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Kaisa Aquino

STORYTELLING IN A TIME OF EXIGENCY[1]

My students and I in our Creative Writing course Philippine Literature and Its Practice just finished discussing the essay "Playwriting in the Time of Exigency" by Rody Vera last week. In my syllabus, I often make a conscious effort to plot the reading and discussion of this essay around the same period of the Martial Law commemoration, and always it provokes the same urgent thoughts about writing, whatever mode/genre it is. Why do you write? Who do you write for? And where are you writing from?

In this essay, Vera shares his own journey of coming to love theater, what he "went through as a young impressionable, idealistic playwright during the years of the dictatorship . . . specifically around 1977 through 1985."[2] So I would like to borrow from this essay today as I share with you my own journey as a student of writing, in a way that responds to the theme of this talk, regarding becoming better storytellers in the time of exigency—referred to in Vera's essay as the Martial Law period and which I refer to now as our present, because the thing about the past is that it is always in contact with our present, and the weight of it is something we cannot ignore.

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[1] This was a talk delivered at "ML@52: Battling Disinformation by Becoming Better Storytellers," Escaler Hall, Ateneo de Manila University, September 27, 2024.

[2] Rody Vera, "Playwriting in the Time of Exigency," *Kritika Kultura* 14 (2010): 103, https://ajol.ateneo.edu/kk/articles/60/579.

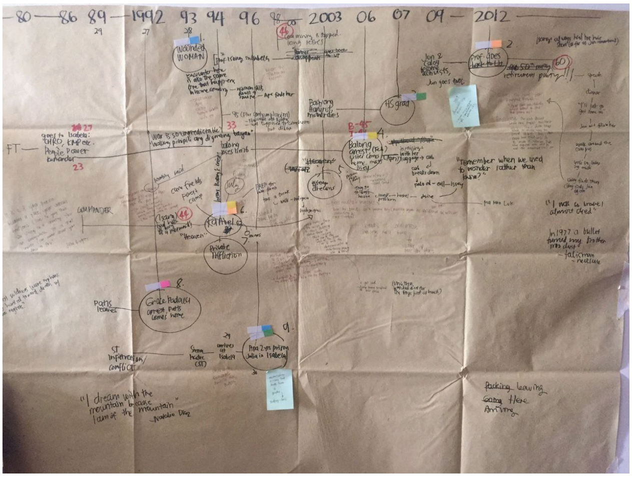
I would like to start by sharing a particular experience I had during one of my fiction workshop classes as a graduate student of creative writing in UP Diliman. In this class, we were tasked to write a story following the tradition of noir fiction, a mode I was unfamiliar with both as a writer and a reader. In my attempt to tackle this prompt, I decided to write a story set in the aftermath of martial law, about a woman named Julia coming back to the Philippines after news of her husband's arrest for the mass organizing he's doing in Isabela. My thinking was that even if I was unfamiliar with noir, at least I knew this material well. When I wrote the story, it was 2017, a year after we decried and protested the burial of Ferdinand Marcos Sr. at the Libingan ng mga Bayani. It felt natural to me to write about that time. I thought then, proudly, "Wow, look at me, writing about this topic! Look at me dabbling in the tradition of social realism!" I submitted my draft feeling very proud of what I had accomplished and looking forward to the workshop and the comments.

The workshop was brutal in a way that workshops in classrooms today aren't anymore, though we were different students back then as well. When my draft was returned to me at the end of the semester, it came with a note from my teacher that one hundred percent reset for me all my ideas/ideals about writing, particularly the genre of fiction. Let me read what it said: "Kaisa, writing about the martial law period, especially the underground movement entails a far greater responsibility than writing about any other historical period, which is in the remote past. The people that you portray are still alive and carry vivid memories of it with them. If this is your subject matter, you cannot take this responsibility lightly. You must do the research and immerse yourself in it with all your heart and mind."

Here was a teacher who took her student seriously, and therefore had that student take her writing seriously. I often find myself telling my students in our undergraduate fiction workshop classes, “This writing you do in the classroom is an academic exercise that you need to accomplish to get your degree.” Which I suppose is true, and I think is a necessary reminder for students some days, but I also acknowledge now that it simplifies the largeness of the task that a writer takes on as soon as he picks up a pen or opens a Google Doc.

And so it is humbling to return to this moment in the classroom I had as a student where my teacher saw in my “vile draft,” as we liked to call it back then, a writer who could be taking this writing thing seriously beyond the classroom and the demands of the course.

Because I really did take it seriously. I kept the note with me and what it told me, both as a challenge and a calling. I understood that I needed to step outside of myself and gain awareness of my environment, the political and social material history of the time I was writing about. I began asking questions: some were answered, some were difficult to talk about. I began going back—both metaphorically and literally—home. I even started to interrogate, alongside rereading historical events, my own personal past, and found out that these two are inextricably linked.


80
86
89
1992
93
94
96
2003
06
07
09
2012
Wounded WOMAN
1.
2.
Prof. does
60
retirement party
HS grad
4.
Balong arrest
5.
6.
Rafael
7.
Private Affliction
8.
Grace Padaca arrest, Patts comes home
9.
Papa 2 yrs prison Julia in Isabela
FT
goes to Isabela: CHRO, KMP etc.
People Power
COMMANDER
"War is so unpredictable"
"Heaven"
"remember when we used to wonder rather than know?"
"I was so brave I almost died"
In 1977 a bullet turned my brother into dust
falisman
necklace
Patts leaves
ST infiltration/conflict
"I dream with the mountain because I am of the mountain"
Natalie Diaz
~~Packing~~ leaving
~~Going~~ Here
Arriving

Draft of the working outline of the novel Isabela during its writing process
(Manila paper, 2020-2022)

My writing world expanded and then deepened. Suddenly, connections showed up between my very personal, almost insular story, and the larger, shared consciousness of my hometown, then my province, then the nation. The story I was writing was no longer just my own.

In my next workshop class, I found myself writing again about Martial Law, but this time, I was conscious of my characters, their story, and their reality—both attendant notions of reality, that of the constructed world in my fiction, and the real, historical moment I was writing in. This time, I wrote a story after the stories told to me by my father, told to him by his father, about the family's *talyer* (auto repair garage) and the *bodegero* (warehouse workers), all of whom implicitly benefited from the illegal logging enterprise in the Isabela region in the late 1980s. I dug around and found out that the repair garage was kept in business by friends of the Marcoses. Truck parts were sold by the truck drivers hired by a realty owned by friends of the Marcoses, who were being exposed by a particularly feisty newscaster, Grace Padaca. She would eventually run for governor of Isabela, would do two terms, and it was during Padaca's time in office that the biggest haul of illegal timber in the history of the Philippines was confiscated by the provincial government. This story I titled "First Love Never Dies," which was published in *Likhaan 16*, and would become part of my novel, *Isabela*. It is a story about two childhood friends meeting again, but it is also about collusion and complicity, debt and crimes grand and small.

In this story, Martial Law becomes an event that marks the end of "youngness" in the lives of the two characters, that sets the tone for what they will become in the future. The family of the female protagonist, Patis, along with all the other families linked to the Marcoses, leaves the country. When the friends meet again years later, they both realize how deeply they have been changed by their shared past. The male protagonist, Balong, tries to reckon with the truth that this girl—*now a woman*—in front of him is no longer the same child he played with years ago: "In the dimmed light of the hotel room, I looked at her, my friend from another life, glowing and washed out like an old, overexposed photo. Everything I had known about her, a life spanning a decade and a half, had melted away" (172). He realizes with a sobering kind of finality that that time in their life as children is over.

In writing the novel, I wanted my readers to see Martial Law as a story—a continuing story with consequences reaching several generations. Its violence is found even in our most private spaces and intimate relationships. Balong's loss is another version of this time period's impunity.

That's why I argue that one of, if not the best way, to remind Filipinos about and to make sense of what happened to them under Martial Law is through literature, particularly fiction, because fiction requires and creates a wholeness of human experience. These are real people who still carry the weight and burden of the violence they encountered in their past, as my teacher said in her note.

When I told my teacher about this talk, and how I'll be mentioning our workshop class seven years ago, to respond to the call for writers of my generation to become better storytellers, she very simply says, "Well, because it's not yet over."

And that's why events like this one, and courses like *Violence in Marcosian Fiction*, are important. In the same way that my own personal artistic and political awakening happened in the classroom, I hope yours also starts here. Or has already started. And that you are already furiously, urgently reading and writing about it.

Here are some texts that I consider not just important but also formative in the way that I approach writing about Martial Law. I have here two non-fiction texts, and three fiction titles:

1. *Agaw-Dilim, Agaw-Liwanag* (2009) by Lualhati Milan Abreu, a collection of essays details the life of a militant woman within the underground armed movement, who got incarcerated. The essays also document the resurgence of the national democratic movement in the 1960s, the rise of the underground armed struggle against the Marcos dictatorship in the 1970s, particularly in the Mindanao-Sulu region, and issues that plagued the movement in the 1980s, specifically what they referred to as “bangungot ng 1988.”

2. *Alternative Histories: Martial Law Novels as Counter-Memory* (2005) by Ruth Jordana Luna Pison, which in shorter than 200 pages, covers seven Martial Law novels that illustrate the concept of counter-memory. In the realm of literature, fighting against symbolic repression means recuperating what has been erased from our memories as a people, countering the established memory which has been imposed on our consciousness. The novels are *Dogeaters* by Jessica Hagedorn, *Twice Blessed* and *State of War* by Ninotchka Rosca, *Empire of Memory* by Eric Gamalinda, *Great Philippine Jungle Energy Café* by Alfred Yuson, *Cave and Shadows* by Nick Joaquin, and *Awaiting Trespass* by Linda Ty-Casper. Pison proposes that a re-reading of these novels will recognize their role in unsettling historical facts about Martial Law and Philippine history, and interrogate the constructedness of canonical historiography—“reading the novels as ‘counter-memory’ serves to refute the already accepted and hegemonic historical accounts of martial law and Philippine history.”[3]

3. *The Jupiter Effect* (2006) by Katrina Tuvera (and also I add here *The Collaborators* [2022]) is a novel that deals head on with the upheavals and compromises of a family during the Marcos years.

4. *America Is Not the Heart* (2018) by Elaine Castillo, which I was told I should read, by a panelist, during a workshop, because it also has characters and parts of their stories told in Isabela. This novel showed me a more creative approach to "intervening" or "re-telling" our history, and harnessing the most personal, therefore most stubborn and long-lasting ill effects of it.

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[3] Ruth Jordana Luna Pison, *Alternative Histories: Martial Law Novels as Counter Memory* (University of the Philippines Press, 2005), 16.

5. *In the Country* (2015) by Mia Alvar, a short story collection that gives voice to the exiles, emigrants, and wanderers of the Filipino diaspora. Its title story, a long short story that runs for 84 pages, starts in the year 1971 and ends in 1985, told in a non-linear, fragmented style, is itself an alternative history told intimately to us by a woman named Milagros (who was a nurse, a union member, lover, wife, then a mother), of how the events of this period in our nation's history affected her private life. It ends with a phone call. There's a revelation that is the most painful to hear for parents. I think you already know what I mean. We already have witnessed it happen, have heard about it happening, I pray we never experience it ourselves. Milagros's husband, Jim, lets go of the receiver. The story ends with Milagros crying, Jim on his knees on the floor, and the words: "as if the time for praying, or begging, had not yet passed."[4]

The evidence is this event itself and that we still read critically works written fifty years ago. Recently, a documentary about the enforced disappearance of Jonas Burgos, which happened seventeen years ago, was screened just a few days ago here on campus. Can we sit with that for a moment? Seventeen years later, and we are still searching. Fifty-two years later, and we are still searching for the truth. Why do we do this? Why do we continue? Quite simply because the time for urgent writing—and reading—has not yet passed. In fact, it is still ongoing.

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[4] Mia Alvar, *In the Country*, (Knopf, 2015), 301.

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Born in Ilagan, Isabela and based in Metro Manila, Philippines, Kaisa Aquino lives and works as a writer and educator. Her debut book, *Isabela: A Novel* (2024), was published by the Ateneo Press, and has been translated into Albanian and French. Her other writing has appeared in *Guernica Magazine*, *Perspectives in the Arts and Humanities Asia*, *Akda*, *Katipunan*, *Likhaan*, *The Best Asian Short Stories 2019*, and in *PA-LIWANAG (Translating Feminisms)*. She is currently a faculty member of the Ateneo de Manila University, and is one of the program coordinators of the Creative Writing Program under the Department of Fine Arts.