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**Gravities of Center.** Barbara J. Pulmano Reyes. San Francisco CA: Arkipelago Books, 2003. 72 pages. \$15 paper.

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Barbara J. Pulmano Reyes's debut book of poetry, *Gravities of Center*, opens with an invocation echoing with the loss and longing of exile: "Found" asks the muse to bestow voice, but also requests a "garnet crystalline fire. / Slow, and certain. / Burning, to light the way back home." The search for voice and the search for home intertwine throughout Reyes's verse, meandering through questions of remembering and forgetting. Home becomes elusive, a construction dependent upon memory and language, which are both fallible, as "Images of Loss" laments: "the manila of my imagination i have learned to mourn my birthplace i no longer understand that place where i wish to pay homage thoroughly colonial i no longer know how my words flow my language now fissures. . . i cannot remember i cannot regret what i cannot remember."

Born in Manila and raised in the San Francisco Bay Area, Reyes creates poetry that aims not to fix one geographical locale as home, but to explore a broad topography of homelands. Spanning spaces between the Philippines and the United States, *Gravities of Center* decenters home by orchestrating counterpoints between cultures. "The Philippines" becomes many places: Manila, Jolo, Banaue, a tropical paradise, a scene of bloody political unrest. "America" is the colonizer enforcing "benevolent assimilation," but also the familiarity of a "Daly City Filipino restaurant," the tawdry atmosphere of a Colma casino, the oenic undulations of the Napa Valley. Referencing centuries of violence from Spanish and American colonization to the Marcos regime to Muslim separatist conflicts, Reyes's verse inhabits the tumultuous vortex of place, moment, and culture.

The prismatic aesthetic of *Gravities of Center* showcases these issues of history and culture, as well as questions of love and sexuality. Sometimes the poetry elaborates on the sonnet or tanka, but far more iconoclastic than traditional, the book jettisons conventions regarding form, font, and space. A poem such as "101 Words That Don't Quite Describe Me" gathers signifiers into a fluid gestalt: "childlike. calculating. irreverent. insane. emotional. dreamer. cynic. hunter. enchantress. ruthless. insecure. sexy. adversary. idealist. bitch." The ironically titled "In Paradise" establishes a dual melody line that sustains the polyphony of utopia and brutality:

At sunrise I paddle the outrigger canoe until  
*Camouflaged adolescents*  
 People on the shore are specks  
*Barely men*  
 Dive into ocean monsoon rain warm  
*Sling semi-automatic weapons*  
 Into undisturbed coral reef alive, magical  
*Over skeletal shoulders*  
 Lay blissfully on pristine sand. . . .

These formal designs become particularly powerful in the intertextual expressions deployed by *Gravities of Center*. Referencing Marlon Fuentes's *Bontoc Eulogy*, the startling film on the exhibition of over 1,000 Filipinos at the 1904 St. Louis Fair, "Anthropologic" translates the docudrama into poetic screenplay. Similarly, "Now Showing" produces a cinematic rendering of Santiago Bose's mixed media collage *Sad Movies Make Me Cry*:

<i>Quick cut</i>	<i>Full body shot of masked Muslim <b>Freedom Fighter</b></i>
aiming assault rifle back at Erap:	Our hunky action matinee idol
Turned senator	Turned boozing womanizing third world
president	
Pulls the trigger. . . .	

A poem like "Now Showing" requires the reader to decode historical and political references such as the allusion to deposed Philippine president Joseph "Erap" Estrada. The intermedia quality of

the book—along with its many evocations of writers in the Philippines, the United States, and elsewhere—insists upon the reader's investigation into other Philippine/Filipino American art forms and firmly fixes these poems within a greater cultural tradition.

Expressions of love, passion, and female sexuality enrich the view of history and culture explored in Reyes's poetry. In "Foretellings," the speaker recollects "his smooth arms wrapped around my shoulders and my face tucked beneath his unshaven chin" and wonders "if there are still quiet corners in my ancestors' archipelago." The book's melding of sexuality and food images is particularly heady: "Food Tanka Three" wafts redolent of "[t]he fragrance of crushed garlic cloves. . . Pressed into your body"; "Olive Oil" promises that "[t]onight she will dream of him, bathed slick, / Thick, and green, tart to her tongue." While these flashes of corporeal pleasure cry out with satisfaction and delight, they are countered by moments of frustration and disappointment, as in "Today's News": "This morning, with no hard evidence to substantiate, / I conclude you really don't care about me at all."

By the end of *Gravities of Center*, we are left savoring the salty traces of bagoong on the tongue, the verdant spiciness of olive oil at the back of the throat. Carrying the weight of many histories, the book excites a spectrum of anger and mourning, sometimes as clipped irony, sometimes drawn out into dull, throbbing pain. Simultaneously, the joy of passion, the thrills of seduction, illuminate Reyes's poetry. These are incantations against loss and exile, celebrations of discoveries and home. These are poems to be stroked, to be fondled between finger and thumb, a string of freshwater pearls, variegated in color, shape, and tenor.

### **Kella Svetich**

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