The Planet as Homeland

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Abstract
The review essay outlines the relationship between the planet and homeland as sites of unfreedom and freedom for Filipinos everywhere. Using E. San Juan’s new collection of poems, the review essay argues that the logic of translation is crucial to understanding the connection between the planet and homeland. To understand this connection is to imagine the future of Filipinos who share the fate of slaves, refugees, detainees, and immigrants across the planet.

Keywords
Balikbayang Mahal, E. San Juan, Jr., homeland, planet, translation, exile

About the Author
Charlie Samuya Veric, PhD Candidate and member of the Working Group on Globalization and Culture, deals with critical issues in American literature, postcolonial studies, and cultural theory. The editor of Anticipating Filipinas and coeditor of Suri at Sipat, he had been educated at the University of the Philippines and Ateneo de Manila before joining the program in American studies at Yale University. Some of his works have been published in American Quarterly, Common Knowledge, Kritika Kultura, Rethinking History, and Socialism and Democracy, among others. He is currently writing his dissertation, “Everyday Events: Face, Aesthetics, Modernity,” which examines the symbolic and material uses of face in culture at large.

A book of translations, Balikbayang Mahal or Beloved Returnee is about making history in unexpected places. Take, for instance, the following cases. The names of the dead haunt the poet-exile as dusk descends on Punta Spartivento—Juvy Magsino, Benjaline Hernandez, Eden Marcellana, Rafael Bangit, Alyce Claver. It is springtime in Den Haag and the memories of political detainees in Muntinlupa rise from the roof of the Christus Triumfator. The poet-exile remembers the Moslem insurgency in Mindanao in the land of the Pequot Indians as night falls. Here, the poet-exile finds himself in unexpected places where he comes to grips with the gathering forces of history. Everywhere he goes in the world, his country follows. To the poet-exile of Balikbayang Mahal, then, the vertigo of bilocation is an old reality.

The African American thinker W. E. B. DuBois has a similar concept; he calls it double-consciousness. The double-consciousness that an African American confronts for being not quite American and not quite Negro is the same enabling predicament that the poet-exile faces. That is, the poet-exile is of a particular country, but not fully from it
because he lives elsewhere. For this poet-exile as it is for African Americans, both of them children of diaspora, the doubleness of location is the doubleness of consciousness. The implicit argument in this proposition suggests the intimate dialectic between place and consciousness; the historicity of consciousness informs the materiality of place. Perhaps no other process captures this logic more than translation itself. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term as the removal or conveyance from one person, place, or condition to another. And as the Latin origins of the term suggest, translation is transportation. To translate, in other words, is to transport. In *Balikbayang Mahal* the poet-exile transports the self from place to place and, accordingly, achieves the parallel transformation of consciousness. Thinking of America in Mindanao is, for this reason, not the same as thinking of Mindanao in America; the place shapes the production of consciousness.

For the poet-exile of *Balikbayang Mahal*, those two thoughts are complementary despite being dissimilar. For instance, he has suggested in his criticism that the aspiration of the Filipino around the world cannot be separated from the people’s aspirations in the Philippines. As the essay included in the collection states: “Despite local differences and multiple languages, the submerged rallying cry of all Filipinos abroad, of all Filipinos overseas, is ‘Tomorrow, see you in Manila!’” (125) Here, one sees the importance of the return to the homeland. This return, however, is yet to come. This future return, rather than arrival itself, is more important to the poet-exile. But those who insist on being in the homeland are wont to denigrate the idea of future return. The poet-exile must work against this denigration; he must insist that the longing to return, however suspended, fulfills a function. For him, this insistence is the self-fulfilling labor of the negative. The longing to return, even as a promise to be broken, is no less powerful. In fact, this longing is empowering for it expands the domain of the possible. Take, for instance, the poem in which one sees the poet-exile standing on a wharf in the Italian lakeside town of Bellagio called Punta Spartivento. There the poet-exile thinks of the insurgency in his distant homeland and says: “Everyone will meet here at the Punta Spartivento of the revolution” (68). The revolution in the homeland is transported to a different place with a different history; consequently, a new sense of place and history is imagined.

This leads us to the other meaning of translation. The *OED* states that translation also means transference as in movement of translation in physics, the transference of a body, or form of energy, from one point of space to another. The poet-exile accordingly translates the law of revolution into the law of physics; politics is made to recognize the workings of the material universe. If the poet-exile cannot be in Manila today, let him imagine the revolution wherever he may be. It is only fitting that this poet-exile takes
the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci as his “only mentor in the labyrinth of the garden of communism” (40). For in the language of Gramsci, place occupies an important role. It is prudent, then, to distinguish between war of position and war of maneuver. And clearly, the poet-exile takes the former in hopes of realizing the latter. Tomorrow, see you in Manila!

Thus, translation widens the terrain for the war of position. By transforming the revolution in the homeland into a consciousness that is recognizable anywhere in the planet, the book unifies the vernacular and international. As a book of translations, then, *Balikbayang Mahal* expands the domain of struggle and, consequently, makes the political work of translation visible. The majority of the poems in the collection were written in Filipino, but their translation into English, Russian, German, Italian, and French underscores the planetary dimension of the struggle in the homeland. Translated and transformed, the vernacular becomes the international. In “Nine Love Songs and One Intervening Poem of Jealousy,” for instance, the poet-exile refers to the socialist thinker Rosa Luxemburg and Russian revolutionary Alexandra Kollontai in the same breath as the anti-colonial Tagalog poet Huseng Batute. This is the voice, at once particular and worldly, that informs the poems in the collection. Reading them, one understands the idiosyncrasies of making a planetary history and the possibilities for creating a common future for all. This understanding begins with knowing that no experience is ever separate. As the poet-exile writes: “Why divide two aspirations meant to be one / Like the twofold experience of fornication and breath breaking / World shall learn the dream of their oneness” (83).

If the poet-exile has chosen to engage in a planetary war of position, what, then, are the conditions of this engagement? In the same essay in the collection, a chronology is given. From the mythical “Manillamen” who fled the Spanish galleons and resided in the bayous of Louisiana in the late eighteenth century, to the native intelligentsia in Europe who challenged the colonial authorities in the late nineteenth century, to the pensionados in American universities and laborers in Hawaii sugar plantations in the early twentieth century, to the domestics, caregivers, entertainers, and professionals around the planet today, the Filipino as a subject shares the history of slaves, refugees, detainees, and immigrants. These are the constituencies in motion that the poet-exile is addressing on behalf of Filipinos everywhere. This marks an important break in the Filipino literary tradition. From Francisco Balagtas, to José Rízal, to Amado V. Hernandez, to Bienvenido Lumbera, the homeland has been imagined as a bounded territory. In the work of the poet-exile, a new conception of homeland is heralded. The poet-exile may be dreaming of returning to Manila, but the place is not a final destination for him. Instead, it is a portal to
other places where homeland is without boundaries; it is not an essential place, but a set of affinities that Filipinos everywhere and other people with similar fates can embrace. This is the planet as homeland. And the poet-exile of *Balikbayang Mahal* is, in the best sense of the word, the translator of ten million Filipinos in Amsterdam, London, Tokyo, Dubai, Rome, Hong Kong, Montreal, Sydney, and New York. His name is E. San Juan, Jr.