

***Wala: Mga Tula (2018):
E. San Juan Jr.'s post-
conceptual interventions***

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“Selection of what is seen, recording of insignificant facts that gradually transforms the true objects into a sort of background against which another designation of meaning suddenly emerges ... a kind of dissolving view, reminding us of the reflection of Paul of Tarsus, all is calm and yet: *this world as we see it is passing away*” (Virilio 37).

This passage from Paul Virilio's *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* gives an impression of the spirit behind *Wala: Mga Tula ni E. San Juan, Jr.* (2018). Inconspicuously tucked away in the copyright page of San Juan's chapbook, the epigraph alludes to the various shades of meaning incorporated in the chapbook's title—nothingness, disappearance, absence, loss, lack, or non-existence in Filipino. *Wala* is San Juan's latest intervention in conceptualism and post-conceptualism: art and literary practices that foreground the concept or idea behind a creative production rather than its aesthetic qualities or formalist concerns. Precision is wanting in San Juan's demarcation of post-conceptualism from conceptualism in his essay “Sining-Konseptuwal, Panitikang Konseptuwal: Bakit Kailangan ang Permanenteng Rebolusyon?” (2019) that reviews the debates in the field. But he sees its focus on the “concept” as a way out of the stranglehold of the author, the work, and the audience which he criticizes for being the only purview of approved creative writing and art criticism in the Philippines.

This post-conceptual approach is borne out in the banner piece “Wala”. It plays on a list of definitions of the word “wala” that introduces

diverging meanings of the term before ending with an enumeration of words prefixed by “wala” to signify the overlapping and overflowing of signification. This is an excess, which at the same time ironically marks the very loss of meaning. Other pieces like “Libog” (“Libido”), “Bugtungang Erotika” (“Erotic Riddles”), “Parabula ng Buto ng Mustasa” (“Parable of the Mustard Seed”), and “Lumang Tugtugin, Bagong Sayaw” (“Old Tune, New Dance”) appropriate the forms of prayers, parables, and riddles that evoke this elusiveness of meaning and thereby question the fixedness of everything.

Iterations of the word “dating” (arrival) are repeated in the piece “Dating”: as adjective, as adverb, as verb in different degrees of progression. This creates a defamiliarizing effect that at the same time makes for an enigmatic note on the tension between the act of waiting for the opportune moment and making that instance arrive. In effect, San Juan strives to enact a dialectical mediation of being and nothingness into the process of becoming, a dramatic rendition of the Hegelian concept of *Aufhebung* (transcendence).

Notions of waiting and desire, which are always relational to that which is missing, form another dimension of lack that the chapbook’s first three pieces — “Tipanan sa Pinto ng Hardin” (“Rendezvous at the Garden Gate”), “Bitin” (“Wanting”), and “Pasumalang Tadhana” (“Random Fate”) ruminate on. San Juan elaborates this irony further in “Alingawngaw” (“Echo”) which touches on voicelessness as an instance of absence: “Walang tinig” (“No voice”), “Walang bigkas” (“No speech”), “Walang ingay” (“No noise”), “Walang hikbi” (“No lamentation”), “Walang huni” (“No sound”). The last few lines juxtapose the scene of someone knocking and asking for help, but with no one responding, thereby dramatizing the peace of the dead imposed by fascism.

At the surface level, we can read San Juan’s latest experimentations as another addition to his engagement with various fields of creative writing, literary criticism, cultural studies, and political interventions that have been embodied in an extensive corpus amounting to “around 52 monographs, 21 volumes of poetry and fiction in English and Filipino, and 232 academic articles published between 1963 and 2015” (Veric). But upon a closer look, one can read San Juan’s post-conceptual interventions as a form of self-reflexive revisiting that looks back to his very own poetic and critical practice.

For instance, “Bakas” (“Trace”), “Unang Paalam” (“First Farewell”), “Balikbayang Sinta” (“Beloved Repatriate”), and many other pieces in the chapbook patch together stark details of city life and time spent in the Metro Manila of the 1950-60s and the memories of the Philippines before San Juan’s exile into the United States, of which only traces remain. “Niyari” (“Produced”) meanwhile relays the construction of the contours of a concept as always going beyond the limits of this production: “umalpas / umigpaw / umapaw” (“transcends / leaps over an obstacle / overflows”). Readers are thereby enjoined to partake in the revisiting of these traces from San Juan’s own past as well as from the unresolved contradictions of contemporary Philippine society that are textualized in these pieces.

San Juan is often criticized for his alleged difficulty for the lay reader, admittedly an unfair accusation given the specialized academic audience of most of his writings. Here he discourages readers from passively consuming the text, instead urging the readers’ playful collaboration.

San Juan had already been drawn to avant-garde poetics early in his life. An example of this is his experiments in in the 1960s in abolishing Tagalog metrics that can be read in the collection *Alay Sa Paglikha Ng Bukang-Liwayway* (2000). This fondness for the avant-garde was further shored up by his close association with poets Amado Hernandez and Alejandro Abadilla during this decade.

But the patently post-conceptualist trajectory began to take form with his *Sapagkat Iniibig Kita at Iba Pang Bagong Tula* (2004), a typographical experiment following the model of Stephane Mallarme’s “A Throw of the Dice will Never Abolish Chance”. This reached a greater level of experimentation with *Ambil: Mga Pagsubok, Pahiwatig & Interbensiyon Tungo Sa Pagbabagong Buhay* (2015), which had as its underlying principle the definition of the Tagalog word “ambil,” i.e. repetition of expressions and misdirection of intended meanings, to draw attention to social contradictions in which both author and reader are enmeshed.

San Juan has indeed come a long way since he came of age as a poet and scholar in the 1950s and 1960s. As a third year college student at the University of the Philippines Diliman, his poem “Man is a Political Animal” was censored in the 1957 issue of the *Philippine Collegian* for allegedly using “blasphemous” language. This resulted in his being banned from being published in the student paper as an undergraduate (San Juan Jr., *History and Form: Selected Essays*).

The young poet had by then begun to abandon the hegemonic formalist tradition in favor of politically-engaged literary practice amidst the radicalization engendered from the shadow of the Huk rebellion, intellectual debates between religious sectarianism and liberalism, the birth of the national democratic movement, and the anti-dictatorship struggle in the Philippines and the rising civil rights, anti-war, and new left movements in the West.

This shift is exemplified by his writing of the *The Radical Tradition in Philippine Literature* (1971) and *Carlos Bulosan and the Imagination of the Class Struggle* (1972), landmark attempts at recuperating the revolutionary impulses in Philippine literary production (Pante and Nery). It is also articulated in the combative poems and essays penned in the wake of his involvement in the mass movement against the US-Marcos dictatorship as a Filipino scholar in exile in America. His writings have been collected in *Kung Ikaw Ay Inaapi, Bakit Hindi Ka Magbalikwas? At Iba Pang Tula* (1984), *Only by Struggle* (1988), and *Himagtik: Pakikibaka Tungo Sa Mapagpalayang Kultura* (2004).

Unlike the intellectual trajectory of other scholars and academics from his era who have since turned their backs on their militant involvements, San Juan’s writings continue to engage with what he calls the “radical tradition” in Philippine culture and literature, which are rooted in the various social movements in the country’s history that emerged against colonial and imperialist oppression. San Juan had been active in the anti-Marcos dictatorship movement in the US from 1969 to the 1980s and continues to be involved in the Fil-Am advocacy group Kamalayan and the International Coalition for Human Rights in the Philippines (ICHRP).

Today, hegemonic conceptions of the literary and the artistic have become so entrenched that it is very well easier to imagine the end of the world than to picture the dismantling of dominant literary institutions (Acuña and Mendoza 18–20). *Wala*, following Ivan Emil Labayne’s (New Ways of Saying ‘Revolt! Change the System’) reading, may exemplify a step away from the sometimes fashionable use of activist vocabulary that does not critique the social position of one’s own literary practice or the equally uncritical penchant for seeking “utopian” impulses in every popular consumer product that is dished out by the “cultural entrepreneurs of the ruling classes for mass consumption” (Guillermo 67).

Apart from San Juan, exemplary of this rethinking and questioning are the literary productions introduced by activist and post-conceptual practitioner Angelo Suarez (Philippine Literary Production Under Fascism) as part of the Philippines Dossier of *Jacket2’s* “Extreme Texts” series. Featured in the dossier are the installations of Labayne’s Baguio-based collective Pedantic Pedestrians, Shaunnah Ysabel Cledera’s self-publishing collective Magpies, and the playful literary projects of Tilde Acuña, whose *Apo sa Ika-22 Siglo: Mga Abstrak* (2017) is “a book of abstracts that celebrates two hundred years of greatness of almighty Marcos, former president of the golden age of the Philippine republic accused as despotic and later ousted” (Acuña).

And yet one must bear in mind San Juan’s (“Sining Konseptuwal, Panitikang Post-Konseptuwal: Bakit Kailangan Ang Permanenteng Rebolusyon?”) warning that treating appropriation, self-referentiality and other defamiliarizing textual techniques associated with avant-garde artistic movements sans any concern for content or context just ends up in formalist games that do not partake in the subversion of dominant literary institutions and politico-economic structures.

While this may be faulted by some critics for essentializing the post-conceptual, Angelo Suarez’s proposal that its ultimate realization lies in moving away from textual games, “weaponized literature”, and scribbling “metaphors for mass protest” (Art Serves the Masses by Abolishing Itself) towards collective acts that inscribe themselves on the body of the social bear consideration. While

falling short of Suarez's exhortation for a post-conceptual practice that directly partake in taking to the streets and seizing the means of production, it is nonetheless in works like these that we begin to conceive something new.

Review of E. San Juan, Jr, Wala (Polytechnic University of the Philippines Press, 2016; revised edition, Philippines Studies Center, 2018).

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