

Diasporic Discourse Online: Imagining the Homeland in Cyberspace

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Abstract

Nations can be seen as constructed and maintained by technological innovations. The eminent scholar Benedict Anderson underscored this as he noted the case of the Philippines' nation building process through print capitalism. Starting with Jose Rizal's novels written in Europe, there seems to be a phenomenon of imagining the homeland from the outside, something that has become a common exercise with globalization and its myriad results, such as diaspora and transnationalism. With the coming of technologies associated with the global exchange of locals, Filipino migrants have become more interactive. The Internet has become the ultimate medium through which the sense of community has been projected and re-articulated across time and space. This article explores the use of the Internet as a tool for virtual construction and imagination of the homeland and describes how Filipino migrants de/construct their homeland by comparing and contrasting it with the host nation, without necessarily compromising national myths and symbols.

Keywords: cyber-community, diaspora, online postings, textual analysis, virtual homeland

Introduction: Are We Destined to Leave?

It may be that... exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back... [B]ut if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties – that our physical alienation... means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely that thing that was lost...

Salman Rushdie,
Imaginary Homelands

Built from the itinerant phenomenon of *balangay* (plank boat), Filipinos seem to have inherited the modes of community formation. The country being an archipelago has permitted, if not encouraged, the concept of travelling from one island to another. Filipinos have been accustomed to the rituals and celebrations of travel to the point that at death they are believed to board a vessel to transport them to the island of the afterlife.

The tendency to leave may have been providential as the very geography establishes ports at every margin. There is romantic detail in this situation. When one reaches the end of the island, another island poses picturesque images of virginity and tranquility. What is tragic in this romanticism, however, is that by the time Filipinos realized the importance of discovering their own community, the Spaniards had already arrived. It took 200 years or so of colonial occupation before Filipinos became conscious of the need to travel, to test the waters. These Filipinos, venerated as *ilustrados* (educated), wrote poetry, essays and even novels – all with the idea of coming home. But the *ilustrados* did not return as swiftly as their memory and nostalgia wanted. They needed to endure the stay at the host land, so they turned to imagining.

Since the 1960s, the leaving-the-home phenomenon has been a dramatic and economically necessary source of national narrative and development. Philippine literature has an incredible number of narratives of these citizens who have straddled two and more worlds in various forms and times. Chika Anyanwu says that these citizens may be neither here nor there, but they are, in profound yet significant terms,

here and everywhere: they are here spiritually, and yet not here physically – creating a sense of nostalgia; they are not here yet here through their indirect economic impact or socioeconomic contribution; they are everywhere in cyberspace and yet nowhere through virtual habitation (2005: 2).

These citizens may have developed an ambassadorial archetype of diaspora – they endure dislocation from their homeland and continue to believe in equal participation, yet, deep inside, have a false sense of belonging. In their desire to participate, they have allowed spatial transmutation resulting in the blurring of memories of the homeland and the disauthentication of culture. Reconfigured as netizens, these Filipinos have turned to cyberspace to assert their identity and ideology.

What I will attempt to map out in this article are the discourses of imagination of the homeland by Filipinos in ethnoscape, a term defined by Appadurai (1990) as the transnational movement of people. Specifically, I am interested in how the participants in an online community imagine their homeland as they exchange personal and collective memories and awareness. Since new media provide resources for self-imagining as an ongoing social project, there are novel avenues to explore regarding re-articulation and re-creation of a community (homeland) in cyberspace. In probing the role of the Internet in building, maintaining and re-creating a community, I was on the lookout for offline myths and symbols along with online stories.

Tonnies ([1887]1955) outlined two types of community – *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. The first is characterized as a total community, a traditional community, one that is stable and long-lasting, comprised of a dense web of social interaction supported by commonality and mutuality, manifest in shared rituals and symbols, a local social contract embedded in place and made durable by face-to-face interactions. The latter is a social arrangement ushered in by urbanization. When those from the traditional community are thrown into the dense heterogeneity of the city, their long-established bonds and norms are lost and the social fabric is radically transformed. The ideal community enshrined in *Gemeinschaft* has an enduring legacy in the popular imagination, always tinged with nostalgia (Bell 2001: 93-94). The decline of *Gemeinschaft* has been retold through time and, most often, imagined romantically and accentuated by symbolic resources and devices. Benedict Anderson's (1983) famous '*imagined communities*' says much about the dependence on symbols, for there is no probability of meeting all the members of the community.

Bell (2001) argues that communities are threatened by different processes. He cited three: detraditionalization, disembedding and globalization (2001: 95). The last one subsumes the other two, as the constraints of geography and culture have been overcome by innovations that effectively have shrunk the world. All kinds of things now move speedily, criss-crossing the world in complex, disjunctive ways: people, ideas, images, commodities, technologies, money (Appadurai 1996). All of these things, Bell argues, and our experience of them, 'are thus disembedded – no longer rooted in place, but characterized as global flows' (2001: 95). He adds that the important aspect of globalization is our experience or perception of this reshaping and shrinking of the world. This has asked our reflexivity, and part of this

involves making choices about our identities and our politics; since we are embedded, and able to access global flows of ideas and information, we can choose who we want to be. And this disembeddedness and reflexivity enables us to question and transform the taken-for-granted, leading to detraditionalization – a chance to make over the social fabric anew and... to *imagine* new forms of community (Bell 2001: 96).

The notion of imagined community means

that we can rethink how we conceptualize and create communities – and the Internet is an imaginative space to do this. Globalization can be argued to open up the whole world as a potential source of community – and the Internet has been seen as a key to this. Disembedding allows us to choose our communities – and the Internet gives us a vast reservoir of choices. Reflexivity allows us to think about who we are and who we want to be – and

the Internet is the ideal site to 'play' with our identities. Detraditionalization frees us from the old obligations, and lets us give community a postmodern make-over – and again the Internet offers possibilities to substantially re-imagine the very notion of community (Bell 2001: 97).

Anderson's (1983) discourse stemmed from the narratives of *ilustrados*, of Filipinos who imagined their homeland with pluses and minuses, who configured and refigured the Philippines according to the demands of the cultural logic of territoriality. The modern day *ilustrados*, the '*bagong bayani*' (new heroes) traverse the same road of image-processing. Contextually, they participate in a contemporary mode of print capitalism, cyberspace. Cyberspace, according to Rheingold (1993), is both surprising and inevitable. It is inevitable for two reasons: (1) folks 'are going to do what people always do with a new communication technology: use it in ways never intended or foreseen by its investors, to turn social codes inside out and make new friends of communication possible'; and (2) virtual communities are a natural response to 'the hunger for community that has followed the disintegration of traditional communities around the world' (Rheingold 1993: 415-18).

As underscored by Anderson (1983), online members create and construct online spaces by envisaging them as communities. This brings to the core the idea that members of a nation will not know who most of their compatriots are but they know in their minds that millions of others exist and that close association and belonging persist.

The perspective of the imagined community is very relevant to the study of online communities as this establishes that even if members do not meet physically, the notion of a community still exists among them. In the case of Filipino migrants in Japan, the use of online forums as venues for interactions presents impressions of fraternity and community among members as they express online their desire for better lives and a return to their homeland. These exchanges and contacts among migrants are confirmations that communities subsist online, and could be a potent influence for the construction of the virtual homeland.

Trajectories of Filipino Diaspora

Diaspora, according to Safran (1991), refers to

minority expatriate communities that are dispersed from their homelands but maintain myths or memories about them, they recognize that they cannot be fully accepted by the host country and desire for an eventual return to their homeland. Their collective identity is defined by their relationship to, and continual support for, the homeland (quoted in Chan 2005: 337).

The scholar E. San Juan (2000), however, argues that the Filipino diaspora does not conform to the traditional idea of diasporic groups historically defined by Safran (1991). To support his thesis, he cites six idiosyncrasies (San Juan 2000: 236-37):

1. Given that the Philippine homeland or habitat has never cohered as a genuinely independent nation – national autonomy continues to escape the nation-people in a neo-colonial formation – Filipinos are dispersed from family or kinship webs in villages, towns or provincial regions first....
2. ... [T]he myths and memories of the homeland are derive(d) from assorted childhood memories and folklore together with customary practices of folk and religious celebrations; at best, there may be signs of residual affective ties to national heroes....
3. Alienation in the host country is what unites Filipinos, a shared history of colonial and racial subordination, marginalization and struggle for cultural survival through hybrid forms of resistance and political rebellion.
4. Some Filipinos in their old age may desire eventual return and only when they are economically secure.
5. Ongoing support for nationalist struggles at home is sporadic and intermittent.
6. ... [T]he Filipino collective identity is in crisis and in a stage of formation and elaboration. The Filipino diasporic consciousness is an odd species, a singular genre: it is not obsessed with a physical return to roots or to land where common sacrifices are remembered and celebrated. It is tied more to a symbolic homeland....
7. [Filipinos] might be syncretic or hybrid subjects with suspect loyalties. They cannot be called fashionable 'transnationals' because of racialized, ascribed markers that are needed to sustain and reproduce Euro-centric white supremacy every day.

San Juan's ideas bring to mind that the Filipino diaspora is a multifaceted group of people with different ideological stances. However, these differences do not hinder them from performing their sense of identity. Wherever their feet bring them and whatever soil they are on, they still manage to uphold and replicate their being Filipinos.

Netnography and Storytelling

One virtual community, <http://www.malago.net>, was selected for this case study. The forum of <http://www.malago.net> was developed for Filipino migrants in Japan. Its chat and forum features provide the opportunity to talk about topics and situations affecting Filipino migrants in the host society. Moreover, it is a community that enables members to identify with others and gives them a sense of belonging.

Member-participants, as observed, exhibit a 'we' feeling, the feeling of togetherness.

Malago.net was established in February 2007. When this research commenced on 1 March 2009, there were a total of 2,191 members, 18,043 posts, and 2,099 topics. Malago.net provides information for Filipinos in Japan, especially on three featured topics, which have their own bulletin boards: *Pinoy Kekkō* (Filipino Marriage), *Kango Kaigo* (Medical Care) and *Malago Shigoto* (Malago Work). *Pinoy Kekkō* includes issues related to romantic relationships with a Japanese and the legalities when a Filipino/a marries a Japanese in Japan or in the Philippines. Both situations are covered with specific discussions on the proper visa, the application for *kekko todoke* (marriage contract) and the residency application. The bulletin board also has adjunct forums on divorce and annulment. *Kango Kaigo* was created to be a useful thematic forum for Filipino medical workers in Japan. This tackles mainly the issues of licensure exams and communication with Japanese patients. *Malago Shigoto* streamlines all topics for Filipino workers in Japan including recruitment issues, job demands, interview musts, health insurance, company compensation and even recession. The website also has a bulletin board for legal counselling, document filing and translation.

I started five threads on 1 March 2009: (1) How do you view the Philippines from Japan? (2) What should Filipinos learn from the Japanese regarding nation-building? (3) What is your memory of the Philippines? (4) If you were to share a significant experience in Japan that you want Filipinos back home to know and learn from, what is it? and (5) How can Filipinos in Japan help the Philippines?

I chose to do a textual analysis of replies to the threads that I launched. The thread questions are results of the understanding of Laura Hammond's *This Place Will Become Home*. Hammond joins a growing number of social scientists who insist on the disassociation of culture from place as 'naturally' linked, 'questioning the commonly held belief that refugees who return to their country of origin are necessarily people "going home"'. To tease out some of the concepts embedded in the 'homeland', Hammond focuses on building a relationship between persons and place, a process she dubs 'emplacement' as opposed to displacement. She defines place as 'any kind of space that people, through their everyday lives, use, appropriate, and reflect on, thereby generating meaning through practice and association, imagination, visualization, narration, performance and even policy formation' (quoted in Stamatopoulou-Robbins 2005: 6).

More so, this study relied on the participatory netnography of the five threads posed on Malago.net, one of the most popular Internet portals of Filipino migrants in Japan as based on the number of members the forum holds. I, too, became part of the community and posted messages to the community like its other members. After six months of observation and participation on the dynamics of the construction and visualization of the homeland, the replies and discussions demonstrated a close relationship between the diaspora and their homeland, mediated through the Internet.

For authenticity purposes, quoted replies and posts are retained in their original form, leaving wording, spelling and syntax unchanged. I have removed all headers for quotations from posters. All panel names (which are members' pseudonyms) are retained, which may or may not mirror the member's politics. Log-in times that are indicated after each quoted message may not signify local time in Japan.

Simultaneous with the premise that online members of Malago.net are emplaced rather than displaced individuals, this study looks at each anonymous participant as a storyteller. Azade Seyhan, discussing the ways of writing outside the nation, argues that 'contemporary writers of exile and diaspora display a deep awareness of the danger that globalization and the worldwide domination of technologies of communication pose to local and little-known cultures' (2001: 40).

'The art of storytelling is tending toward its end', observes Benjamin, 'because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out' (1969: 86-87). The epic faculty par excellence is memory. He observes that epic memory is not only capable of remembering a great flow of events but also of forgetting them, remembering them selectively and coming to terms with their disappearance and death (quoted in Seyhan 2001: 41). A story 'preserves its strength in concentrated form and is able to release it even after a long time' (Benjamin 1969: 392).

For Benjamin (1969), the invisible tie that binds the storyteller to the listener is memory. The listener is not a passive player, but an agent that has to reproduce the story. Memory provides a litany of traditions. The storyteller does not burden the listener with psychological explanations, for these bar the magical legitimizing the logical. He concludes that the growing power of information dissemination has played an important role in diminishing the significance of storytelling (Benjamin 1969: 390-91). The story is the keeper of memory, which fuses with the life of the storyteller. Hence, with each telling, layers of memories grow.

Imagining the Homeland

Based on the analysis of the postings, I argue that the online forum of Malago.net allows Filipinos in Japan an opportunity to compare and contrast the two countries. The Philippines is often imagined as a location of one's memories, relating mostly to childhood and familial connections. While they acknowledged that they were in a different locality, expressed by forms of cultural politics, their identity-formation did not really struggle as I had expected. They were conscious of the obligatory transfer that they underwent, and they recognized the positive exchanges of such transfer. The positive narratives of transfer imply emplacement, and in many cases, they put the compare-and-contrast pendulum in selective amnesia mode. There is a need to look beyond the necessity for economic returns. Perhaps what Rafael (1990) noted may suggest that

Japan was seen as another *nation*, that is, a place free from colonial control and sovereign in its capacity to determine its own history... The future ties they envisaged with Japan was not one of subordination to a superior race but one characterized by relation of mutual deference and reciprocal obligations (1990: 105).

Furthermore, while there are differences over the image of the homeland, Filipinos in diaspora embrace the long wait and suspended comeback. Lulu Manuel, one of the respondents to my initial threads, says,

[I]f we view the Philippines from Japan, our country is very, very far back behind, being in a third world country, in terms of economy, government, etc... but, being a Filipino, I'm proud I'm one, for we have the sweetest smile, the guts and perseverance, hospitality and most of all, we care with love and fear God.

But, sometimes, we lack discipline... in driving specially... we as civil servants forgot to serve with patience... we as bank tellers neglect the rights of our clients, making them wait for long hours for one transactions... our *palengkes'* *tinderas* (wet market's salesladies) are not honest enough with their weighing scales... and some of our government officials are involved with graft and corruption... what else can I say... but... we have the sweetest smile though... how about Japan? We can all attest to the difference because we've been there and some are still there.

14 March 2009, 01:06:20 PM

Yogimeek, a new member married to a Japanese, views her comparison of Japan and the Philippines through the lens of the economy. 'Still a poor country,' she says and adds an estimation, 'maybe 30 years behind Japan'. Her numerical demarcation of the difference stems from her indi-

cators: health and education. She notes that a large number of Filipinos have died of hunger and many children are malnourished. 'Plenty of children in the rural region cannot afford to attend elementary school and can't afford to buy even a pencil', she narrates. Though she may not be armed with official statistics to prove her claim, Yogimeek may have been aware that her description is in no way profound. 'There are much more to say but will my words better the Philippine economy?' Symptomatic of her tendency to include disapproving economic criticisms, she has fears of government's political power, '[B]aka mapagkamalan pa akong aktibista' [I might be mistaken for an activist]. With the objective of balancing her claim and the desire to provide another point of view, Yogimeek continues:

My husband sometimes commented, after World War II, Philippine was expected to be the richest nation in Asia since it won the war against Japan. But instead, it becomes the poorest! Long before, Philippines was called 'Pearl of the Ocean' [Orient] but it seems like 'a shell without a pearl'. All the intelligent brainy [f]ilipinos were exported to enriched other nations economy in exchange for cash Dollars instead of using these people to develop the country's industry and economy. Motainai, motainai! [What regret! What regret!] Corruption is worse still.
15 March 2009, 12:13:04 AM

Like Lulu Manuel, Yogimeek emphasizes corruption, which she indirectly identifies as the root cause of the country's loss of the title as the Orient's pearl. She grieves the country's inability to meet the expectations of the world as far as memories of war are concerned. What is ironic, as she observes, is the way the supposed pyramid of power has been inverted. From what was supposed to be a superpower in Asia, the Philippines ended up giving domestic and even technical support to the dollar economy, and even worse, the economies of the countries it defeated along the course of revolution are now far better.

Asked whether she has direct experiences with Japanese (minus that with her husband) commenting on the Philippines, Yogimeek mentions her Japanese friends, hesitant at times, of their disparaging views of the Philippines as a people and as a nation. 'Our country will never progress because we lack good political leaders', she replies, singling out the government's incompetence in delivering education, especially to poor children. In a monologue, sounding like an activist, for whom she does not want to be mistaken, she declares:

Living in Japan for quite a long time, I've learned how much aid Japan extends to the Philippines but still our country lacks all the infrastructure facilities and **very few** [her emphasis] public school houses are built in the

rural areas. *Saan napupunta lahat ng aid na nanggagaling* [where does all the aid go] from Japan & other big nations? *ang sagot, napupunta karamihan sa bulsa ng mga politico* [the answer, straight to the politicians' pockets]. They are not really concern *kung napakaraming homeless at palaboy laboy na bata sa karsada* [whether there are homeless and lost kids along the road], the politicians are only concern of their own personal enrichment, *di mabubusog* [they won't be full] because they are 🐷 🐷 🐷

In lieu of silence, Yogimeek used emoticons to illustrate the image that she had in mind. Here, we see the power of cyberspace in providing alternative approaches to narrating the homeland. The 🐷 image, which could have been verbalized as 'pig', does not translate the weight given to the Tagalog/Filipino equivalent ('*baboy*'), which could also denote wild and hungry. The 🐷 image performs one of the rituals of writing outside the nation. In their desire to keep the symbols of their homeland, Filipinos attune themselves to the complexities of image rather than articulating it in English or the Filipino language. They feel wrath toward the politicians, but not toward the nation. The Philippines is not the same as Filipinos. The positive emotion they feel for their country does not extend to those who govern it.

The affective affinity to the homeland shows in this statement by Pops27:

I believe that there is really no place like home. yes, japan is economically great but it does not erase the fact that my heart and mind still long for a place which is home, a place where i can say that it is mine, a place where i don't feel alienated because of some social and cultural differences or barriers...a place where i am at peace.
16 March 2009, 11:02:28 PM

Ashting26 extends the same feeling:

ang pilipinas ang tinuturing kong unang 'HOME' ang japan ang tinuturing kong pangalawang 'HOME' at sa pamamagitan ng mga ganitong forums at sites, para akong nasa pilipinas ulit. para akong nasa bahay ulit. hehe. medyo weird ata ang sagot ko. pero yan ang totoo. sa tingin ko ang mga forums na ito ang nagbibigay ng venue para sa aming nasa malayong lugar na bumalik sa pinas 'virtually' at maging at peace ulit.

[I consider Philippines as my first 'home'. Japan is my second home. And through these forums and sites, I feel like being at my first home again. I feel like I am in our house. It's weird though. But that's what I feel. Forums like this provide us an avenue to go home virtually and find peace.]

Ashting26 continues:

ang pinas sa akin ang nagbibigay ng inspirasyon sa akin na pag-ibayuhin ang trabaho

ko dito at maipakita sa mga hapon na kaya ng isang pinoy na makipagsabayan sa kanila. di man ako masyadong bihasa sa kanilang lengwahe, ako naman ay maituturing nilang asset dahil sa aking sipag at tiyaga at ang willingness ko rin na matuto.

March 17, 2009, 10:03:34 PM

[Philippines gives me an inspiration to do my job well and prove to the Japanese that Filipinos can be their equals. I may not be well-versed in their language, but I am an asset to them because I have the industry and willingness to learn.]

Pops27 and Ashting26 consider the Philippines their 'first home'. Against the backdrop of economically powerful Japan, the image of the 'first home' serves as a reminder of the values that they regard as Filipino. We see this in Ashting26 who equates his endurance and willingness to work to the economics of Japan. It may be a cultural equation that is common to Filipinos in diaspora and is a relevant message to the members of the online community. Ashting26 understands the need to learn Nihonggo (Japanese) for one to compete, at least at the basic level, in the Japanese market. But he lacks this capacity. This lack of language capability creates disembeddedness in Ashting26. This disembeddedness brought him to the online forum where he could speak the language he is most comfortable with. The same struck Pops27 as she found herself entangled in an array of barriers. The online forum provides them an avenue where the native/Filipino they brought with them to Japan finds home and peace.

Labels of homeland are, likely, given disproportionate signification. This binary can be examined in terms of figurative language (see Table 1). Despite, for example, that the Philippines is a poor country, it is home. Labelled metaphorically as the 'Pearl of the Orient', the seemingly dramatic inversion of an image of a shell without a pearl signifies the absence of a resource that is expected to be residing inside the nation.

TABLE 1: Labels of Homeland

Positive	Negative
(First) 'Home'	Third World Country
Land of 'Sweetest Smile'	('poor', 'behind')
Pearl of the Orient	'Shell without a Pearl'

Filipino netizens intimated solutions – so that the pearl may be put back in its shell. Several mentioned discipline as the key to a solution. Yogimeek singles out the love of one's country. She adds:

I admire the Japanese people's love and respect for the Emperor of Japan,

Tenno Heikka, most especially after their fall in WWII. Their love & respect for the Emperor is equivalent for the love and respect for their country. The Emperor being the Sun and Center of Japan binds the Japanese people as one. Japan, being a close country too in the past centuries helped in build high spirits with common ideals & objectives, hard working and gaman tsuyoi (patient) peoples. Meanwhile, the Philippines which is a mixture of several races... the mentality & attitudes are 'bara-bara' (inconsistent) & 'charampuran' (non-committal) in Japanese language.

15 March 2009, 12:35:39 AM

Pops27 agreed with Yogimeek, observing:

well, i think Japanese people really love their country. this maybe because their government can provide them the necessities in life. they don't have to really migrate to other countries to seek greener pastures. i think their government was/is really effective in inculcating into the minds of the young the value of their country, the love for their country and the passion for their country.

maybe this is just me talking but i think, personally, i became nationalistic when i came to Japan. this is maybe what Benedict Anderson calls 'long distance-nationalism'. it is a shame though because i could and should have been nationalistic ever since i was in PI [Philippines], but i was not. it is only here in Japan that i have become nationalistic and have become proud of my being Filipino. oh well, this maybe is my way of articulating my uniqueness amidst the 'commonness'.

16 March 2009, 11:14:15 PM

Ashting26 echoes the same ode to affection:

sa tingin ko ang pagmamahal sa bansa. dapat mas maunawaan natin ang tunay na kahulugan ng pagmamahal sa bansa. dapat lubos nating maisaisip at maisapuso ang tunay, dalisay at wagas na pagmamahal sa bansa. ika nga ni Ninoy, 'the Filipinos are worth dying for'. dapat maingrain sa ating ang konsepto na ito sa ating pusot isipan. kaakibat nito ay ang pagpapahalaga sa ating bansa at pagbubunyi ng ating pagka Pilipino.

17 March 2009, 09:27:29 PM

[For me, it is the love of country. We need to know the real meaning of love of country. We need to digest the real and lasting affection to the nation, just like what Ninoy [Benigno Aquino] said, 'The Filipinos are worth dying for.' It must be ingrained to our existence. This is greatly connected to appreciation of the nation and the eventual pride of being a Filipino.]

In their hope to come up with a formula of a nation, despite the limited language of national love, the netizens rely on the affective narratives of heroism brought forth by stories of love and pride. Pops27's analysis of Japanese love is important in this discussion. A nation's capacity to provide for the needs of its people, Pops27 believes, brings forth their

love of country. But Ashting26's romantic yet filial notion of love provides a different view. Like Japanese, Filipinos are also willing to die for their country, the latter stresses. But it is their different notion of love and their different image of submission to power that distinguishes them. The words of Pops27 and Ashting26 express different understandings of the symbols of nationhood. Ashting26 seems to have been recalling the influential memories of *ilustrados* whose stories describe a nation based on the idea of Spanish colonization, hence, their fraternal desire to go home and gradually build the nation.

Pops27, on the other hand, embodies the new meaning of nation and the new meaning of heroism as well, which eventually catapults him to the status of a common '*bagong bayani*' (new hero) persona. On love of country, both understand the lack of it by Filipinos and they see it in the way Japanese express their feelings about their country. Their very presence in Japan and their different notions of love of the imagined homeland bring together an arbitrary racial binary.

TABLE 2: Binary Oppositions of Characterizations of Filipino and Japanese

Filipino Trait	Japanese Trait
Lack of Discipline	Disciplined
Corrupt	Honest
Selfish	Selfless

Signified against the economically prosperous and selfless nation, the netizens capitalized on the images of their imagined and first home. The exotic images of the Filipino and of the Philippines – the 'sweetest smiles' - locate Filipinos in a tropical place vis-à-vis the cold country of Japan. The omnipresence of this festive image is inexplicable given their homeland's turbulent economic and political situations. Summergirl writes:

kahit magulo at madumi sa Pilipinas mahal ko pa rin ang Pinas dahil masaya... lumabas ka lang sa labas... matutuwa ka ng manood ng mga taong nakapaligid sa iyo... nagkukutuhan, turo turo ang saya saya

18 March 2009, 02:33:44 PM 

[Even though it is quite chaotic in the Philippines, *I still love it*. Just go out and you'll find happiness around you. People line up in stairs to catch each other's lice, people pointing at different cooked viands... everything is joyful.]

Homebound

E. San Juan's (2000) image of Filipinos' desire to return only when they are economically secure echoes that '*balikabayan*' (homebound/homecomer/returnee), even if they are away from home, practice 'though with increasing trepidation interrupted by fits of amnesia, the speech acts and durable performances of *pakikibaka* [struggle], *pakikiramay* [condolence], and *pakikipagkapwa-tao*' [interpersonal communication] (2000: 237). San Juan understood this idiosyncrasy of the Filipino diaspora and he connects the phenomenon to the indelible nativist psychology. In this psychology, the Filipino in diaspora endures the away-from-home mode and elicits innate figures of *pakikibaka*, *pakikiramay* and *pakikipagkapwa-tao*. Versions of their struggle, condolence and interpersonal communication may have been accommodations of the influences of the same phenomena in their host societies or may have been hybrid forms of arts and media. But what are seemingly essential in these performances are the units of narratives and influences that are Philippine. In his *Balikbayang Sinta* (Hailed Homecomer), San Juan (2009) calls the Filipinos in diaspora (and the *balikbayans*) postmodern 'cargo cults'. They bring boxes and boxes, all in squares and rectangles, including coffins of dead overseas Filipino workers (OFWs). Acknowledging the possibility of tragedy, they keep tangible artifacts of the host land. While alive, morbidity aside, they send their absence presence – remittances (both official and non-authorized), packages (both new and scavenged) and pictures (both postcard and remembrance).

When they return to the Philippines, Alice Albuero (2002) says '*balikbayans* have the opportunity to demonstrate how successful they have become. Their *balikbayan* boxes are important, even necessary, components for their display. Because these cartons are manufactured for their use, they serve as uniforms which identify returnees and distinguish them from the rest of the Filipino population' (Albuero 2002: 281).

In their desire to be bound for home in the future, netizens narrate the happy ending of their stories. This project of '*pagbabalik*' (homecoming) commences with helping the homeland while physically able. 'Helping the Philippines is a great task', says Lulu Manuel, 'but in a little way, we can be of help to our community...by applying the things that we have learned when we are in Japan, such as recycling of goods and proper ways of disposing trash'. She continues, 'In our neighborhood, *kanya-kanya ang mga* neighbors (the neighbors did not mind each other), but

when they saw my husband sweeping the street in front of our house, *na-notice ko rin na* (I noticed that) they started sweeping their own *tapat ng bahay* (home front)...! At this point I realized that Lulu Manuel may have already resettled in the Philippines or elsewhere. Then I asked her, after having lived in Japan, what she thought Filipinos had learned from Japan that they could use to improve their own nation. She replied:

Difficult to say, but, I think [I] am not the only one who lived out[side] our country for long... Being a role model for our *kababayans*, what we have learned in the country where we stayed for a long time will be beneficial to our country.

For our part, we implement the leave your shoes outside and use slippers inside the house rule. It [the policy] minimizes the dirt and (it becomes) easy for me to clean the house... So when visitors come..., they know the rule... During house visit, we implement the call first attitude before coming.

[We instill] no red tape attitude. *Kung kailangan pipila, pipila kami kesa* (If we have to take the queue, we fall in line)... Or *kung may kailangang ayusin sa isang* (If there is a need to process a document at a) government agency, we do it the regular way, not the express way.

Ashting26 embodies Anderson's 'long-distance nationalism' (1998), which he defined as the phenomenon where advances in communication technologies in the capitalist world economy enable migrants to send money and guns or circulate propaganda to influence political events in their homelands yet remain absolved from accountability in the safe havens of their host countries. Ashting26 says,

I think the mere sending of money to PI is already a great help to PI. i for one send money every month to my loved ones in PI and i believe it is already good contribution to philippine economy. but of course this is just a very little contribution. i think filipinos in japan should mobilize and come up with noteworthy projects and programs for the benefit of those who are disenfranchised. i think that is one. another maybe, after a few years of international exposure, maybe filipinos in japan should opt to go home so that they can apply the learnings or the skills that they gained here in japan to businesses or whatever in PI.

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Writing the Nation under the Rising Sun

Yogimeek, in her first reply in a thread, quoted Jose Rizal in her closing paragraph: 'I will never see the sunrise'. As the central hero of the Philippine epic-revolution, Rizal has been venerated for his ideas of

the nation and has been widely discussed and reinterpreted in order to map out the nation. With a plethora of monuments dedicated to his memory, his words continue to echo in the walls of academic and government institutions.

'Sayonara!' he bids a Japanese woman by the name of O-Sei-San whom he had loved. He chants in his letter: 'When will the sweet hours I spent with you return?'¹ Floro Quibuyen ([1999] 2008: 353) noted that perhaps Rizal's love affair with O-Sei-San is the 'poetic epitome of his falling in love with Japan, its culture and people, whose courtesy and quiet ways, and honesty, cleanliness and industry impressed him deeply'. In his letter to Ferdinand Blumentritt on 4 March 1888, his observations support that impression:

There are very few thieves... It is said that houses are left open; their walls are made of paper, and in the hotels one can leave money on the table without fear of losing it. The Japanese are very merry and they are courteous; in the streets fighting is not seen. Their houses are clean. Rarely are beggars seen. They are very industrious... *because I have the looks of a Japanese.*

While there is no direct comparison between the Philippines and Japan, Rizal's description provides opportunities for bringing up the subtexts that pertain to the homeland. The Japanese rooms are susceptible to theft, yet no losses were documented. A result of such admiration for corrupt-free Yokohama and Tokyo was his longer-than-intended stay, 'for the country seems to me very interesting and because in the future we shall have much to do and to deal with Japan'.²

In his letter to O-Sei-San, the already-engaged Rizal romanticized on the images of flowers in the falls. The greatest storyteller, as Rizal-as-First-Filipino advocates may consider him, Rizal capitalized on the idea of beauty and tranquility, and with its unwithered serenity, imagined the homeland with its feminine memories. More than a lover of Japanese beauty, Rizal had longed for his return, especially while he was away from home – where the mother serves as light (*'ilaw ng tahanan'*) – the Rizal household and the Mother Philippines. Vicente Rafael (1990) observes this arguing that 'equating love of nation with love of mother idealized the former in terms of the latter. Thus could sacrifice and loss appear necessary and reasonable: by acting as their protectors sons could reciprocate the affections of mothers, real or imagined' (1990: 596).

There is a noteworthy account to further the analogy of woman-nation and lover-nationalist. While visiting an exhibition of Japanese paintings in Paris in 1883, Rizal, like other Filipinos in Europe, was mistaken 'as one from Japan'. When asked to provide information on the paintings

on display, he indulged in the fantasy of being Japanese. He talked about the constitution of Japan and the biographies of the artists he knew about. But considerable embarrassment took place when a woman asked him to read the Japanese scripts that were written at the bottom of the image. Fearful of being found out, he explained using another fiction – that he could not read Japanese because he was part of a group sent to Europe by the emperor to learn about the West, and as a result, he was unable to learn Nihonggo (Rafael 2000: 105-06). Commenting on this slip, Rafael notes Rizal's act 'attests to the fictionality and malleability of national identity, one whose limits and coherence is set not by blood but language' (2000: 106). Caught by the beauty of Japan/ese, Rizal took the opportunity to imagine Japan from his own perspective. His 'Japanese features' did not help him; he was caught off guard by storytelling that greatly relies on the power of language more than the image/form. But what is significant in this strand of fictionalization is the confounding details of his reason to his French interlocutors. Wasn't it that he was really a part of a group of Filipinos who sailed to Europe to learn about the West? In the contemporary narrations of modern-day heroes represented largely by overseas Filipino workers, Rizal's reason has occupied a place in Filipino psychology, and this is shown through the 'home-altar'. A significant feature of an OFW home is a wall or shelf with framed pictures of the family member with a foreign backdrop as the real main attraction. The 'altar' is an indelible mark of every Filipino household with workers abroad. Just like the *balikbayan* boxes and monetary remittances, these are the ultimate sources of pride. And on the day of his/her homecoming, the OFW can only reason, 'I am part of a group of Filipinos who sailed to a country/continent just to learn about being far away'. It was a risk that they took to leave their families behind, unsure of what the future would be for them.

It is in being far away that narratives of displacement become stories to be re/told. Pops27 displays this 'placelessness' and counts the tangibles that are out of reach:

japan is totally different from PI. the people here are cold, while the people in PI are warm and friendly. ironically, when i got here [Japan], i have become more appreciative of my country. i longed that i should have made more time enjoying PI when i was there. i longed that i was with my friends who are jolly (unlike here that people are so serious). i longed for my parents and family, of course. how i wish i could be there (physically) and just enjoy the 'bounty' of PI. but since i am here in Japan for work, to seek greener pastures, it is just in mind... *just an imagination... just a dream* [her emphasis].

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Pops27's description of settings of the homeland and host country, elicits discrete narratives among Filipinos in Japan. Pops27's setting has become people-centred – how the unnamed yet culturally identified personas connect with him/her as the central subject of the narrative. In contrast to Rizal's setting almost 120 years ago, Pops27's context is symptomatic of a member of a group who went abroad for economic reasons.

Narration in this sense has become more personal and involved where the group member is the centre of the story, in contrast to Rizal's where he, the storyteller, witnesses how the characters act and evolve in a chosen location. The tendency of self-casting that Pops27 has performed puts the 'I' in a situation that calls for acceptance of exile. It is quite evident yet perhaps unconscious that the 'I's in her post are in lower case. The use of the upper-case 'I' pronoun emphasizes that one is single, solo, or alone. Hence 'I's in her post are in lower case, denoting that as a member of this online community, Pops27 has typographically accepted that her story is her community's story too.

The transfigurations that Rizal introduced and the losses of heroism that linguistic and cultural experiences have led to may have seemed spontaneous. The narratives of displaced-misplaced-unplaced peoples have no configuration. Even Appadurai (1996) argues that contemporary forms of complex non-territorial and transnational alliances cannot be defined within the lexicon of available political languages (1996: 164). '[N]o idiom has yet emerged', he says, 'to capture the collective interests of many groups in translocal solidarities, cross-border mobilizations, and postnational-identities' (Appadurai 1996: 166). Turning to storytelling to translate the incomprehensible narratives of exile and departure is an instinct of any citizen who migrates to a foreign land. The then unimaginable consequences of being 'unplaced' have become a communal sentiment of Filipinos who have been away from the homeland.

Ashting26's statement below can extend the aforementioned argument. Narrated in full Tagalog, the paragraph contains only two English words – 'miss' and 'nostalgia'. While this may exhibit, too, Appadurai's (1996) 'no idiom yet' observation of the exile experience, the Filipino post of Ashting26 presents the units of sentiments – the remembrances of family members who are left at home, the not-so-fortunate economics of living and the affective memories of tactile connections – images that are still finding a term in the Filipino vocabulary, a word that could contain the exactness of its intangibility.

namimiss ko ang pinas. sobra! di ko akalain na ganun pala ang sobra kong pagkamiss sa bansa natin. kalimitan ay nostalgic ako. naalala ko ang pamilya ko, mga kapatid ko, at mga kaibigan. salat man ako sa yaman doon, masarap pa rin ang

buhay, dahil kasama ko ang mga taong importante sa buhay ko...ang tawanan, ang halakhakan, ang yakapan, ang inuman, ang iyakan...haaayyy, kakamiss.

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[I miss the Philippines. So much! I never thought I would miss our country this much. Usually, I am nostalgic. I remember my family, my siblings, and my friends. I may not have had everything then, my life was happy, because I was with people who are important to me... the fun, laughter, the embraces, the drinking moments, the tears... I miss everything.]

Yogimeek displays the same character of melancholy. 'I appreciated the storms that passed the country', she says. Despite the country's economic and political instability, the participant extends positive emotions of homeland through the online community. As she *navigates* the Internet, the memories *rush* – extracting pictures of the homeland – its geography, its place in the world map. The participant longs for it as memories flood, for there is an insoluble landed image of place beneath the murky waters. The landed characteristic of home has, in a majority of instances, aggravated the placelessness in virtual participation and strengthens the Filipino psychology of tracking the nation.

After the storms that the homeland has experienced comes the image of the sun. In the popular imagination, 'the Japanese emblem of the rising sun eventually got linked to notions, derived from the Easter Vigil of the Holy Week, of the "light in the east", the source of light [*liwanag*] and the coming of the redeemer.' (Quibuyen [1999] 2008: 361-62). Influenced largely by the *ilustados*' nation-building pursuits, the veneration of the sun hails the symbolic structure of light and the central metaphor of the stories that were told online. Despite the heteroglossic nature of voices on the Internet and the absence of a 'master narrative' of the homeland, Filipino netizens find themselves emplaced in Japan and, with a promise of a morning, long for the less heroic homecoming.

Captured by Net: A Conclusion

Heterogeneity has been a distinct result of today's communication of cultures. It has produced multiple and contested identities. The captured citizens are in between the exchanges of artifacts, information and images and are entangled in the challenge of underlining their authentic descriptions and definitions as a people and as a nation. In the transaction of identities, Filipinos desire to go back to their homeland, their birthplace and death place. This nostalgia is ignited by the opportunities that the Internet provides.

The Internet has been regarded as a place for the imagination of the homeland. It has been used as an apparatus for nation-formation. The Filipinos in diaspora have the propensity to utilize the Internet as they go through the process of incorporation into the host society. Marked by centuries of travel and disembarkation, Filipinos have navigated cyberspace to secure visibility and articulate their sense of identity.

Filipinos in diaspora keep the homeland in a spectre of long-distance nationalism. The desire 'to come home' has always been there, but has to be suspended time to time due to financial constraints and the economic capacity of the homeland. There is an understanding of the need to be financially sufficient as the homeland is imagined as incapable of projects of the host nation. In comparing and contrasting the concrete and abstract attributes of Japan and the Philippines, Filipinos have learned the value of emplacement in their host country. The examples of economic independence, unwavering nationalism and discipline are affective images that the Filipinos found worthwhile emulating and concretizing. The homeland has been found dependent and reliant on the opportunities and domestic needs of an industrialized nation like Japan. The nation is still there. It has not been dissolved in the navigating character of the Internet. The homeland is a work in progress and is formed miles away despite having been emplaced in a foreign country.

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NOTES

- 1 From *Reminiscences* (p.145), quoted from Floro Quibuyen (*A Nation Aborted*). Direct quotes from a letter for Ferdinand Blumentritt, which come as a part of the paragraph, also come from Quibuyen (p. 353), condensed from Rizal-Blumentritt correspondence (pp. 163-64). Emphasis added.
- 2 From *Reminiscences* (p. 291), quoted from Quibuyen. Also quoted by Rafael (*White Love*, p. 105) from *One Hundred Letters of Jose Rizal*.

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