



# Post Bling Bling



**Eileen R. Tabios**



***POST  
BLING BLING***

By Eileen R. Tabios

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## I. POST BLING BLING

*In a global, capitalistic culture logotypes exist (Nike, McDonalds, Red Cross) which are recognizable by almost all of the planet's inhabitants. Their meanings and connotations are familiar to more people than any other proper noun of any given language. This phenomenon has caused some artists to reflect on the semiotic content of the words they use, (for example, in the names of perfumes) and isolate them, stripping them down to their pure advertising content. Words are no longer associated with a product, package or price, and go back to their original meaning or to a new one created by the artist.*

**—from Galeria Helga de Alvear's exhibition statement for "Ads, Logos and Videotapes" (Estudio Helga de Alvear), Nov 16 - Jan 13, 2001**

**[Terse-et]**

V  
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**FAIR**

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**FAR**

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Y

**AIR**

## ***WELCOME TO THE LUXURY HYBRID***

It's not just the debut of a new car, but of a new category.

Lexus engineers have combined the attributes of a luxury sedan with the remarkable fuel economy and low emissions that only hybrid technology can provide.

The result is a vehicle that offers you the best of both, without asking you to sacrifice anything.

A V6 engine delivers the power of a V8 while producing only a fraction of the emissions associated with a standard SUV.

Yet this hybrid is also every inch a Lexus, sparing nothing in the way of your comforts and conveniences.

Making it what may indeed be the first vehicle of its kind.

One that treats you, and the world you live in, with equal respect.



***Robert De Niro***

My Life:

My Card:

AMERICAN EXPRESS

## ***Infinity Infiniti***

Available in black obsidian

*Optional:*

*a sport-tuned suspension  
and 19-inch alloy wheels*

## **FOR THE GREATER GOOD**

There are a lot of people out there – professors, nurses, deans, hospital and university administrators, doctors, coaches, curators and others like them – whose career choices inherently add value to our culture. Regardless of whether they see it this way or not. Take teaching, for example. Not only is it rewarding for the teacher on a personal level, it is beneficial for society on a universal one. Sure, there are richer career paths these people could walk in life, but perhaps none as worthwhile. For them and what they do, we think a reward is in order. One equal to the contributions they make to the rest of us.

At TIAA-CREF, that is our sole reason for being. For over 85 years, we have been helping to ensure the long term financial well-being of the millions of people working in the academic, medical and cultural fields. People whose lifework advances the greater good.

With our nonprofit heritage, TIAA-CREF has long subscribed to a different set of guiding principles. Principles directly influenced by the people we serve. With over \$300 billion in combined assets, our approach to investing goes beyond sound portfolio management. We are mindful of our social responsibilities and have a long history of championing corporate governance. And our employees do not work on commission. We stay focused on the best interests of our participants. They come first. The mission we embarked on over 85 years ago still rings true today – serve those who serve the rest of us. Because for all the good they send our way we think, some good deserves to come theirs.

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Topless

Wet

White

at

*The Mandalay Bay*

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Shoes to go with skirt.  
Skirt to go with blouse.  
Blouse to go with lipstick.  
Lipstick to go with Jack.

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Personalized Credit Plan.*

Choose your pay date.  
Choose your reward.  
Choose to pay online.  
You choose how and when you pay.

*Your Choice. Your Chase.  
Personalized Credit Plan.*

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We're not saying you should trek high into the Himalayas. All we're saying is that the *Ford Escape* has an available 200-horsepower V8 with big ambitions.

So when you hit the throttle to blow by a mountainous 18-wheeler, just think: There's a whole world of adventure awaiting you and your newfound power.



## ***Microsoft Couplet: A Poetics***

Your potential?  
Our passion.

***THE DIAMOND TRADING COMPANY—  
JUST GLITTERING WITH FEMINISM!!***

YOUR LEFT HAND SAYS YOU'RE TAKEN. YOUR  
RIGHT HAND SAYS YOU CAN TAKE OVER.  
YOUR LEFT HAND CELEBRATES THE DAY  
YOU WERE MARRIED. YOUR RIGHT HAND  
CELEBRATES THE DAY YOU WERE BORN. **WOMEN  
OF THE WORLD, RAISE YOUR RIGHT HAND.**

***W Hotels***

*--for Alice Notley*

"The warmth of cool"

"The balance between style and soul"

Whatever/whenever service.

## ***SWEETHEART***

Tequila Corazon de Agave is an ultra-premium tequila made from the heart of the blue agave grown in the rich, red soil of the “Highlands” in Arandas, Jalisco, Mexico.

The agave grown here is the largest and sweetest of all agave plants, taking up to twelve years to mature to its full flavor.

That full flavor is imparted to each bottle of Tequila Corazon giving it a deeply nuanced, full-bodied taste with sweet hints of soft vanilla and toffee.

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Tequila Corazon de Agave is created with passion...and heart.

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Our most advanced ideas.

Our highest level of engineering.

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WE ARE PROFESSIONAL GRADE.*



## II. A LONG DISTANCE LOVE

*Balikbayan (back to town or country) is a word coined in the '70's as part of the Department of Tourism's program to give recognition to the hard work and persevering spirit of the Filipino expatriates. Most balikbayans opted to live abroad either to work, to pursue higher education, to get married or to join the U.S. Navy. Majority of Filipinos who left their nests have been pursuing dreams of wealth in order to provide a comfortable life for their families and relatives back home. A balikbayan, is someone who "brings home the bacon," so to speak. He represents the Pinoy quest for the dollar, the deustchmark, the Gulf money, all in the name of prosperity.*

*A few decades later, the same definition applies and endures. But now, the quixotic balikbayan, part of the growing global trotters who has internalized the values of unabashed consumerism, totes his requisite box or two, besotted with the idea that commodities can bring joy and gladness to everyone. Aside from the dutiful checks every month, either to support brother Junior who is going to college or to build a 2-room concrete house replete with crazy-cut marble floors, a balikbayan who returns home to visit is nothing without the care package/s, commonly called balikbayan box.*  
**—from "The Shipping News: Globalization Inside A Balikbayan Box",  
Bayani Magazine, September 2000**

## ***LETTERS FROM THE BALIKBAYAN BOX***

**On May 1, 2005, at 5:27 PM, ERTABIOS@aol.com e-mails out to Filipinos in cyberspace:**

Dear All,

For a new project I'm working on, I'd be interested in knowing what would be the kind of things you or your family or Filipino acquaintances would deem important in putting into a balikbayan box. Of course the contents would differ per person/family, but I would like to see if there are some products that have wide appeal for such a purpose.

Best,

Eileen Tabios

**Date: 5/1/2005 5:47:08 PM Pacific Standard Time**

**From: Jen XXX**

Dove soap  
"L'Oreal" shampoo  
Clairol hair dye.  
hair conditioners  
used kids' clothing  
new women's clothing  
cameras  
watches  
skin cream & lotions  
lots of walnuts (my cousins own a bakery)

**Date: 5/1/2005 7:32:16 PM Pacific Standard Time**

**From: Barbara Jane Reyes**

OTC meds  
vitamins  
outgrown clothes and shoes  
various canned foods



chocolate

**Date: 5/1/2005 8:03:25 PM Pacific Standard Time**

**From: Nadine Sarreal**

used books and magazines  
used clothes and shoes  
medicines and herbal supplements  
multi-vitamins  
small appliances (walkman, discman, coffee maker, toasters, hair dryers, etc)  
CDs and VHS movies  
used computer(s) and computer parts  
Thermos and electric water pots  
kettles  
photo albums (new/unused)  
chocolates  
cereal  
gum  
coffee and tea  
toothbrushes (to offset all that sugar)  
Colgate (has to be Colgate, not Crest) toothpaste  
shampoo and conditioner  
candy (stuff you can buy on sale because it's after Christmas or Easter or Halloween)  
school supplies (notebooks, pad paper, pens, pencils, paper clips, staplers, crayons, mapping pencils, markers, sketch pads)  
text books  
requested items (special sized sports shoes, basketball, certain brands of clothing, perfume, shampoo, hair dye)  
corned beef and spam (yes, SPAM)  
towels and bedsheets (new and used)  
unpopped popcorn  
folding umbrellas  
handbags  
briefcases (especially the kind you get at conferences that have a sponsor's name printed on the front)  
mens' briefs  
sports socks  
T-shirts (this is a general gift, you send one for everyone)  
toys (new and used)

low cal salad dressing  
eyeglass frames (used)

This is as detailed as I can recall from 25 years of sending door-to-door boxes. There's a technical difference between balikbayan box (which is what someone returning to the Philippines for a visit would bring) versus a door-to-door box which is what you'd pack with goodies and have a courier pick up from your house and deliver to your family/friends (thus door-to-door). Here in Singapore, it costs just as much or even more to send a door-to-door box home as it would cost from the US. The difference is that there is a range of box sizes, the largest one costing about US\$90 to send. There is NO WEIGHT LIMIT but the service suggests you include only up to 12 cans of corned beef, 2 or 3 bottles of shampoo, etc.

**Date: 5/1/2005 8:03:25 PM Pacific Standard Time**  
**From: Kathy XXX**

My folks usually put things in balikbayan boxes like:

Canned salmon/lunch meat  
Towels  
Lotion/Shampoo/Conditioner  
Old clothes  
Old paperback books mom finds lying around most anywhere  
Samples of perfume or the little shampoo/soaps you'd get at a hotel  
Give-aways from the cosmetics counter (Clinic and Elizabeth Arden)

**UNUSUAL THINGS:**

Microwave (this was put on as luggage during a trip back home)  
Entire set of Encyclopedia Brittanica from the 1970's  
Pots and Pans  
Kitchen utensils

**Date: 5/1/2005 9:09:48 PM Pacific Standard Time**  
**From: Bino A. Realuyo**

my father (in n.y.) used to send them to us (in manila) every so many months, and there was one and only one thing i looked forward to when i opened those boxes:

inhaling the escaping smell of america.

it was what i looked forward to as a child. i even wanted to live in that box so i could smell it all day.

**Date: 5/1/2005 10:00: 48 PM Pacific Standard Time**  
**From: Eileen Tabios to Bino A. Realuyo**

You remind me of a veeeeery old lady whose "pasalubong" from my family one trip was a small bar of soap. She wasn't a relative or anything but in our village, people just started to stop by if there were state-side visitors so she got a small bar of soap. She lifted it with her wrinkled hands to her wrinkled nose, and then said, "Ooooooh. Soap even smells different from America."

**Date: 5/1/2005 10:11:26 PM Pacific Standard Time**  
**From: Pearl XXX**

ah, this one is a quick easy response.

toys  
toys  
toys  
kid's clothes in like new condition  
kid's movies, program video tapes  
video games  
Ladies clothes and shoes  
handbags  
dried goods food

**Date: 5/1/2005 10:53:28 PM Pacific Standard Time**  
**From: Michelle Bautista**

My uncle's family went home to bring my cousin home for burial. But they still packed stuff to bring home to distribute and some stuff to use to cook for the ensuing 24 hour wakes upon their arrival.

The garlic and sugar they could get there, but those kinds of staples are considered

expensive even relative to the dollar-peso exchange.

I remember when they took my grandmother home for burial my mother packed similar things saying it was easier to bring it over than to buy it there.

**Date: 5/1/2005 11:06:01 PM Pacific Standard Time**

**From: Michelle Bautista**

Also, there were a couple of pieces in the "Dalagas and Tomboys" show [at Bindlestiff Studio, San Francisco]. One shows a woman talking to her balikbayan box and the box is talking back. She mentions how the mom wants her to bring spam though they have it over there.

In a film, a woman talks about how she is the only one in her family to go back and how she feels obligated to share and bring back some of the "success" her family has had in the states.

Conversely, whenever a friend of mine comes back from the Philippines, her uncle gave her all this hopia and milkfish to distribute to relatives here which put her over the poundage limit. When she got back and went shopping with her mom at a Filipino grocery store, she found the hopia and milkfish lined on the shelves.

I remember when I was little my mother often packed Nestle's Quick, cans of Folger's coffee, toothpaste, chocolate candies (m&ms, snickers), toothbrushes, Dove and Irish Spring soap bars. For an American friend now living in the Philippines, I always bring back a bottle or two of decent wine.

**Date: 5/1/2005 11:45:28 PM Pacific Standard Time**

**From: Rosy XXX**

spam  
corned beef  
Calrose brand of rice  
California wine  
cereal boxes  
clothes  
tennis shoes  
towels

**Date: 5/3/2005 1:07:52 AM Pacific Standard Time**  
**From: Rochita Ruiz**

paper towels  
chocolate sprinkles  
dishwashing liquid  
perfume  
stuffed toys  
clothes  
bags  
lotion  
toys

Practically speaking, it's quite logical to send money home. Sentimentally speaking, the contents of the balikbayan box are my way of saying to my family that I thought of them when I was choosing things to put into the box. For instance, paper towels are available in the Philippines, but my mom loves the ones that come from here, so I always include those in a box that I'll send home.

It's not so much the brand name that's important (I have a family who are not brand-conscious, which helps), but it's the thought that's been put into collecting together the things that go in the box. It's also a bit like going home when I wrap up presents and label them with the names of those who are dear to me. Even though I can't see them, they are always with me in my thoughts. (It also gives me an excuse to shop ;)

When my aunt used to send us balikbayan boxes, it was always exciting to see what she had put into it. It wasn't so much the content as the anticipation that made it such a festive occasion.

**Date: 5/2/2005 2:32:05 AM Pacific Standard Time**  
**From: Luis Cabalquinto**

books, books, & more books  
new & vintage clothing

canned and bottled foods  
kitchen tools & supplies

farm & garden tools  
new & used toys

carpentry tools  
dvd movie & game players

new & used computers  
tv sets

bottled "spirits"

(My associates and I have sent all of the above at various times to relatives, neighbors, friends, and schools in our respective hometowns in RP -- LC)

LIBBY'S CORNED BEEF and SPAM are 2 most often requested and shipped canned food items.

**Date: 5/2/2005 5:15:53 AM Pacific Standard Time**  
**From: Leslieann Hobayan**

after seeing some responses on flips, i wonder if these are too general. after all, filipinos thrive on american labels. so i offer a couple of specific items that i remember putting into balikbayan boxes for my cousins: jif or skippy peanut butter, hersheys (always) chocolate with or without almonds, (more recently) sketchers sneakers (aka rubber shoes), new & still-boxed barbie dolls.

**Date: 5/2/2005 8:04:39 AM Pacific Standard Time**  
**From: Maria XXX**

Glucosamine, Vitamin B-12 (from Price/ Costco) -- the big bottles  
See's chocolates  
back issues of *Conde Nast Traveler*, *The New Yorker*, *Marie Claire*

**Date: 5/2/2005 8:52:44 AM Pacific Standard Time**  
**From: ERTABIOS@aol.com**

Dear All,  
Thanks to everyone so for for your responses. A follow-up: in case there are specific labels that you have favored for some reason, I'd appreciate the specificity. The brand instead of just the category of "soap" or "canned goods."

We always packed toilet paper, not just to use but also because it's good packing material. I remember an aunt who packed a pair of sneakers for some nephew, and that nephew had sniffed because it wasn't "Nike" .....:-)

Thanks again,  
Eileen

**Date: 5/2/2005 9:00:34 AM Pacific Standard Time**  
**From: Reb XXX**

here we go... with brand names

chocolate, chocolate, chocolate (candy bars and powdered mixes, i.e. Nestle Quik) / Hersheys Kisses) are favored, as are M&Ms coffee (Maxwell House, Folgers, and the specialty General Foods International coffee tins)

tea (Liptons, and the flavored herb teas, i.e. Bigelow Orange Spice, Lemon Lift, etc.)

herbs (bottled freeze-dried basil, thyme, cinnamon, sage, etc etc etc)

shampoos & soaps (L'Oreal, Neutrogena, Dial, Dove, Ivory)  
cosmetics (makeup, skincare items, hand and body lotions -- Olay, Clinique, Almay)

hosiery (pantyhose) and underwear

tinned meat (ham, corned beef, spam, vienna sausages) -- Armour, Libby's, Hormel

books and music, dvds more recently

art supplies (oil, acrylic, watercolor paints, and brushes)

clothing (new and vintage); denim, college sweatshirts, tshirts

**Date: 5/2/2005 8:35:08 PM Pacific Standard Time**  
**From: Mariel XXX**

Be warned: I'm a closet list maker, so I'm going to give you a list.

My gaggle of aunts always pack:

bath towels  
bedsheets/bed linen  
Ivory soap (always with the ivory soap!)  
Dove soap  
Jergens soap  
Oil of Olay soap  
Oil of Olay body wash  
bottles of shampoo  
big Jergens, Lander, or Dove lotion  
body wash, always the herbal kind  
Crest, Colgate, Close-up toothpaste  
big bottles of Listerine or Plax  
Ziploc bags  
aluminum foil or Reynolds wrap  
Saran wrap  
paper towels (kitchen)  
Nutella  
Nesquik chocolate powder  
pistachio nuts  
Planters mixed nuts  
bags of walnuts  
Potato chips  
boxes of prunes  
Taster's Choice coffee  
coffee creamers  
various brewed coffee packs (they don't drink coffee but they send a lot)  
Campbell's soup for the lola/the apos  
Spam, or other meat in a can  
vienna sausages in cans  
Vitamin E  
Vitamin C  
calcium caplets  
pain relievers  
anti-inflammatory medicine  
all sorts of L'Oreal creams (all anti-aging, for the titas)  
Oil of Olay (always labeled for me)  
perfumes of all sorts, some nosebleed inducing  
lipstick always a big ziploc bag of them  
perfume samples  
stuffed toys, learning toys,  
kids books, pop-up books



women's purses Nine West, Liz Claiborne (most from sales or outlet shopping)  
all sorts of cosmetic bags (some are freebies)  
Parker pens with refills  
Sharpie markers

**CLOTHING-WISE:**

Osh Kosh playsuits  
onesies (Baby Gap, Old Navy, Baby Guess)  
\* they've never sent diapers though, a puzzle to me)  
kid's shoes always a few years larger  
all sorts of souvenir tshirts  
athletic socks 12-pack  
sweaters that are not right for our climate  
khakis  
shorts

**ALSO:**

sometimes there's jewelry, or trinkets that are stashed inside rolled up socks or in packs of tissue,  
earrings and bracelets are common.

That's all I can remember so far. [Except that] my balikbayan box was not much appreciated. They thought the books were a waste of space. Only the bath towels and the quirky picture frames got any love. hehe.

**Date: 5/3/2005 5:02:11 AM Pacific Standard Time**  
**From: Isabel XXX**

As a child I remember my parents and grandparents packing balikbayan boxes to send to the Philippines. In later years there was some talk of the high cost and unreliability of shipping boxes. So they stopped and began sending cash instead, as my siblings and cousins do now. But before, the items my elders used to send were neatly packaged in zip lock bags or taped in tight packages that fitted together well like a jigsaw puzzle inside the huge box. It contained:

- Nescafe instant coffee
- Carnation instant creamer
- Bayer aspirin
- 12 pack boxes of Eagle Mirado #2 pencils

- Packs of lined folder paper
- Blank notebooks
- Camay soap
- Hawaiian print quilted blankets
- Hawaiian print cloth remnants (my mom was seamstress and brought these home from work)
- Aloha shirts and muu muus (new and used)
- Rubber slippers (flip flops to the Mainland)
- Rice cookers, toasters, tupperware
- Canned Spam, tuna, corned beef,
- Canned pineapple rings
- Children's clothes and footwear we had outgrown

**Date: 5/3/2005 8:20:10 PM Pacific Standard Time**  
**From: Amy XXX**

When i went to the Philippines 2 yrs ago, we brought 2 big boxes so we could distribute 'gifts' to all kinds of relatives/neighbors. Nail polish: Loreal (for the closer aunties) and Maybelline and Wet n Wild for the 'maids' -- terrible that we gave them so called 'cheaper brands' but there are just so many: gardeners, drivers, lady who irons clothes, lady who washes clothes

Soap: Ivory, Caress (all bar form)

Shampoo: Pantene for family, Suave for the neighbors

mini-chocolates: nestles crunch, m&m's, butterfinger, baby ruth

packs of bic pens

canon/wamsutta towels, 300+ thread count bedsheets (heavy, so they were a luxury only to my elder uncles)

old copies of *entertainment weekly*, *newsweek*, and *glamour*

packets of powdered milk

one a day vitamins, ben-gay, calcium supplements, cough/cold medicine, allergy medicine, hair coloring boxes: clairol, loreal lipsticks: same brands as nail polish, with

same distinctions too.

what a cool project. as a young girl, i loved 'shopping' for these items with my mom. we even saved happy meal toys to give to some of the poor kids in the province. packing the boxes and seeing all the chocolate and makeup and bottles and bars of soap were so magical!

**Date: 5/2/2005 8:58:17 PM PM Pacific Standard Time**  
**From: Leny M. Strobel**

Eileen --

As an extension of this project, wouldn't it be interesting to find out, too, if there are folks who have stopped sending these items as they realized that these items were also widely available in the Philippines?...or realization that this practice constitutes a perpetuation of colonial habits? I know a friend who realized that he'd rather send the money home and let the money circulate locally to buy products from local producers rather than send goods which are immediately consumable. However, I suspect that many items also probably end up in the ukay-ukay or sari-sari store -- in which case they do generate income.

Like Bino, when I was growing up and as we received our package from the US, the first thing we did was to inhale the "US-smell"...

**Date: 5/2/2005 11:28:31 PM Pacific Standard Time**  
**From: Barbara Jane Reyes**

yes i've always asked my parents and aunts why they continue to send these things back to the PI, esp. after seeing grocery stores in metro manila.

BUT THESE PRODUCTS ARE EXPENSIVE in pesos -- and it's difficult, and mostly a showy display of our privilege, conducting colonialism discourse with folks who may not afford the luxury of colonialism discourse. and so, from our positions of american privilege, indicting their colonial mentality -- this is paternalist.

additionally, i've been told stories of some extended family members feeling disgruntled when these items are not included in the balikbayan boxes, because they interpret the omission as our american family not sharing our american wealth, thus communicating a "we are better than you. we've forgotten about you" message to

them.

**Date: 5/3/2005 12:12:36 AM Pacific Standard Time**  
**From: Rose XXX**

Practically speaking, it's quite logical to send money home. Sentimentally speaking, the contents of the balikbayan box are my way of saying to my family that I thought of them when I was choosing things to put into the box. For instance, paper towels are available in the Philippines, but my mom loves the ones that come from here, so I always include those in a box that I'll send home.

It's not so much the brand name that's important (I have a family who are not brand-conscious, which helps), but it's the thought that's been put into collecting together the things that go in the box. It's also a bit like going home when I wrap up presents and label them with the names of those who are dear to me. Even though I can't see them, they are always with me in my thoughts. (It also gives me an excuse to shop ;)

When my aunt used to send us balikbayan boxes, it was always exciting to see what she had put into it. It wasn't so much the content as the anticipation that made it such a festive occasion.

**Date: 5/3/2005 7:58:47 AM Pacific Standard Time**  
**From: Eileen Tabios**

In a message dated 5/2/2005 11:28:31 PM Pacific Standard Time, Barbara Jane Reyes writes:

BUT THESE PRODUCTS ARE EXPENSIVE in pesos -- and it's difficult, and mostly a showy display of our privilege, conducting colonialism discourse with folks who may not afford the luxury of colonialism discourse. and so, from our positions of american privilege, indicting their colonial mentality -- this is paternalist.

Is it Leny's question(ing), or her question's reception via this paragraph by Barbara, that's paternalistic (via the conflation of poverty with an unwillingness to "discourse")?

Is significant change ever easy?

Is colonialism discourse a "luxury"?

[Though anytime one wants to communicate with anyone else, perhaps we should say "chat" or "converse" rather than "discourse".....:-) ]

I'm not positing anything (yet) as I'm primarily just listening, but just raising these questions at this paragraph that seems so all-encompassing to me of what could be a multiplicity of responses to this issue.

**Date: 5/3/2005 7:58:48 AM Pacific Standard Time**  
**From: Annalissa Arangcon Herbert**

Apologies for such a long post, but Leny's question motivated me to write:

I think Leny's point is well taken, and I was wondering the same thing as I was reading the lists of "care packages." As a second generation child who grew up in San Francisco, I have very ambivalent memories of the the huge balikbayan boxes my parents would pack up to send back home every year. In particular I remember times, when unused birthday presents, bottles of perfume, old clothes, candy old stereo equipment (that was old and maybe not working so well) would go into the boxes for the trip back home. It wasn't always new stuff.

When as I child I questioned my mother why half my closet and most of my birthday toys would get packed into the boxes for these unseen relatives, my mother would chide me for being "selfish" and tell me that I was "spoiled" since I was living in the United States and didn't understand how difficult it was for the people back home. It seemed to me though, that our relatives back home were less interested in the material things (of course it was fun to open up the boxes and give away free stuff and play Santa Claus) and always more interested in the interpersonal stuff, i.e. Just come home yourself! we miss you! My how big your daughter has grown send us pictures, call us and tell us how you are doing etc...

On my recent trips to the Philippines, especially in the last few years (I last went home this past December for a wedding) my mother packed up most of my carry-ons with tons of the usual stuff, out grown clothes, perfume, US candy, assorted watches etc, a laptop for my cousin. My aunt and her family's response to the presents, was actually one of distaste, Why did you bother bringing all that stuff here? We can buy that here already! She told me we really are more interested in spending time with

you and hearing the family news. I got the sense that I was reinscribing a sense of colonial inferiority in them. There I was, the U.S. based relative bringing in the left over "treasures" from the 1st world and they were feeling pressure to reciprocate in equal material goods, but were facing the economic reality that they couldn't and that irritated my aunt. They kept on insisting on taking me out and offering to pay for books I was buying for my research in order to reciprocate the stuff I brought them. Even though my mother's intentions in making me bring all that stuff were motivated out of love, it reminded me that no one wants to be reminded that they are poor.

**Date: 5/3/2005 6:14:41 AM Pacific Standard Time**  
**From: Bino A. Realuyo**

In a message dated 5/3/2005 2:28:31 AM Eastern Daylight Time, Barbara Jane Reyes writes:

BUT THESE PRODUCTS ARE EXPENSIVE in pesos

:-)

yes bj, absolutely. i remember when we "saved" many of these things in manila because of their value (monetary, colonial-stateside, etc.). we put some of them away like exhibits. i also remember now that my ball pens, ball pens! looked considerably different from my classmates because mine were stateside. the papermate pens had a white stem. with those new pens, there was no need to burn the tip when the ink ran out.

as a child in the belly of manila, these stateside products made me DREAM. they gave me hope. they made me look at my own future straight in the eye. they made me say words like, "some day" and really believe there was such.

my father sent many cheap products. i had in fact no idea that those beautiful, colorful soaps he sent were RECYCLED soap until i came here. i had no idea where he got them from. but i think for him, it wasn't about sending brand u.s. products. it was, as you said b.j., a ritual of SHARING, sharing anything at all. it didn't matter what. which was one reason that i put so much value to their collective smell.

the reverse of balikbayan box is the pasalubong gifts from the philippines. we keep telling people there to please STOP sending us gifts because everything they buy is AVAILABLE here. and then some. but they will buy anyway. they will send anyway.

**Date: 5/3/2005 9:07:43 AM Pacific Standard Time**

**From: arealuyo@aol.com**

En un mensaje con fecha 5/3/2005 11:00:24 AM Eastern Daylight Time, Eileen Tabios escribe:

Is colonialism discourse a "luxury"?

[Though anytime one wants to communicate with anyone else, perhaps we should say "chat" or "converse" rather than "discourse".....:-) ]

i think this balikbayan box has many, many sides, depending who sends it, and who is on the receiving end.

when my father left manila in the late 70s, he was terminally ill. the rest of us, my mother and two siblings, had no idea of his fate in america. my brother and i were young boys, and my sister a teen. a few months after my dad left, the balikbayan boxes started to come in.

for me, at that age, it was very simple. opening that box, inhaling the smell that was hidden inside, was the tight embrace of an absent father whom i might never see again. for many years, my early teens, i was reared by my father through the boxes and letters he sent home to manila. i would not see him until the rest of my family moved here and reunite with my still sick father. by then, it was too late to replace the box with a real man. i have since learned to live with the metaphors that life has thrown at me.

in my family, that box was more than a box, the contents more than its tangible parts. it was a raison d'etre, a bridge between worlds, between decades of history, between young sons and a dying father, a figurative "galleon-trade" between manila and new york, a somewhat economic upgrade, a stateside pride that i carried in the streets of manila (a weapon). it was a war-torn man's parenting style reinvented in a form of a box.

"colonialism" is a very easy label. perhaps it's truly time to think outside the "box" of these limiting concepts.

perhaps the question is not always what was in the box, but what happened when it was opened on the other side. what happened on my side was simply the story of my young life.

i used to say, my father was a balikbayan box.

anak ng kahon,

anak ng kahon= son of a box. :-)

**Date: 5/3/2005 11:54:41 AM Pacific Standard Time**

**From: Michelle Bautista**

In Lolan Sevilla's piece on the balikbayan box in the "Dalagas and Tomboys" show, she discusses with the box the problematic issue of the contents of the box.

Do the contents of brand name clothes that are originally made in Asia simply helping to perpetuate the economic poverty of the region in supporting "sweatshop" created clothing? And how these same brand name products have bad labor and environmental practices that destroy the country and culture they are in. How the emphasis on stateside products encourage a negative view of "native" products. Also, how often Filipinos here will max out their credit card to desperately fill this box, essentially going into a bit of poverty themselves.

In the scene, she comes to terms with the fact that as part of her family obligation she will have to bring this box, but takes care of the last few pounds by including books, like "Asata" and "Making Waves", as well as some "t-shirts from the youth event" she organized and perhaps a few letters to her family about her life here.

My family still brings this stuff back, mostly because it's still difficult to travel all the way to the supermarket and back with these items, and as a way of controlling how much they buy and spend. They do just give money, but at the same time, they worry that the money they give may not be used on the things that had been intended.

My aunt gave money to her sister-in-law who had been diagnosed with cancer for treatment. however, her sister-in-law could not spend so much money just on herself, so used the money to buy "things" for her family members. in another family money sent for the schooling of their kids was used for something else.

There's also I think this thing about how Filipinos show their "love". And that Filipinos tend to give a "thing" to show how much they care. In a Swedish film based on the work of Rhacel Parrenas on overseas contract workers, a child whose mother works



abroad is asked how his mother shows her love for him. He points to his large shiny watch.

The balikbayan box tells Lolan, "I know the gifts I bear can be problematic, but what would make it better? All I can say is that you're asking the right questions."

**Date: 5/3/2005 4:50:50 PM Pacific Standard Time**

**From: Eileen Tabios**

Dear All,

I want to thank everyone who's participated in providing balikbayan lists, as well as in terms of discussing their implications. I'm not writing this email to suggest that the dialogue can now stop. It's just that I'm about to go offline until possibly next Monday because of a trip to New York tomorrow (if anyone is in CUNY La-Guardia tomorrow in Queens, I'm doing a reading/panel from noon to 2 p.m. at Room M106, dealing with "borrowed tongue" and costumbrismo).

If folks continue to discuss this online (perhaps in response to this email), I will be online until tomorrow morning but in any event will pick up reading them again on Sunday evening.

I will still need to get back with a comprehensive overall list of what my "survey" uncovered. But, in gratitude for your help, I want to share more about this "shopping project" I'm developing. What I'm doing now is writing a poetic autobiography based on shopping lists. Its working title is

***COMMODITIES: Poem, Installation Art, Novel and Autobiography***

If you take a look -- as I have been -- at your shopping lists, they inevitably reveal something about your life. Some weeks back, while going about my daily business that included buying this and that item, I realized that my current shopping lists reveal much about my daily activities but very little about how I came to be the kind of person engaged in those daily activities. So, I'm writing an autobiography based on shopping lists throughout my life. (So the project is not limited to the balikbayan box content list but will be based on many types of shopping lists and shoppings.)

So interspersed with a set of shopping lists as they occur in realtime (today), will be vignettes I'm calling "Installments." I'll cutnpaste an example below which is titled "1969", the year I left the Philippines. The reason I'm sharing this particular vignette

is that if any of you care to suggest items for the referenced 1969 shopping list, I'd also appreciate it.

That is, what kind of items, if you were departing from the Philippines in 1969 would you have bought to bring with you to your new country of residence, as remembrances of the Philippines? I'm thinking of capiz shell decorative boxes, maybe, or I remembered that purse made out of shellacked coconut shell pieces (horrid, now that I think about it) that I mention below in the vignette.

Anyway, thanks again,  
Eileen

**DRAFT**  
**Installment #1: "1969"**

After hearing that our immigration visas were approved, my mother spent 1969 shopping in preparation for our departure from the Philippines. "I want to be sure," she said, "we don't forget where we came from."

We were scheduled to leave for the United States in early 1970. Some of the items from my mother's 1969 Immigration Shopping List:

- decorative boxes formed by capiz shells
- handwoven placemats and tablecloths
- farmers' rattan hats that she envisioned hanging up against our future American kitchen walls
- wood carvings of carabao, pigs, chickens and other animals by Igorot tribesmen
- rosaries
- a bedspread illustrated with a sewn map of the Philippine archipelago
- two dozen Barong Tagalogs in various sizes that she anticipated my brothers growing into
- a wood and brass plaque depicting various types of Filipino swords
- sofa pillow covers with handstitched images of Philippine flowers: Benguet Lily, Bougainvillea, Gumamela, Ilang-Ilang, Jade Vine, Kalachuchi, Kamie, Sampagueta, Santan, and Waling-Waling
- bamboo-framed watercolors of various rice terrace scenes

At the airport, we discovered the items exceeded the weight of free baggage allowed by the airline. My mother stiffened her spine, and began giving them away to the relatives who had come to see us off.

To my secret relief as I coveted it, she did manage to pack a purse made from shellacked coconut shells.

But at the other side of the plane trip, when we were met by my father and a few U.S.-based relatives we'd never met before, she took out the purse and gave it as a gift to Auntie C.

The fat auntie noticed my dismay but accepted it anyway. Later, she gave me a pink, fluffy sweater. But I hated it as I suspected it was a discard from her daughter's closet.

I was ten years old.

Date: 5/4/2005 8:02:42 AM Pacific Standard Time  
From: lenystrobel@sbcglobal.net

"Colonialism" is a very easy label. perhaps it's truly time to think outside the "box" of these limiting concepts.

I am interested in pursuing this line of thinking as I think it's important, (to me), how we understand what we mean by "colonialism as a box" that we need to think outside of. So I would like to pose these questions to the group.

1. Is colonialism over? Why isn't it a relevant concept anymore?
2. How does paternalism show up in the way we deal with the balikbayan box practice?
3. What is outside the box of colonialism?
4. If our individual stories constitute the narrative of the nation, what do our personal balikbayan box lists and stories say about us as a nation and a people?
5. When does colonial discourse become a luxury? For whom?
6. In considering the balikbayan box practice, how do we distinguish between colonial paternalism and the Filipino practice of pasalubong (which has deep cultural implications) as we pack and unpack its contents?

My interest in the above questions is a part of my curiosity as a someone who thinks/writes about decolonization. Thanks!

Leny

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**RATHER ABRUPTLY, THE DISCOURSE ENDED. LENY M. STROBEL'S AND EILEEN TABIOS' QUESTIONS REMAINED UNANSWERED. EILEEN TABIOS ALSO WONDERS IF THE "RIGHT QUESTIONS" WERE ASKED.**

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**P.S.**

*The Filipino Diaspora will continue to fill the manpower needs of a globalized economy. I would not be surprised if the OFWs [overseas foreign workers] would increase [[from about 8 million currently] to 25 million in ten years.*

**—Perry Diaz (a Filipino writers whose views are disseminated within cyberspace)**

## **NOTES and ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:**

The poems in *POST BLING BLING* were written as inspired by advertisements in the July 2005 issue of *VANITY FAIR*.

The poem "THE DIAMOND TRADING COMPANY—JUST GLITTERING WITH FEMINISM!!" was part of a "Poems Form/From The Six Directions" poetry-wedding performance during the October 3, 2005 wedding reception for Michelle Bautista and Rhett Pascual in the San Ramon Marriott, San Ramon, CA

Of immense help in crafting *LETTERS FROM THE BALIKBAYAN BOX* were the Flips List serve (created by Vince Gotera and Nick Carbo) and the Pagbabalikloob List serve (created and moderated by Perla Daly and Leny M. Strobel). Maraming Salamat.

In *LETTERS FROM THE BALIKBAYAN BOX*, some names were changed to protect contributors' privacy. The changed names will show "XXX" as the last names. The rest are the real-life names of participants who consented to reveal their identities.

Thank you to poet-editor-publisher William Allegrezza for asking.

Back Cover Photo Credit: "Eileen & Achilles at Dutch Henry Winery" by Dutch Henry ([www.dutchhenry.com](http://www.dutchhenry.com)) winemaker Scott Chafen.



Eileen R. Tabios has released a poetry CD; four e-poetry collections; and written 12 books as well as (co-)edited five books of poetry, fiction and essays. In 2005, she released the multi-genre collection *I Take Thee, English, For My Beloved* (Marsh Hawk Press, New York) which features poems, an experimental novel, an art monograph, play, and poetics prose. In 2006, she will release a new poetry collection, *The Secret Lives of Punctuations, Vol. I* (xPressed, Espoo). Her awards include the Philippines' National Book Award for Poetry, the Potrero Nuevo Fund Prize, the PEN/Oakland Josephine Miles National Literary Award, and the Judds Hill Winery Annual Poetry Prize. She writes the poetics blog, "The Chatelaine's Poetics" at <http://chatelaine-poet.blogspot.com>, while steering Meritage Press from St. Helena, CA. A budding grape farmer, she is arduously and long-sufferingly researching the poetry of wine.