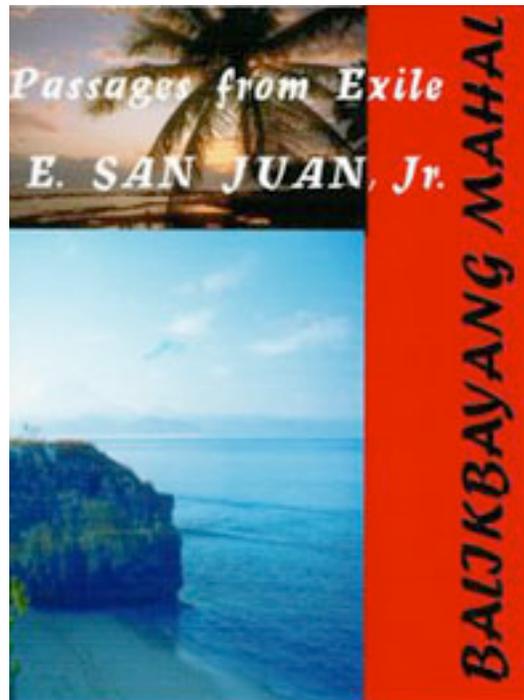


Review

Charlie Samuya Veric, Tamara Powell, and John Streamas

Three Essays on *Balikbayang Mahal: Passages from Exile* (Morrisville, NC: Lulu.com, 2007) by E. San Juan, Jr.



I.

The Planet as Homeland

Charlie Samuya Veric

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 Triumphator. 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 18th century, to the native intelligentsia in Europe who challenged the colonial authorities in the late 19th century, to the *pensionados* in American universities and laborers in Hawaii sugar plantations in the early 20th 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 Rizal, 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 10 million Filipinos in Amsterdam, London, Tokyo, Dubai, Rome, Hong Kong, Montreal, Sydney, and New York. His name is E. San Juan, Jr.

II.

Anatomy of Exile

Tamara Powell

E. San Juan, Jr.’s latest work is not a polysyllabic, hard-hitting work of critical analysis like those he is best known for. Instead, it is a poetry-filled work entitled

Balikbayang Mahal/Passages from Exile. This work is a collection of old and new poems and also includes a long essay on exile and diaspora entitled “Sa Loob at Labas ng Bayan Kong Sawi: Emergency Signals from a Filipino Exile.” One of the most striking features of the work is the bevy of languages represented. The poems appear in their original forms in either Filipino or English. A few poems also appear with French and Chinese translations accompanying them, and there are poems in Spanish and Italian. Most of the 35 poems are accompanied by a translation into at least one other language. Some poems, like “Mask of the Poet,” appear in English and Filipino with German and Russian translations.

The most consistent features of San Juan’s poems are his use of free verse and his gift of allusion. The poetry reminds one of T.S. Eliot in its deluge of allusions and its use of multiple languages. The author’s sweeping knowledge of geography, history, politics, religion, and literature blossoms in poetry. Most of San Juan’s work, including his poetry, is political and looks outward upon the world. For example, the poem “Spring in Den Haag, Nederland, 25 March 2007” commemorates the Permanent People’s Tribunal’s verdict of “‘Guilty!’ for the U.S.-Arroyo regime” (11). The poem also mockingly contrasts the peacefulness of the Dutch city of The Hague with the “murders and abuses” (11) still found in the Philippines despite the findings of the Permanent People’s Tribunal, the subtle point being that the sense of satisfaction the speaker receives from the verdict does not translate into action in his homeland — the verdict does not stop the suffering half a world away. The poem ends with hope: through continued and renewed struggle, justice will be found, “Your lips breaking apart the chains binding the morning’s/sunburst —” (12). The Arroyo regime will be defeated, and peace will prevail.

The most enjoyable poem by far is “Vicissitudes of the Love and Death of Vladimir Mayakovsky.” In line with the “Slap in the Face of Public Taste” demanded by the Russian Futurist Manifesto written by David Burliuk, Alexander Kruchenykh, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Victor Khlebnikov on December 15, 1913, the poem uses as many combinations of “arbitrary and derivative words” (Burliuk et al) as can be imagined. Filled with examples “of the principles that the Futurists worshiped — technology, speed, efficiency, and noise” (Cundy 349) and allusions to Mayakovsky’s

life and works, the poem races past Mayakovsky's death and projects the Futurist ideas into the future. In the poem, San Juan also creates varied images of Mayakovsky's body joining with a machine, in imitation of Mayakovsky's fascination with the machines:

"Among the Russian Futurists, [Mayakovsky] was the closest to the Constructivists and Italian Futurists . . . he consistently brought machines to life" (Klanderud 41).

Mayakovsky was fascinated with the idea of things coming to life and people joining with machines, and this poem celebrates Mayakovsky in just such a way, as his "submarine catacombs" shoot "neon x-rays," and his "eyes . . . are embalmed gas jets/tied to the radiator of [his] solar plexus" (San Juan 56). The poetic homage to Mayakovsky zips by on the page filled with "ZOOM" and "SOS" in Futurist style.

The final work in the book is "Sa Loob at Labas Ng Bayan Kon Sawi: Emergency Signals from a Filipino Exile." This essay pulls together journal segments "written in the mid-1990s" (San Juan 124) on the meaning of the word "exile." San Juan begins with a brief history of the reality of exile in recent Filipino history. Examples from the Filipino diaspora are linked to history, definitions, and theoretical discussions to examine from many angles what exile means to Filipinos. The essay pauses at one point to demand, "We Filipinos need a cartography and a geopolitical project for the masses in diaspora, not for the elite in exile" (139). But the word exile is slippery. An example of one of the many facets of the word begins with the "Filipino swamp settlers of St. Malo" (140) in Louisiana. This settlement existed from 1825-1915, when it was finally wiped out by a hurricane. San Juan then reports that the Burtanog sisters, descendents of the St. Malo residents, were recently interviewed by filmmaker Renee Tajima. They do not consider themselves exiles or in diaspora, but rather Southern white women of Louisiana. Exile is a complex word, and San Juan's essay analyzes it thoroughly through history, politics, personal experience, poetry, and theory.

"In time of emergency," he writes, "Trotsky's strategic stance of waiting-in-exile proves to be the time of pregnancy, of gestation and the emergence of new things." He continues, "Apart from being a symptom of defeat, exile then can also serve as a weapon of resistance" (147). San Juan is never without hope, and his conclusion reflects that tendency on the part of the author: "The aboriginal Indians . . . express for us also what I think can be the only ultimate resolution for human exile and diaspora for Filipinos as

well as for other peoples: ‘We and the earth, our mother, are of one mind’ (151). This essay addresses aspects of many types of exile and many diasporas, but it begins and ends with the complexities and consequences of what it means to be a Filipino far from home.

Although most of the work is heavily political and looks outward upon the world, “Mask of the Poet” is one of the few poems in this collection that looks inward. It combines the postmodern idea of the lack of authentic, monadic self with the ancient idea that everything is connected. The voice of the poem is the poetic inspiration itself, “. . . keeping vigil alone in the whole world” (27). San Juan as poet and theorist seems to be inspired to constantly keep vigil, as his video interventions prove,¹ providing emergency signals, new insights into and commentary on cultural studies. San Juan is always an eloquent and forceful writer, and his poems are no exception. This latest work is his most artistically creative yet, and adds significantly to his already weighty collection of writings.

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¹ For examples see <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ESqkf5G4y8s>> and <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O1bCgpVA6DM>>.

III.

Always Moving Toward Justice

John Streamas

Fairly commonly these days, poets end their volumes with a short prose section, usually footnotes or glosses on the poems. Likewise, except for a short epilogue-poem at the very end, the closing section of the new book *Balikbayang Mahal: Passages from Exile*, by E. San Juan, Jr., is a work of prose. But it is not brief, nor is it made of footnotes or clarifications of the poems. It is a 31-page essay, part scholarly, part autobiographical, and all enjoining, on the state of exile. And what it urges us to do, by way of analyzing the history of the colonizing of the Philippines, is work for the revolution that alone can save the world's targeted and vulnerable peoples from occupation or exile. "Revolution," writes San Juan, "is the way out through the stagnant repetition of suffering and deprivation." At stake is of course a homeland, from which millions tearfully depart to find jobs or to save their lives. The Philippines' main export is, after all, a labor force of ten million people working, without legal protections, mostly in the service industries of rich nations. Their employers call these workers not exiles but recruits, and colonization has created a home economy that offers no alternatives but to leave. Intellectuals and activists who oppose this economy are also driven out, and San Juan counts himself among the exiles, disguised as an "itinerant and peripatetic student without credentials or references, sojourning in places where new experiences may occur."

In this sense the essay, meandering as it does from space to time, from the autobiographical to the historical, extends the ambitions of the poems. To underscore this theme of exile even further, most of the poems appear in two or more languages, English and Tagalog and sometimes Chinese, Russian, Italian, or German. (For helpful translations from Tagalog, the reviewer wishes to thank Rei Lagman.) This is no celebration of institutional diversity or of a melting pot but is rather a mapping of the poet's migrations, what he calls "a succession of detours and displacements." And yet the poems refuse to become travel literature, as they insist more on the history of home than on the consumption of destinations. Still, they are no less concerned with time than

with space. In “The Tarantula,” for example, the venom of the beast’s blood is unleashed from its “millennial” spines; and in “Balikbayan Beloved” we hear that “everything is late,” including “the hours of an infant’s deliverance and funeral dirges.” The titles of two recent poems announce their own times and places as the Netherlands in 2007 and Willimantic, Connecticut in 2005. And yet both poems invoke the homeland, with bitter recognition of the atrocities of the “U.S.-Arroyo regime” in the first and the question “But why does the Abu Sayyaf sneak into the mind?” in the second. Timekeeping in the Philippines, according to Ian Bartky’s new history of the globalization of time measurements, split along colonial lines. For more than two centuries Manila and the Catholic Philippines observed American time, while southern islands kept Asian time, usually a full day’s difference. “The milieu of transition,” writes San Juan, “may be the site where space is transcended by time.”

A note of reassurance is in order. Recent forays into anti-Bush politics in U.S. popular culture — examples include an album by Neil Young and a movie by Robert Redford — have been scolded for focusing so intently on their message that they lose their art and their heart. Yet readers will discover in San Juan’s poems a snarky humor, a vibrant sensuousness, and a rich embrace of literary history. Mayakovsky appears in several poems, not only for his manifestoes but also for his passions. Near the end of the wild poem “Vicissitudes of the Love and Death of Vladimir Mayakovsky” come lines that recall Hopkins and Whitman and Mayakovsky himself: “Dice of electrons run amok in your brain’s reservoir / Vladimir / and uproot oases until the panting deer / Christ-Self’s surrogate / is devoured by gnomes and ourang-outangs / from the extreme unction of your epic verses.” These lines splay across the page, tracing a path as seemingly haphazard as many migrations. In “The Forked Fountain in the Nest of Your Eyelash” the poet immerses himself in a sensual world of silt and cobwebs, incense and kisses, claws and vulture’s teeth, but in the end it is only an illusion of love that is “embraced / by the guerilla astutely spying.” And “The Sweetheart of Ludwig von Wittgenstein” teases with a “sulphur-black dinosaur” rising from lava caves and arguing “against / the equations of your love.” What soon becomes clear is that, for San Juan as for Mayakovsky, passions suffuse alike the material and the political.

But, even at their cleverest and most teasing, these passions are also entwined in the sorrows of exile. Perhaps the most lyrical poem is “The Way Things Are,” made of five quatrains with images of birds hovering in old buildings; yet even here “We wait for miracles / With daggers to console / Us,” and a metaphor for circling birds — of angel droppings that “May nourish the exchange / We are possessed of and by” — suggests a vision to console “Every animal that dies.” The poems begin on a lyric called “Voyages,” with a first sentence that extracts a weird majesty from rootlessness (“To exile I ride on the bountiful surf”) and end on a lyric called “Hail and Farewell,” with a closing quatrain that might be merely clever if it were not also acutely aware of the risks of rootlessness: “But Mayakovsky is our kin — / We also reek / Of incense / And formalin.”

In the introduction to his new book of essays *In the Wake of Terror: Class, Race, Nation, Ethnicity in the Postmodern World*, San Juan praises activists who testify in tribunals for justice, self-determination, and human rights. They recall, he says, eighteenth-century revolutionaries in France and the United States and twentieth-century revolutionaries in Russia, Vietnam, Cuba, and China. And, more important, they still inspire oppressed peoples everywhere. This is not a false or empty hope. It is fed by history and solidarity, and it persists and grows. The poems in *Balikbayang Mahal* are about the sorrows of migration and exile, to be sure, but they are also about the hope of connections.