E. SAN JUAN JR:

Remembering the Struggles During the Martial Law

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Abstract

Elmer A. Ordoñez recalls his encounters with E. San Juan, Jr., beginning with his receipt of a manuscript in the early 1970s that he later published as the director of the University of the Philippines Press: *Carlos Bulosan and the Imagination of the Class Struggle* by San Juan. For Ordoñez, this book marked a turning point in the intellectual trajectory of San Juan who was his former student. Moreover, Ordoñez situates the early and middle aspects of San Juan's growth as an intellectual and activist in the local and international contexts that have come to shape San Juan's life. Of particular interest is Ordoñez's recollection of his collaboration with San Juan in organizing against the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos in North America, during which they became responsible for circulating subversive documents from the homeland among Filipino exiles in the United States and Canada.

Keyword

activism, E. San Juan, Jr., exile, Martial Law

About the Author

Elmer Ordoñez is a SEA Write-Philippines awardee for 2008. He has written short fiction, poetry, essays, and scholarly articles, many of which are included in his collections *Sitting in the Moonlight* and *Other Stories*, *Emergent Literature: Essays on Philippine Writing*, and *The Other View*, among others. He retired as professor of English and Comparative Literature from the University of the Philippines Diliman. He has served as national secretary of Philippine PEN and chair of the literary arts committee of National Commission for Culture and the Arts. He is a lifetime member of the U.P. Writers Club and the writers' group, Ravens. He is literary editor and columnist of the *Manila Times*. His most recent publication is the novel, *Snows of Yesteryear*, published by the University of the Philippines Press.

In the early 1970s we at the University of the Philippines Press received a manuscript “Carlos Bulosan and the Imagination of the Class Struggle.” It came from Epifanio “Sonny” San Juan, Jr. who had earlier translated Amado V. Hernandez’s collection of prison poems which were smuggled out in strips of newsprint by his wife, Atang de la Rama, during his incarceration in the 1950s as a political prisoner. Hernandez was arrested following the round-up of the communist politburo. He was released in the early 1960s and wrote *Mga Ibong Mandaragit*, first serialized in *Liwayway* magazine.

The Bulosan manuscript, by its title alone, made me realize that Sonny had come some way from his literary concerns as a student of mine who wrote sixteen pages of close reading of Ivan Bunin’s “The Gentleman from San Francisco” for a simple homework assignment of a page or two of analysis. Even then he already stood out as a student—being suspended, like Jose Garcia Villa, for having published in the *Philippine Collegian* a purportedly “obscene” poem titled “Man is a Political Animal.” He apparently followed Dadaism and Ezra Pound, and put out a little magazine called “Blast.”

Sonny belonged to the generation of Jose Maria “Joma” Sison who in the late 1950s tempted fate by taking on the establishment—unintimidated by the Anti-Subversion Act, military surveillance, and McCarthyite witch-hunting rampant during that period of struggles for academic freedom and against CAFA investigations of alleged communists among the UP faculty and students. Sison himself was terminated as a beginning instructor in English, suspected as he was for authoring “Requiem for Lumumba,” a paean to the Congolese leader assassinated under CIA auspices. At this time in 1960, Senator Claro M. Recto died in Rome under mysterious circumstances, for he was last seen with some Caucasians believed to be CIA agents.

By then, Sonny had graduated with honors and left for Harvard on scholarship while Sison went to Indonesia to continue his political education. Sonny’s interest in the decadent poets surfaced when he wrote his PhD dissertation on Oscar Wilde—which was followed by another study on James Joyce’s *Dubliners*. I remember “Araby” and the “Dead” were the stories Sonny and his classmates took up in my class which used the required Brooks, Purser, and Warren’s *An Approach to Literature*, exemplifying New Criticism.

At about that time, too, Edward Said was at Harvard, whose dissertation was on Joseph Conrad, the topic I also chose for my own dissertation at the University of Wisconsin-Madison earlier. But Sonny said he never met Said though they were in the same department of English.

Sonny came to teach in UP Diliman in 1966–67 when I was on leave for a post-doctoral stint at Oxford. It was during this period that he renewed fraternization with Tagalog writers like Efren Abueg, Roger Mangahas, and Rogelio Ordóñez—the *Agos sa Disyerto* group. He might have met Hernandez, too. It was during this time that he did his translation of Hernandez’s prison poems, *Isang Dipang Langit*.

Sonny returned to the US going through a period of turmoil—protests against the Vietnam War and student revolts all over the world. It was during this period, the late 1960s, that Sonny said he really read up on Marxism-Leninism and Mao-Tse Tung Thought. He was radicalized then and turned to the study of other revolutionary writers particularly from the Third World. His *Carlos Bulosan and the Imagination of the Class Struggle* (UP Press, 1972) may well be the product of his transformation from a formalist critic to a Marxist one. His own creative work, poetry and short fiction, also underwent this social climate change.

As an academic in various universities, Sonny kept up with the recent literary works and critical theories that shaped his radical critique. What interested me were his expositions on Antonio Gramsci, Raymond Williams, Fredric Jameson, Terry Eagleton, and other Marxist critics that were useful in appreciating national liberation struggles. I share Sonny’s strictures against postcolonial criticism of which Said, Sonny’s batchmate at Harvard, was said to have “fathered” with his book, *Orientalism*.

II

With the imposition of martial law, my wife, son, and I found ourselves in Malaysia with cancelled passports. Sonny was one of those I wrote to abroad. He mentioned that the Filipinos in the United States were organizing anti-martial groups. We managed to seek asylum in Canada, in the city of Montreal, Quebec. Sonny and Delia Aguilar were in Storrs, Connecticut, and we could easily communicate. He had set up a Philippine resource center, issuing anti-imperialist pamphlets and monographs. Their link was with the American Friends of the Filipino People, led by Dr. Daniel Boone Schirmer based in Boston and whose daughter Audrey, married to Canadian Martin Duckworth, was based in Montreal. We invited Schirmer to our first anti-martial law event at the Université de Montreal.

My wife and I had organized a group of Filipinos and Canadians eventually called Center for Philippine Concerns in Montreal which had links with the Anti-Martial Law Coalition based in San Francisco with chapters in both Pacific and Atlantic coasts and in Chicago. Our group in Montreal was able to connect with

groups in Toronto and Vancouver. It was through this network that anti-martial law campaigns were conducted in North America. We were in touch with Sonny and Delia, exchanging materials of underground literature from the Philippines which we reproduced or used in posters, newsletters, slide show presentations, and press releases regarding anti-people activities of the Marcos regime.

Sonny and Delia were among the first to circulate the underground poems of Ma. Lorena Barros, Emmanuel Lacaba, Clarita Roja (a pseudonym), as well as the works of political detainees like Edicio de la Torre, Ed Maranan, Mila Aguilar, Jose Maria Sison, Dolores Feria, Jose Lacaba, Bonil Iagan, Bien Lumbera, Alan Jazmines, Ed Villegas, Mano Verdades Posadas (a pseudonym), and the underground writings from cultural workers and members of the New People's Army. It was a time of resurrecting the tenets of the proscribed PAKSA (*Panulat para sa Kaunlaran ng Sambayanan*) founded in 1971 on the principles laid down in the *Talks at the Yenlan Forum on Art and Literature*. At the same time, we drew inspiration from the writings of nationalist writers and patriots like Andres Bonifacio ("*Pag-ibig sa Tinubuang Lupa*" and *Kalayaan*), Hernandez ("*Kung Tuyo na Ang Luha Mo, Bayan*" and "*Isang Dipang Langit*") and Jose Corazon de Jesus ("*Bayan Ko*"). Nationalist and revolutionary songs from the Philippines and Third World solidarity groups were disseminated by the anti-martial law groups some of which morphed into anti-imperialist groups or ideological formations.

III

The anti-Marcos groups which had links with the traditional political opposition looked askance at what they labelled "leftist" or communist groups. The Movement for a Free Philippines headed by former senator Raul Manglapus kept their distance from us not wanting to be tainted red. The *Philippine Times* edited by Pedro Ramos in Chicago was bought by Eugenio Lopez, Jr. only to kill it, knowing that a few of the writers in the paper belonged to the ideological organizations. Sonny and I were portrayed once by the *Philippine News* in San Francisco as part of the "Gang of Four" as depicted by the KDP (*Katipunan ng mga Demokratikong Filipino*) that had become the cadre group of the Line of March whose principal objective was to "build socialism" in the United States. The so-called "Gang of Four" (derived from China's struggle for power), along with two others from Chicago and San Francisco, was seen as a hindrance to KDP's political agenda.

As far as Sonny and the rest of our group were concerned—now called the Alliance of Philippine Concerns with close links to the Friends of the Filipino People—the

principal task was to provide support to the people's movement in the Philippines in opposing the Marcos dictatorship backed by the United States.

To this end, Sonny and I also participated in Philippine studies conferences held in various cities like Chicago, Ann Arbor, and Kalamazoo to read papers on the Filipino people's struggle to end martial law.

The end of martial law came about during the EDSA uprising in February 1986. When we realized that the result was the restoration of oligarchic politics by another set, we had no choice but to continue the struggle for people's democracy and genuine independence. My wife and I returned to the homeland and immersed ourselves in progressive NGO work while teaching at the University of the Philippines.

Sonny and Delia, long settled in the US, have continued to provide valuable resource material (books, essays, and creative work) for the people's movement and inspire the younger progressive intellectuals like Sarah Raymundo, Roland Tolentino, Tomas Talledo, Charlie Samuya Veric, and many others, as well as recharge the earlier generations of activists.