance their trip to the US. While they do pay back these people, they can also show their gratitude and appreciation by bringing them gifts, especially the first time they return to the Philippines. Superficially, *balikbayans* can be viewed as extended travellers and their *pasalubong* a "way of sharing the vicarious thrills and delights of a trip" ("100 Things" 24 July 1998:3). As Rhea elucidates, "Sometimes, I [ask them to] try to just bring me a shirt or whatever from that place. At least, even though I was not able to be there, I was not able to go to that place, at least I have a shirt for that place" (T4). On a deeper level, though, the gifts that returnees bring is a way of sharing the experiences of their "sacred" journey to the "dreamland." As a woman at the airport expresses, "people in the Philippines want to be in the US and, since they can't be there, they're bringing the US to them" (Anon. FN2). Lambert concurs, "if possible, we wanna bring the whole America to the Philippines" (T11).

In his classification of rites, van Gennep refers to contagious rites, which are “characteristically based on a belief that natural or acquired characteristics are material and transmissible (either through physical contact or over a distance)” (7). The *balikbayan* box practice can be seen as belonging to this group of rituals, since there is a hint of the notion of contagion for the locals. In acquiring the material contents from these packages, some recipients hope to achieve the same success as the returnees and, also, to eventually make that pilgrimage to the “land of milk and honey.” It does not matter if these gifts seem inconsequential, as long as they come from America. As Judy explains: “*Ganahan ang mga tawo uy. Bisag unsa pay i-pasalubong, . . . basta gikan didto, ganahan ang mga tawo* (“People like it. No matter what the *pasalubong* is. . . as long as it’s from there, people like it”)” (T5). Filipinos want to have a piece of America, and Rhea surmises that this is the reason that people seek out these new arrivals: “*So, siempre, mao siguro nang mangadto sila kung makadungog sila nga naay ni-abot . . . kay basig pa diay nga mapiskan sila sa gipangdala* (“So, maybe that’s why they go there when they hear that somebody arrived . . . because maybe they might get a trickle of what was brought”)” (T4). Though Rhea is probably talking about receiving something tangible, there is still the sense that these locals hope to be touched by the success of *balikbayans*.

The belief in contagion is so strong that, sometimes, even mere proximity to these magical commodities is enough for the people. Thus, even when some of the witnesses are not receiving anything, as might happen when the boxes are sent door-to-door, they may be thrilled nevertheless. As Judy explains:

... bisag di gud ikay gipadad-an gud, malipay sad ka ba. 'Uy, unsa ka ni.' Kanang excited ka ba unsa kay sud ana ilang box. . . . Unya layo gud kay na'g gigikanan sa, unya gida gyud na diha para inyo. So, excited sad ta uy, bisag di ato. Excited sad ta motan-aw uy. 'Mao diay ning gikan didto.'

(" . . . even though it wasn't sent to you, you are also happy. 'Oh, wonder what it is.' You're also excited to know what's inside their box. . . . And it's come from such a long way, and it was brought there for you. So, we are also excited, even if it's not ours. We are excited to see. 'This is what's from over there.'") (T5)

Therefore, *balikbayan* boxes allow Filipinos to get a taste of or look at America and, thereby, feed their own dreams of making it there (see Figure 6.5). As Rafael points



Figure 6.5 Canned goods literally give Filipinos a taste of America

out, these packages are “the material evidence of immigrant success as much as they are symbolic of the promise of immigration itself. Thus do they constitute the materialization of a desire realizable only outside of the nation, yet recognizable only within its borders” (“Your Grief” 17).

At the same time, *balikbayan* boxes are contagious in a different way. In addition to providing locals with an infinitesimal fragment of America, they also transfer some of the migrants' success onto the recipients. For instance, when they receive shirts that carry brand names or are "Made in the USA" as *pasalubong*, natives can easily display them. According to Rhea, "Yes, it's easy to bring and it's much, let's say, easier to show off 'cause there's always this name thing written on the T-shirts. Maybe it's the name of the city, the name of the country, like that. So people wearing it will be wearing it as if they are showing off or maybe they are proud that they have something coming from other country" (T4). Allan agrees: "These things, these items or these brand names are rarely seen in the Philippines. That's the reason [they like] name brands. And people could see it's coming from the US" (T2). Thus, through these T-shirts and other similar gifts, recipients can visibly demonstrate their ownership of something from America. Simultaneously, they can publicize the fact that they have relatives who are successful in the US. As Madrona guesses, they like American products so they can "show off. To show that maybe they have aunts from America" (T1). Dulce explains further,

You know, Filipinos love something that is really Stateside [*laughs*]. Stateside. It's become status symbol. Maybe if you could partake of something that costs a lot in the Philippines, that's something else. And if you have those things maybe, they could say that really you have a relative in the [US] that could send it or maybe make things available for you. (T10)

Lambert and Harlika conjecture that such exhibition makes recipients feel superior:

L: It boosts their—
 H: Self-esteem
 L: Self esteem
 H: Their ego

L: 'Oh we have relatives in America. See this? 'Made in the US' and you, you're just poor, you have nothing.' (T11)

Therefore, through material and familial association, many recipients think that the *balikbayans'* success is reflected onto them. They think that they, too, have been graced by the magic of America.

Conclusion

As a result of American colonial legacies, most Filipinos have idealistic images of the United States. Though some of their notions are confirmed once they are in the US, Filipino immigrants also undergo unpleasant experiences. Despite such problems, though, Filipinos generally view their lives in the US in a positive light. This is probably because the quality of life in the US is much better. More importantly, they likely base their success on the improvement of their status in their native country. When they return to the Philippines, *balikbayans* have the opportunity to demonstrate just how successful they have become. Their *balikbayan* boxes are important, even necessary, components for their display. Because these cartons are manufactured for their use, they serve as uniforms which identify returnees and distinguishes them from the rest of the Filipino population. In addition, since these are full of material goods for family, friends, and others, these packages indicate that returnees have the means to afford such things, which again sets them apart from the locals.

However, while *balikbayan* boxes allow returnees to "show off" their newfound affluence, they are also vehicles through which they re-colonize their former countrymen. In compliance with the requests of the recipients, these cartons often contain name brand

and/or “Made in the USA” products. The desire for such goods is evidence of the effective indoctrination by Americans or, to use a common phrase, “colonial mentality,” which has led Filipinos to believe that anything American is best. Living in the US and having access to a wide variety of products, immigrants know that that is not always the case and, by acquiescing to their recipients’ demands, they perpetuate such unquestioned beliefs and predilections. Combined with glowing depictions of life in America and worry-free spending during their visits, *balikbayans* corroborate American colonial preachings, as well as current media discourses, and are, therefore, positioned as neo-colonizers. Consequently, the colonial cycle begins anew and locals continue to have heightened expectations of returnees, especially their bringing of *balikbayan* boxfuls of American goods.

While many *balikbayans* relish their improved statuses, their culture dictates that they maintain “smooth interpersonal relations.” One way of doing this is to share their success with those who are less fortunate. While this practice has its roots in the virtue of charity, this is just as much about “sop behavior.” In manifesting their wealth through their boxes, *balikbayans* have to be careful that the envy of others, or perhaps the gods, will not cause their downfall. Therefore, they are compelled to give token offerings to those who are not so closely related to them or to anyone who asks. Most recipients, on the other hand, are grateful for their *pasalubong*, no matter how inconsequential, for it is their way of vicariously experiencing the traveller’s journey. They are especially happy to receive anything, since it comes from America. As they consider the US to be the ultimate “dreamland,” Filipinos are eager to touch and taste America. The gifts, then,

acquire a certain sense of symbolism, with many of the recipients hoping that the magic will rub off on them so that they could also make it to America and reach the same heights of prosperity as the returnees. In this way, the *balikbayan* box practice is transformed into a contagious ritual. At the same time, the contents of the packages are communicable in a different way. Particularly for the close relatives of *balikbayans*, the receipt and consumption of American commodities confer some of the aura of the returnees' success onto them. Thus, by having access to Stateside goods, their status, too, becomes somewhat elevated.

Balikbayan boxes, therefore, enable returnees to showcase their success as well as their generosity. Whether it is motivated by compassion or fear of ill will, they share their affluence with others. For the recipients, these packages contain material manifestations of their dreams, which they hope, by contagion, will bring them good fortune. As well, the improvement in the returnees' social standing trickles down to the recipients, especially when they display their *pasalubong*. However, *balikbayan* boxes are also sites of neocolonialism and colonial hegemony. Because they usually bring "Made in the USA" products, *balikbayans* are essentially reinforcing the lessons originally learned during American colonial times and, thereby, preserving the cultural and commercial dominance of the United States in the Philippines. As a result, Filipinos continue to crave Stateside goods and salivate over visions of "milk and honey." In the final chapter, I summarize the points of this thesis and present my conclusions.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion

The essence of this thesis can be encapsulated in two words—desire and imagination. “Desire” is defined by Webster’s Dictionary as “yearning, longing” or “to want to have, acquire, or bring about (something)” and “imagination” as “the power to form mental images of objects not perceived or not wholly perceived by the senses” or “the power to form new ideas by a synthesis of separate elements of experience, and the ability to define new ideas” (259, 483). However, such simple meanings belie the potency of these catalysts of human behavior. Desire and imagination are, in fact, the motivation for numerous actions that have shaped people’s lives and national destinies. And, they are at the heart of the existence of *balikbayans* and *balikbayan* boxes.

Balikbayans are the progeny of desire and imagination. They spring from a particular combination of history and geography, politics and economics. Their story begins with a strategic location. Situated off the Asian mainland, the islands of the Philippine archipelago provided Spain with an ideal base from which they could partake of the lucrative Oriental trade for over three centuries. Spanish imagination provided the structure for the Philippines as a nation, for as Anderson states, “official nationalism in the colonized worlds of Asia and Africa . . . should be traced to the imaginings of the colonial state” (Imagined Communities 163-164). These Iberian conquerors were, therefore, responsible for amalgamating the disparate islands and kinship groups and indoctrinating the people with European notions of hierarchy, religion, and culture. Their

desire for profit transformed the Philippines into a center for the galleon trade and, later, *hacienda*-based agriculture, both of which exploited natural and human resources to enrich the conquerors. The entry of the United States into Philippine affairs was also driven by imagination for, with the opening of Japanese and Chinese markets, American imperialists wanted the US to be part of the equation. Thus, in a continuation of its westward expansion, the US fulfilled this vision when it acquired the Philippines from Spain. As with the Spaniards, the desire for financial gain motivated the Americans to devise policies, which ensured that the Philippines would be a source of cheap raw materials as well as a hungry market for American manufactured goods.

As a result of its colonial legacies, particularly its detrimental economy, the Philippines continues to be underdeveloped and the majority of its population is impoverished. Because of their dismal economic situations, most Filipinos crave financial stability for their families. This desire, coupled with the American-instituted system of education, which taught them to view America as the “land of opportunity,” has been driving many Filipinos to the United States since the beginning of the twentieth century. The passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 opened the doors to even more Filipinos since new preferences increased eligible migration from the Philippines. Ferdinand Marcos, who became President of the Philippines in 1965, was scheduled to reach his two-term limit in 1973, but his desire to remain in power caused him to forestall the end of his presidency through an imaginative interpretation of the constitution. He declared martial law in 1972 and “established a regime of preempt authoritarianism not dreamed of by his predecessors. Although by standards of political

measurement it was not democratic, yet it was rationalized under the concept of ‘constitutional authoritarianism’ (Tan 102). This shocking proclamation generated numerous criticisms and, to counteract them, Marcos and his administration dreamed up the *Balibkayan* Program, so that overseas Filipinos could witness firsthand the positive effects of martial law. According to Richter, they “sought to influence Filipinos abroad politically and the nations in which they resided” (59). The promotion played on the desire of overseas Filipinos to return to their country and be reunited with their loved ones. It also lent its name to those who responded to the marketing and, subsequently, visited the Philippines. Thus was the birth of *balibkayans*.

While most people are unaware of the term’s origin, they do know what a *balibkayan* is: as their name suggests, *balibkayans* are Filipinos who return to their country after a long absence. Originally and more specifically, the term refers to Filipino immigrants the United States who visit the Philippines temporarily. The designation has since included immigrants to other countries and overseas contract workers, as well as those who return to the Philippines permanently. *Balibkayan* boxes are extensions of the *balibkayan* population. Because returnees have been away for years at a time, they bring numerous *pasalubong* or gifts to their relatives and friends in the Philippines. Initially, they used discarded boxes to convey their presents. In the 1980s, imaginative Filipino-American entrepreneurs responded to the need for sturdy yet lightweight containers that conformed to airline regulations and began offering standardized *balibkayan* boxes. Since then, *balibkayan* boxes have become ubiquitous and central components of their transnational lives.

However, the cartons alone cannot be considered *balikbayan* boxes. Their contents are just as essential to the definition, and they include food items, clothing and accessories, cosmetics and toiletries, electronics, toys, alcohol and cigarettes, and much more. These commodities can be either used or new. The various activities involved in the preparation of these boxes, as well as in the performance of the custom, are also part of the definition. *Balikbayans* have to make travel arrangements and inform relatives in the US and in the Philippines about their impending homecoming. They also have to shop for *pasalubong* and pack them carefully in their *balikbayan* boxes. After *balikbayans* travel across the Pacific and arrive in the Philippines, the climax occurs when the boxes are opened and the *pasalubong* distributed to family and friends. The recipients usually reciprocate in kind, offering food and accommodations, time and attention to the returnees for the duration of their visits. When it is time to leave, *balikbayans* again buy gifts, this time for those in the US, and they sometimes use the same *balikbayan* boxes to transport these. Thus, the combination of cartons, contents, and custom make *balikbayan* boxes what they are. All these show the interconnectedness between *balikbayans* and their boxes. They demonstrate the personal care and effort involved in the process, especially from the women. They also indicate the immigrants' desire to make the journey back to the Philippines and to ensure the safe delivery of their gifts.

The performance of the *balikbayan* box custom speaks as powerfully about the desire and imagination of its characters. First and foremost, it is a metaphor for the dislocation of those who carry them, the Filipino American *balikbayans*. These people

immigrate to the United States, in order to provide better lives for their families. In doing so, they are separated from their communities and loved ones. Once in America, these Filipinos go through new experiences, which usually further set them apart from those in the Philippines. As immigrants, they become liminal beings, since they are neither fully American nor fully Filipino. Therefore, Filipino Americans are not only dislocated spatially but culturally, socially, and emotionally as well. Their visits to the Philippines temporarily bring an end to their displacement, and their *balikbayan* boxes play a crucial role in this. When returnees shop for their *pasalubong*, they are often thinking about their recipients—"what they want" and "what they need"—or imagining what "they would want" or "would be good for them" (Alicia T7). Such thoughtfulness and care reveal their love and affection for those in the Philippines. As is the case with most gift exchanges, they are also demonstrating their desire to preserve or renew their relationships with these people. In reciprocating, recipients, too, indicate their wish to keep these connections. However, while *balikbayans* long to be reconnected with those in the Philippines, they cannot ignore their ties to the US. As shown by other aspects of the homecoming process, e.g., the informing of relatives and friends in the US of their journey and the bringing back of *pasalubong* for these people, they also have bonds in their adopted country which need to be maintained. Though *balikbayans* are re-incorporated into their old communities during their visits to the Philippines, the closeness they achieve is as bounded and temporary as the boxes they bring, since deeper attachments to the US almost always necessitate their departure. Their affiliations with those in the Philippines, though well-rooted, have to continue with their long-distance

arrangement, only to be broken by occasional *balikbayan* visits. Thus, while *balikbayan* boxes embody the *balikbayans'* connections with those in the Philippines, they also point to their relationships in the US. More significantly, these packages are the materialization of their desire to preserve their ties to both places.

Balikbayan boxes are also about the desire for status. Though Filipinos primarily go abroad to attain financial security for their families, many welcome the increase in social standing that accompanies their newfound prosperity. While the immigrants are away, their families in the Philippines are the ones who enjoy the rise in rank, as they refine their lifestyles with the aid of the immigrants' remittances. When they visit, the *balikbayans* themselves can luxuriate in their improved status. But first, they remind their relatives and communities of their wealth through the display of material evidence from their boxes. Returnees have to be careful, though, not to incur the envy of others and cause their own misfortune. So, they engage in sop behavior and share tokens of their success with those who are less fortunate. The locals, on the other hand, also gain some prestige from the presents they receive. While, by association, the *balikbayans'* close relatives already acquire a bit of distinction, they are especially able to impress others when they show off their *pasalubong*. Often at their request, these gifts are "Made in the USA" and/or carry brand names because they consider these to be of better quality. Since other locals also buy into the superiority of American goods, they are likely to notice the new possessions of the *balikbayans'* relatives and other recipients. Thus, some of the returnees' status rubs off on their recipients via their *pasalubong*.

Alternatively, *balikbayan* boxes represent the dreams and imaginings of the Filipino people. The history of colonial education and ongoing cultural bombardment have taught Filipinos to value American products, which explains the recipients' preferences. These have also fueled their imaginations with visions of "milk and honey," which accounts for their desire to migrate to the United States. When Filipinos do immigrate to the US, though many of their expectations are realized, they also encounter several obstacles, such as culture shock, homesickness, and prejudice. They also discover that products "made in the USA" are not necessarily better than those manufactured elsewhere. However, when they return to the Philippines, *balikbayans* tend to showcase only the joys of migration through their boxes, positive stories, and freespending. Consequently, locals continue to view America as the ultimate "dreamland." When they receive *pasalubong* from the *balikbayans'* boxes, some of them probably hope that they will be contaminated with some of the American magic that they ascribe to these commodities. Thus, even if the gifts are used or modest, recipients still appreciate them since they symbolize the "American dream." Hence, because they do not refute any of the propaganda imparted by American teachers and corporations, *balikbayans* are positioned as neo-colonizers of the Philippines and their boxes are sites for the propagation of American cultural hegemony.

Therefore, these deceptively plain and unwieldy *balikbayan* boxes are, as the Latin phrase goes, *vox populi* or the voice of the people. They speak of the *balikbayans'* desire for prosperity, status, and personal connections. They also communicate what is in the imagination of both *balikbayans* and recipients. *Balikbayan* boxes illustrate that, as

Marcello Mastroianni's character in the film Journey to the Beginning of the World remarks, "Nostalgia is a landslide in a dreaming heart." While *balikbayans* are nostalgic about their past lives and intimacies, recipients long for the American life from their fantasies. Because of the sentiments and symbolism involved, the *balikbayan* box tradition is more popular than ever and is likely to stay that way for a long time. As long as Filipino Americans and Filipinos have connections and desires and imaginations, so will *balikbayan* boxes endure.

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APPENDIX A

Guide to Field Resources

Major Sources

Alicia.....	8/14/98T3	Madrona.....	7/29/98W1
Alicia.....	8/21/99	.....T7	Madrona.....	7/29/98	.....V1
Allan.....	8/9/98	.....T2	Madrona.....	7/29/98	.....T1
Annie.....	8/9/98	.....V2	Madrona.....	4/10/01	.....FN6
Arlene.....	9/28/99	.....P1	Madrona.....	5/3/01	.....P23
Dulce.....	8/26/99	.....T10	Michael.....	10/1/99	.....T12
Gayle.....	8/9/98	.....V2	Monty.....	11/1/99	.....FN1
Gayle.....	4/25/01	.....P13	Nene.....	6/10/99	.....T6
Gil.....	8/26/99	.....T11	Ofelia.....	6/99	.....FN5
Harlika.....	8/26/99	.....T11	Onofre.....	8/26/99	.....T11
Isabel.....	8/21/99	.....T8	Onofre.....	4/10/01	.....FN6
Isabel.....	4/23/01	.....P12	Rex.....	7/29/98	.....V1
Jay.....	10/1/99	.....T12	Rex.....	8/24/00	.....E4
Jay.....	8/9/00	.....P10	Rex.....	4/24/01	.....E6
Joseph.....	11/1/98	.....FN3	Rhea.....	2/22/99	.....FN4
Juanita.....	8/21/99	.....T9	Rhea.....	6/7/99	.....T4
Judy.....	6/9/99	.....T5	RJ.....	8/21/99	.....T8
Judy.....	8/7/00	.....E3	Anonymous women	11/1/98	.....FN2
Lambert.....	8/26/99	.....T11			

Legend

E = e-mailed response/inquiry

FN = from field notes

P = phone interview/inquiry

V = videotaped interview

T = tape-recorded interview

W = written response

Other Sources

Arko Int'l Foods.....	4/27/01	.....P17	Gluck, Richard.....	8/3/00	.....E2
Asiana Airlines.....	8/25/00	.....P11	Joey	7/29/00	.....E1
Atlas Shippers.....	8/3/00	.....P8	Korean Air	8/3/00	.....P4
Atlas Shippers.....	4/27/01	.....P14	LBC.....	4/27/01	.....P19
Atlas Shippers.....	4/30/01	.....P20	Luneta Seafood Mkt...4/27/01	.....P16	
Cathay Pacific	8/3/00	.....P9	Nanay's Seafood Mkt.4/27/01	.....P18	
China Airlines.....	8/3/00	.....P5	REN Intl.....	8/3/00	.....P6
Daisy	9/1/00	.....E5	REN Intl.....	4/30/01	.....P22
Forex	8/3/00	.....P7	Thai	8/1/00	.....P2
Forex	4/27/01	.....P15	United.....	8/1/00	.....P3
Forex	4/30/01	.....P21			

APPENDIX B: Interview Data

Name	Date of Interview	Mode of Interview	Status	No. of Visits	Length of Visits
Alicia	8/98; 8/21/99	tape	<i>balikbayan</i>	5 or 6	2-3 weeks
Allan	8/9/98	tape	<i>balikbayan</i>	1	3 weeks
Annie	8/9/98	video: with Gayle	<i>balikbayan</i>	1	3 weeks
Arlene	9/28/99	phone. notes	shipper	unknown	unknown
Dulce	8/26/99	tape	<i>balikbayan</i>	1 (after immig.)	2 weeks
Gayle	8/9/98	video: with Annie	<i>balikbayan</i>	4	3wks-2yrs
Gil	8/26/99	tape; with Harlika, Lambert, & Onofre	<i>balikbayan</i>	2	2-4 weeks
Harlika	8/26/99	tape; with Gil, Lambert, & Onofre	<i>balikbayan</i>	>2	less than 1 month
Isabel	8/21/99	tape; with RJ	non- <i>balikbayan</i>	none	n/a
Jay	10/1/99	tape; with Michael	shipper	unknown	unknown
Joseph	11/1/98	notes: at LAX	tourist	n/a	n/a
Juanita	8/21/99	tape	<i>balikbayan</i>	3	1 month
Judy	6/9/99	tape	local/ recipient	n/a	n/a
Lambert	8/26/99	tape; with Gil, Harlika, & Onofre	<i>balikbayan</i>	3	up to 2 months
Madrona	7/29/98	tape; video with Rex	<i>balikbayan</i>	>5	up to 5 months
Michael	10/1/99	tape; with Michael	shipper	unknown	unknown
Monty	11/1/98	notes: at LAX	<i>balikbayan</i>	2	4 ½ weeks
Nene	6/10/99	tape	local	n/a	n/a
Ofelia	6/99	notes	DOT official	n/a	n/a
Onofre	8/26/99	tape; with Gil, Harlika, & Lambert	<i>balikbayan</i>	>5	up to 5 months
RJ	8/21/99	tape; with Isabel	non- <i>balikbayan</i>	none	n/a
Rex	7/29/98	video; with Madrona	<i>balikbayan</i>	5	2-4 weeks
Rhea	6/7/99	tape	local/ recipient	n/a	n/a
Anonymous women (3)	11/1/98	notes: at LAX	<i>balikbayans</i>	unknown	unknown

APPENDIX C: Personal Data on Respondents

Name	Gender	Age (at time of interview)	Occupation	Highest Level of Education
Alicia	F	59: 60	legal secretary	college graduate
Allan	M	33	DSS case worker	some college
Annie	F	5	student	first grade (in 2001)
Arlene	F	40	BayanBox co-owner	unknown
Dulce	F	61	retired	college graduate
Gayle	F	34	dental assistant	college graduate
Gil	G	33	technology director	master's degree
Harlika	F	41	nurse	college graduate
Isabel	F	37	controller	college graduate
Jay	M	29	Asst. Team Leader	unknown
Joseph	M	18	unknown	unknown
Juanita	F	72 or 73	p/t babysitter	high school?
Judy	F	34	movie checker	college graduate
Lambert	F	48	nurse; on disability	college graduate
Madrona	F	62	retired	college graduate
Michael	M	31	LBC Team Leader	unknown
Monty	M	33	unknown	unknown
Nene	F	31	domestic helper	high school
Ofelia	F	unknown	administrator	unknown
Onofre	M	67	retired	college
RJ	M	36	unemployed	some college; vocational school
Rex	M	29	teacher	master's degree
Rhea	F	27	cashier	master's degree
Anon. women (3)	F	unknown	unknown	unknown

APPENDIX C (continued): Personal Data on Respondents

Name	Place and Length of Residence in Philippines		Current Place and Length of Residence in U.S.A.	
Alicia	Cebu City, Cebu	46 ¼ years	Los Angeles, CA	13 years
Allan	Cebu City, Cebu	20 ¼ years	Glendale, CA	13 years
Annie	n/a	none	Glendale, CA	5 years
Arlene	unknown	unknown	unknown	unknown
Dulce	Urdaneta, Pangasinan	60 years	Temecula, CA	1 year
Gayle	Manila	20 yrs+ 3 ½ yrs to finish college	Glendale, CA	11 years
Gil	Urdaneta, Pangasinan	2 years	Torrance, CA	31 years
Harlika	Urdaneta, Pangasinan	18 years	Carson, CA	23 years
Isabel	Manila	30 years	North Hollywood, CA	8 years
Jay	unknown	unknown	unknown	unknown
Joseph	Las Piñas, Metro Manila	none	n/a	n/a
Juanita	Manila	59 or 60 years	Los Angeles, CA	13 years
Judy	Talisay, Cebu	34 years	none	n/a
Lambert	Urdaneta, Pangasinan	19 years (+3 years in Australia)	Los Angeles, CA	16 years
Madrona	Urdaneta, Pangasinan	31 years	Los Angeles, CA	31 years
Michael	unknown	unknown	unknown	unknown
Monty	San Miguel	13 years	Burbank, CA	20 years
Nene	San Remigio, Cebu	31 years	none	n/a
Ofelia	Cebu	unknown	none	n/a
Onofre	Urdaneta, Pangasinan	36 years	Los Angeles, CA	31 years
RJ	Cebu City, Cebu	21 years	North Hollywood, CA	15 years
Rex	n/a	none	Rowland Heights, CA	29 years
Rhea	Cebu City, Cebu	27 years	none	n/a
Anonymous women (3)	unknown	unknown	unknown	unknown

APPENDIX D

Glossary of Select Foreign Terms

Bis.: Bisaya	Tag.: Tagalog	Iloc.: Ilocano	Span.: Spanish
	var.: various	unk: unknown	

<i>abaca</i> (var.)	Manila hemp
<i>Alaskero</i> (Tag.)	term for Filipino who worked in Alaska, usually in the salmon canneries
<i>halik</i> (var.)	to return
<i>balikbayan</i> (Tag.)	returning Filipino
<i>balikbayan</i> box (Tag.)	large, usually brown or white box returning Filipinos bring or send to the Philippines
<i>Balikbayan</i> program (Tag.)	program created by the Philippine Department of Tourism in 1973, which gave incentives to overseas Filipinos to return/visit the Philippines
<i>Balikbayani</i> program (Tag.)	DOT program, which rewards overseas Filipinos for sending/bringing tourists to the Philippines
<i>barangay</i> (var.)	smallest unit of government in the Philippines; community
<i>barato</i> (Bis.)	cheap
<i>bayan</i> (Tag.)	town or nation
<i>bayani</i> (Tag.)	hero
<i>cacique</i> (Span.)	political boss
<i>carne norte</i> (Span.)	corned beef

<i>comadre/compadre</i> (Span.)	term used to refer to a female/male ritual kin; also <i>kumare/kumpare</i> in the vernacular or shortened to <i>mare/pare</i>
<i>compadrazgo</i> (Span.)	ritual kinship; also <i>compadrinazgo</i>
<i>daghan</i> (Bis.)	many, plenty
<i>dala</i> (var.)	to bring. Variations include: <i>magdala, nagdala, nagpadala</i> . Shortened to <i>da</i> by Bisayans, e.g., <i>magda, nagpada</i>
<i>encomienda</i> (Span.)	system of land distribution, in which individuals or institutions acquired rights over pieces of land for a certain period of time
<i>encomendero</i> (Span.)	individual granted an <i>encomienda</i>
<i>fiesta</i> (Span.)	festival; feast day
<i>gastos</i> (var.)	expenses
<i>gikan sa gawas</i> (Bis.)	literally, from outside. Refers to those who have returned from an extended stay abroad
<i>hacienda</i> (Span.)	landed estate
<i>hatag</i> (Bis.)	to give. Variations include: <i>hatagan, gihatagan, gitagaan</i>
<i>hiya</i> (Tag.)	shame
<i>indio</i> (Span.)	natives. From the Spanish word for Indian. Used by Spaniards to call the natives of their colonies
<i>kababayan</i> (Tag.)	countrymen
<i>Katipunan</i> (Tag.)	Society. Short for <i>Kataastaasang Kagalanggalangang Katipunan ng mga Anak ng Bayan</i> (“Highest, Most Respected Society of the Sons of the Country”)
<i>kwarto</i> (var.)	money
<i>Manang/Manong</i> (Iloc.)	older sister/brother or elderly man/woman

<i>mo-uli</i> (Bis.)	go home
<i>ninang/ninong</i> (var.)	godmother/godfather; sponsor
<i>padala</i> (var.)	gift/objects you send along; also <i>pakidala</i>
<i>pakikisama</i> (Tag.)	ability to get along; smooth interpersonal relations
<i>pareho</i> (var.)	same
<i>parente</i> (Bis.)	relatives
<i>pasalubong</i> (Tag.)	gifts given when returning from a trip
<i>pasungsong</i> (Iloc.)	loose change
<i>pensionado</i> (Span.)	individual who was given a scholarship by the American colonial government to study in the US
<i>Pilipinas</i> (var.)	Philippines
<i>Pinoy</i> (slang)	term originally referring to a Filipino in America. Now refers to any Filipino
<i>pueblo</i> (Span.)	town
<i>Sakada</i> (unk.)	contract worker in Hawaii from early 1900s through WWI
<i>Swerte</i> (unk.)	luck or lucky
<i>tao</i> (var.)	human being
<i>utang</i> (var.)	debt, loan
<i>utang na loob</i> (Tag.)	debt from within; debt of gratitude
<i>vox populi</i> (Latin)	voice of the people



