

## Boxed In or Out?

# Balibayan Boxes as Metaphors for Filipino American (Dis)Location

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Résumé de l'article

Les boîtes *balibayan* (du tagalog *balik*, revenir et *bayan*, ville ou pays), qui contiennent surtout des *pasalubong*, ou cadeaux, pour les parents ou amis, sont littéralement des éléments de base de l'existence transnationale de nombreux Philippins et en sont venues à représenter les *balibayans*, ou ceux qui reviennent, eux-mêmes. En utilisant les concepts des rites de passage et de la dialectique du don, de la réciprocité et de la reproduction, cet article considère les boîtes *balibayan* comme des métaphores du dédoublement expérimenté et ressenti par beaucoup de Philippino-américains de la première génération. Il présente la préparation des boîtes comme une allégorie des liens qu'entretiennent les Philippino-américains avec ceux qui restent aux Philippines. En considérant ces boîtes comme l'un des « lieux » de l'identité des *balibayans*, il met l'accent sur le statut liminal qu'ont les membres de cette première génération de Philippino-américains, à la fois dans leur pays d'origine et dans leur pays d'adoption.

## BOXED IN OR OUT?

*Balikbayan* Boxes as Metaphors for Filipino American (Dis)Location

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*Bisag unsa na nila kadugay didto, mo-ari gyud sila. Unya mao na kanang, mostly, mo-da gyud anang balikbayan box. Kay para sa ilang relatives. [No matter how long they've been there (in the United States), they still come here (to the Philippines). And that's why, mostly, they bring that balikbayan box. For their relatives.] (Jocelyn, Filipina interviewee 1999)*

And use becomes creation when objects become parts of objects, when the context becomes a composition (Glassie 1991: 265).

In the summer of 1998, my family and I traveled back to the Philippines to attend my brother's wedding. It was the first time I had returned to my native land since we immigrated to the United States thirteen years prior. Our luggage consisted of nine suitcases and eleven *balikbayan* (from the Tagalog words *balik*, to return, and *bayan*, town or nation) boxes. While the suitcases contained our clothes and supplies for the trip, the boxes mostly contained *pasalubong*, or gifts, for relatives and friends. This seeming largesse is by no means out of the ordinary; in fact, these boxes are staples in the transnational existence of many Filipinos and have come to represent the *balikbayans*, or the returning persons, themselves.

In this article, I examine *balikbayan* boxes and their significance, specifically contending that these are indices of the dislocation experienced and felt by many first generation Filipino Americans. To most Filipinos, their families are of the utmost importance, inspiring loyalty and a sense of duty such that many immigrate to the United

States because of their desire to provide better lives for their families. In doing so, these immigrants<sup>1</sup> often make many sacrifices, not least the separation (initially for some, extended for others) experienced from the people to whom they were closest. In the United States, they have new and different experiences which, to varying degrees, contribute to their alienation from families and friends. The act of visiting the Philippines allows *balikbayans* to reconnect with their homeland, while the gift giving that accompanies it serves as a tightening or renewal of bonds to their loved ones. They can never be truly at home on these visits, however, since they are caught between nostalgia for their old homes and the reality of their new homes. The government recognized this early on in the 1970s, when it launched the *Balikbayan* Program, a Department of Tourism (DOT) scheme that treated *balikbayans* as tourists in their native lands and offered consumable versions of home. Thus, just as *balikbayan* boxes are essentially transitory, so are the people who use them.

This article is based on fieldwork carried out over a two-year period (1998-1999), during which I interviewed *balikbayans*, recipients, shippers and a DOT official. In all, I conducted eighteen interviews with a total of twenty-six people, seventeen of whom are females and nine males. These interviewees represent a spectrum in age, education, occupation, length of residence and place of origin in the Philippines, length of residence in the United States, and number and length of *balikbayan* visits. This work is also grounded in my role as participant-observer and my personal experience as an immigrant and a *balikbayan*. For this particular analysis, I build on existing studies on Filipino Americans and their experiences in the United States (e.g., Aguilar-San Juan 1994; Espiritu 1995; Okamura 1995; Posadas 1999; Rafael 1995, 2000; Root 1997). I utilize the rites of passage concept and the dialectic of gift giving, reciprocity and reproduction to discuss the performance of the *balikbayan* box custom and the relationship between *balikbayans* and locals. I also present the preparation of the boxes as an allegory for the bonds that bind Filipino Americans to those who remain in the Philippines. In line with recent works by Bonus (2000), Espiritu (2003), Ignacio (2005) and San Juan (2001) concerning the negotiation

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1. The term immigrant in this case includes the category of migrant worker as well as landed immigrant since many Filipinos first arrive in the destination country as migrant workers and later formalize their immigration status.

of Filipino American identities,<sup>2</sup> I situate the identities of *balikbayans* within the boxes they carry. In reading the boxes as a location of *balikbayan* identity, I emphasize the liminal status of first-generation Filipino Americans both in the native and adopted countries.

### All in the Family

The Philippines is a kinship-oriented society. As in many cultures, the family is the dominant influence in a Filipino's socialization. Family members — both nuclear and extended — are economically, socially and emotionally interdependent. Clannishness is also an integral, often expected component of life (Jocano 1969; Lynch 1973; Murray 1973; Steinberg 1990); more often than not, the interests of the kinship group take precedence over the well-being of the community or the country. In addition, the good of the family almost always outweighs individual desires, and all family members have an obligation to ensure that the household thrives. Thus, from an early age, the Filipino sense of duty to their 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 1969: 78). Foremost among these lessons is the *utang na loob* [debt from within; debt of gratitude] owed to their parents for giving life and making sacrifices for the future of the children (Krasno 1996: 6; Mulder 1997: 22; Panopio and Rolda 1988: 55). Though this debt can never be truly repaid, children are required to show their parents complete respect and unquestioned obedience in return. 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 many Filipinos to seek better opportunities through migration,

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2. Bonus locates Filipino American identities in three sites: “Oriental” stores, community halls, and community newspapers, while Ignacio discusses Filipino and Filipino American identity politics on the Internet. San Juan views the practice of ballroom dancing as an indicator of immigrant identity, while Espiritu continues to tell the stories of first and later generation Filipino Americans and explores the idea of home as “both an *imagined* and an *actual* geography” (2003: 2). These and other works go in-depth into the relationship between US colonization and neo-colonization of the Philippines, racism in the US and what it means to be Filipino or Filipino American.

either as temporary overseas contract workers or permanent immigrants. Once abroad, they remit some of their earnings to their families in the Philippines (Pertierra 1992). For instance, Francisca, who used to work as a nanny and housekeeper, sent \$300 to \$500 regularly to her children, while two of my brothers and I continue to give our remaining brother in the Philippines a monthly stipend. Through these remittances, parents continue to sacrifice for their children, and children show their devotion and *utang na loob* to their parents and relatives.

### Coming to America

While out-migration may benefit families financially, it also has its drawbacks. The steady departure of hundreds of thousands of Filipinos annually means that relatives and friends are constantly being separated from each other. Despite earning wages that they could never have dreamt of at home, Filipino emigrants suffer a dislocation that is at once geographical, cultural and spiritual.

When Filipinos first arrive in the United States, they encounter numerous hardships and have to make several adjustments in their adopted countries. They may have to become accustomed to dissimilarities in terms of the basics, such as living arrangements, diet, climate, and transportation. Maria, for example, remembers coming to America in 1967, when she was 31 years old, and her less than warm reception at her boarding house.

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? "Come to the Philippines, even [if] 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 (Maria 1998).

Thus, Maria 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.

Immigrants face an even greater challenge when it comes to lifestyle and convention. For instance, 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 the elderly as a sign of the lack of family values. As Dahlia expresses,

[...] it's really a real shock, a culture shock. That's what I don't like [...]. 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 in the United States (Dahlia 1999).

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 when dealing with others, as they themselves are sensitive to *pakikisama* [smooth interpersonal relationships] and keeping face.

Hard work also accompanies immigration, even for the aged. For instance, Francisca came to the United States when she was in her sixties and worked through her early seventies. This work imperative applies to much younger migrants, as well. One of my brothers, for example, was nineteen years old when we arrived in the United States. He had to forego the college education that he begun before he left the Philippines and instead worked at a warehouse to help support our family. After fifteen years he was at last able to resume his studies, taking one night class at a time.

In addition to adjusting to different living conditions and societal values, immigrants suffer tremendous loneliness and homesickness. This is especially the case for those, like Maria, who came to the United States alone. She recounts:

[There was] nobody. That's the problem. I didn't have relatives, I was the only Filipino there. Oh, I 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 passes by, I just look. No passersby, no people, very quiet place. So the quietness of the place, oh my, almost killed me. I cried and I said, "[...] my baby!" [My son] was only thirteen or twelve 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 laughed. It was a time for socializing (Maria 1998).

Even those who are joined by family still suffer alienation from the Philippines, their remaining relatives, and their friends. Moreover,

because of their ethnicity, Filipinos are subject to the more serious threats of prejudice and discrimination. For early immigrants, injustices were very blatant; like other Asians and people of colour, they were targets of name calling, exclusionary acts, anti-miscegenation laws, discriminatory practices, and racial violence (Bogardus 1976: 52-62; Clifford 1976: 74-89; Cordova 1983: 115-120, 191-195; Melendy 1976: 38-42; Pido 1986: 91; Posadas 1999: 20-24). Today's immigrants no longer have to contend with legally sanctioned discrimination, but they still face name calling and stereotyping. For example, de Castro writes,

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!" (1994: 304)<sup>3</sup>

In addition to such verbal attacks, Filipino Americans continue to be victims of racially motivated violence, including the police brutality against Rodin and Minerva Rodriguez at their store in Jersey City in 1989 (de Castro 1994: 306-307), the arson of Norberto Bautista's South Everett, Washington home in 1996 (Posadas 1999: 147), the beating of Syracuse University student Derrick Lizardo and his friends at a local restaurant in 1997 (Posadas 1999: 147), and the 1999 shooting death of mail carrier Joseph Iletto by a white supremacist in Los Angeles (Sanchez 1999: A1).

Despite these hardships, many Filipino immigrants feel that the financial rewards are more than enough compensation. Wages in the Philippines are so low that family members often need to pool their resources to survive; it is even difficult for professionals to move away from their families and live on their own salaries. In the United States, however, even the minimum wage, a considerable amount compared with Philippine earnings, can be sufficient for achieving independence. With their paycheques, Filipino Americans can indulge in the material comforts of life, including cars, appliances, and houses, possessions that are not so easy to acquire in the Philippines. According to Isabel, "Yeah,

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3. Both Espiritu (2000) and Ignacio (2005) dedicate sections of their books to gender stereotyping.

the quality of life definitely is a lot better than the Philippines 'cause, over here, you could pretty much get whatever you want" (Isabel 1999). Moreover, one of the most satisfying aspects of earning higher wages is the ability to contribute financially to their families in the Philippines. As Maria declares, the United States is "much, much better because I can send money. I can help my brothers and sisters. Some of them are still going to college [...]" (Maria 1998).

Thus, many Filipinos proceed to build their lives in the United States with good salaries in their pockets and aspirations of reunification with their families. The pangs of loneliness and homesickness are slowly alleviated as Filipino migrants make new friends and get involved in new activities. In California, where the majority of Filipino immigrants reside, they frequently encounter their *kababayans* or countrymen. In the buses or on the streets, it is not unusual for strangers to ask, "*Pilipino ka ba?* [Are you Filipino?]", and friendships often blossom from these encounters. Filipino organizations, including hometown or provincial, alumni, professional, and religious ones, also provide opportunities to meet fellow expatriates (Bonus 2000). And by befriending people from other ethnicities and participating in non-Filipino-oriented pastimes, Filipino immigrants gradually acclimatize to life in the United States.

### The Twilight Zone

In his study of rites of passage, van Gennep highlights the tripartite patterns of passage rituals: they consist of "preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and postliminal rites (rites of incorporation)" (1960: 11). In many ways, the experiences of Filipino immigrants parallel these various stages. For example, migrants, in their preparations for their departure from the Philippines, saying their goodbyes, and getting exit stamps on their passports, experience separation. The transitional stage primarily consists of the airplane flight, while 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.

Even as members of American society, immigrants continue to be "liminal" and "ambiguous" persons. According to 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” (1969: 95). While naturalization should ideally mean that Filipinos have successfully crossed a migratory threshold and can now be fully incorporated members of their adopted country, many are still judged by the colour of their skin. 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” (1999: 146). Because of such colour-coded prejudices, Filipinos in America — be they residents, naturalized citizens, or citizens by right — cannot really escape their liminality. For them, “transition has [...] become a permanent condition” (Turner 1999: 106).

As immigrants and persons of colour, Filipinos are primarily positioned at the interstices or margins of American society. Like other liminal beings, they tend to have little status, rank, wealth or power. Frequently relegated to a common lower status regardless of their rank back in the home country, many immigrants “tend to develop an intense comradeship and egalitarianism” (95). Those who might never have associated with each other in the Philippines are regularly brought together by their shared circumstances in the United States. In this way, they experience *communitas*. In order to come to terms with their cultural liminality, Filipinos also often turn to the familiarity of easily identifiable national and cultural identities from their previous, more clearly defined existence. 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. [...] 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 greater transience 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 through particular constructions of memory. [...] The newspapers also serve as vehicles for the collective sense making of their conditions and experiences in their new homeland (Bonus 2000: 148-149).

In their adjustment process then, Filipinos long for — even cling to — tangible elements of their preliminal phase. Sometimes this nostalgic tendency can lead to a sort of meta-Filipinoness. 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 (Isabel 1999).

Thus immigrants consciously bring the Philippines to the United States and continue to reconcile their past with aspects of their new home. As one of Bonus' respondents reflects, "*Malayo na ang nalakbay ko* [I've travelled far already] ... but I always want to be reminded about my former home. It matters in understanding myself here" (Bonus 2000: 151-152).

In the process that accompanies a rite of passage, 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 for Caucasians, this is not the case for Filipinos, however much they attempt to conform or assimilate. Instead, improvement in social standing is only acknowledged back in the homeland from which they have been disconnected, where *balikbayans* are accorded a higher status. When they return to the Philippines, Filipino Americans are reincorporated into their old society and temporarily overcome the liminality experienced through immigration. Back home, however, they acquire another kind of liminality because, by definition, *balikbayans* are also "ambiguous."

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 rather than one's loyalty to the nation-state. At the same time, being a *balikbayan* depends on one's permanent residence abroad. It means one lives somewhere else and that one's appearance in the Philippines is temporary and intermittent, as if one were a tourist (Rafael 2000: 206).

*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 1969: 107).

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. Maria, for example, went home for the first time because

I felt so homesick. I just felt so homesick, that's why. [...] Plus my mom and my brothers and sisters were always writing me, "Please come home, we miss you, please come home." So I went home (Maria 1998).

This craving to belong 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" (1998: 9). Thus, "[t]ourists are trying to fulfill some kind of need when they travel... [T]hose who visit friends and family are addressing their emotional (love and sense of belonging) needs" (Cruz 1998: 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.

### The Gift

*Balikbayan* boxes play a great role in the returnees' reconnection with their families and communities. These cartons filled with *pasalubong* or gifts facilitate *balikbayans*' re-entry into Philippine society since gift-giving implies a relationship between the giver and the recipient. As Cheal puts it, "a gift is a ritual offering that is a sign of involvement in and connectedness to another" (1987: 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 (Mauss 1954). 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 1991: 124). It is precisely the centrality of this renewing quality which leads 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” (Weiner 1980: 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 they care about most. For example, Maria brings presents for her siblings, nieces, and nephews, as well as her mother when she was still alive (Maria 1998), while her sister, Dahlia, hands out gifts to her children, grandchildren, and in-laws (Dahlia 1999). Frankie gives presents to “friends and cousins, mostly cousins” (Frankie 1998), while David bears *pasalubong* for “family, relatives” (David 1998). In addition, *balikbayan* boxes usually include goods for distant relatives, neighbours, and other members of the community with whom returnees maintain a less intimate relationship.

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” (1987: 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’ affection for and connections to people in the Philippines. *Balikbayans* can show their devotion in obvious ways, such as Maria’s bringing of “Pampers for my ailing mother” or her sister who “one time brought home pillows [...] because [...] my mom is disabled, so she has to have soft pillows” (Maria 1998). More often, though, this affection is expressed in terms of giving satisfaction. As my mother Alicia expresses, “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” (Alicia 1998). Sometimes, it is easier for *balikbayans* to please relatives because they make requests for specific things. My mother corroborates, “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 United States call them and ask them what they want” (Alicia 1999). Returnees strive to meet family expectations. Dahlia explains, “Well, we try, we try hard. Because [...] as much as possible, being a grandmother, I want to please my grandchildren” (Dahlia 1999). 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 my mother, the *balikbayan* boxes that bear these *pasalubong*

symbolize 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" (Alicia 1999).

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 1995: 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. As Rhonda, a local, explains

[...] *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 (Rhonda 1999).

The significance of the gesture is, therefore, not lost on the recipients. These *pasalubong*, then, embody the presenters' consideration and affection. As Dahlia encapsulates, "You have your love in that box for people back home because you purchased something for them [...] It symbolizes [...] love for people back home" (Dahlia 1999).

The gifts that are distributed during the *balikbayans'* visits, however, are only the conspicuous end results of a complex and sometimes lengthy process. Aside from the thought involved in the selection of the *pasalubong*, a multitude of other activities is involved in the *balikbayan* box practice. While all of these steps contribute to the successful performance of this custom, the attention to detail is just as much a manifestation of the returnees' desire for reconnection as the gifts themselves. In her book *Wrapping Culture*, Hendry bemoans that "we 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” (1995: 7). In the *balikbayans*’ case, the gifts certainly tend to take centre stage, and while they do reveal something of the giver’s intent, it is perhaps the overall preparation and execution that is more telling of the *balikbayans*’ sentiments.

*Balikbayan* boxes play an essential role in facilitating the returnees’ reincorporation into their Philippine families and communities. The boxes are flat when they are purchased from the stores and need to be assembled and, because these cartons will be carrying up to seventy pounds of goods, travelers reinforce them with tape — duct tape, packing tape, or other kinds — particularly at the seams and corners, thus ensuring the boxes keep their shape and do not fall apart. In the same way, relationships need to be moulded and fortified as well. Therefore just as the tape seals these packages, so 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 must also reinforce their affiliations as much as possible. At the same time, the ropes are visible reminders of the ties that bind *balikbayans* to the Philippines.

With the use of markers, travelers label their cartons with their names and destination addresses; some also include their addresses in the United States. 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 pre-printed already. While these words refer to the delicate nature 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 coloured 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 need to retain some of their Filipinoness to ensure more harmonious fellowships with those in the Philippines. Via this process, travelers hope

to accomplish their goal of maintaining the integrity of both boxes and relationships.

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 my mother, “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” (Alicia 1999). More often, recipients give *padalas* (gifts or objects entrusted to the travellers) for other friends and relations back in the United States who are unable to visit the Philippines. For *balikbayans*, though, 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 accommodation, transportation, and meals for the duration of their stay. They often take time out from their jobs, in order to spend time with and entertain the travellers. As Rhonda exemplifies, “I always give my time, that’s all. If that person needs company, I could always give that person my time” (Rhonda 1999). 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’ visits 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” (1976: 63). *Balikbayans*, then, exchange consumable goods for immaterial benefits, which, in turn, form the bases for 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 centre 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, my mother 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 [...]. There's not much time to really catch up [*emphasis*] 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 (Alicia 1999).

Consequently, when Filipinos emigrate, their affection for those left behind is not diminished, although they do lose the intimacy that comes as a result of constant companionship. During their visits, *balikbayans* recapture some of that familiarity, but the limited time frame prevents them from fully regaining the same degree of cohesion that they experienced prior to emigration. Furthermore, their departure again distances them from the people at home and these relationships subsequently revert back 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 again to certain elements of the Filipino lifestyle, which sometimes make them want to extend their stay. Maria 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 we usually do not eat here [in the United States] — the vegetables and the fruits (Maria 1998).

Other returnees, particularly those who have not been in the United States for too long, are even more content and happy in the Philippines. Dahlia articulates,

Oh, I feel very much at home because the Philippines is really a real home for Filipinos who have been raised there. People [...] born here, of course, this is home, United States is home for them. But I still prefer the Philippines as my home (Dahlia 1999).

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

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 (Maria 1998).

While such negative aspects deter many *balikbayans* from staying in the Philippines for too long, many of them also have family members and friends resident in the United States, in addition to homes, possessions and employment, a fact which ensures their return there. As Maria acknowledges, she comes back to the United States because "my family is here [*laughs*], my house 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" (Maria 1998). Moreover, many relish the easy access to capital, as well as the numerous possibilities for upward mobility, self-improvement, and other endeavours. The longer they have been in the country, the more they adapt to American lifestyle. Thus, despite their ties to the Philippines, most *balikbayans* prefer to live in the United States. According to Maria, "It is much better here. [...] It's much, much better" (1998).

Because of their Filipino heritage and United States residency, Filipino Americans are pulled in 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 with the inception of the *Balikbayan* Program in 1973, when the regime constructed *balikbayans* as tourists and consumers. As Rafael describes,

[...] 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 version 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 (2000: 206-207).

Aware that immigrants are inclined to remain in the United States, the brains behind the *Balikkbayan* Program preyed on their nostalgia and translated the homeland into purchasable, transportable versions. Currently, in addition to selling island destinations, the Program serves up accompanying souvenirs. While generic memorabilia, such as T-shirts and key chains, are available, the native arts and crafts are more popular among returnees. The travellers frequently buy symbols of a particular region as these local handicrafts are “portable memories of home. *Hindi lang pang-turista, pang-balikkbayan pa!* [Not just for tourists, also for *balikkbayans!*]” (“100 Things” 1998: 7). Many returnees acquire these objects to show pride in their origins and to remind them of their native land, and while some of these are given to friends and relatives in the United States, most are displayed in their homes. Though these souvenirs embody ethnicity and remembrance for many *balikkbayans*, most of them have become standardized merchandise and, therefore, rendered somewhat inauthentic.

While handicrafts are suitable mementos of their visits, *balikkbayans* are generally keen to purchase native delicacies of the Philippines to bring back to the United States. 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 *balikkbayans*’ acquisitions is quite apropos, since they exemplify the homecoming experience. With these food items, *balikkbayans* 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 *balikkbayans*’ sentimental yearnings, these delicacies feed a hunger for something distinctly Filipino. Just as there is a time limit to the *balikkbayan* visits, however, these victuals satiate the taste buds and stomachs fleetingly and only while supplies last. Once they are gone, consumers are left craving for more. Similarly, *balikkbayan* trips are transitory — over as quickly as they begin. But, just as the taste — or the memory of it — lingers, so do the impressions of their visits.

Clearly, immigration creates a dichotomy in the lives of Filipino Americans, and *balikkbayan* boxes are symptomatic of this dislocation. Returnees 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, *balikbayans* themselves are as transient as the boxes they carry. As Filipino American author Jessica Hagedorn 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. [...] I am unable to stay [...]. I return only to depart, weeks or months later [...]. I am the other, the exile within, afflicted with permanent nostalgia for the mud. I return only to depart [...] (1993: 187).

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