

# **philippine studies: historical and ethnographic viewpoints**

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

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## **Writing the Self and Exigencies of Survival: Autobiography as Catharsis and Commemoration**

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*Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints*  
vol. 66 no. 3 (2018): 301–34

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# Writing the Self and Exigencies of Survival Autobiography as Catharsis and Commemoration

This article discusses the autobiographies written by survivors of Ferdinand Marcos's martial law regime. Despite incarceration, torture, and the control of writing materials that sought to obliterate the self and the written word, political prisoners undertook great risks to record their lives. Interviews with these writers reveal the challenges that, years later, survivors faced in writing their experiences, resulting in the belatedness of autobiographical writing. But in writing and publishing their narratives these activists and political prisoners-turned-writers felt emotional catharsis and empowerment. The passing of their generation has made these survivors realize the acute need to preserve memories of martial law.

**KEYWORDS: MARCOS DICTATORSHIP • PRISON WRITING • AUTOBIOGRAPHY • MARTIAL LAW • HISTORICAL MEMORY • TRAUMA**

During commemorative activities held on 21 September 2014 to mark the forty-second anniversary of the declaration of martial law, I noticed a shirt worn by activists who were tortured and imprisoned during the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos. The shirt read, “I survived Martial Law—ML@40.” In wearing this shirt the activists not only became living proof of survival, but they also embodied their identity as survivors (cf. Schaffer and Smith 2004, 50).

In contrast to the word “victim,” the term *survivor* signifies having fought the atrocities of martial law and “suggests strength and a moral affinity to other kinds of survivors—of war, torture, the Holocaust” (Antze 1996, 9). Some of these “martial law survivors,” aged roughly from 60 to 80 years old, continue their advocacies as university professors, NGO workers, volunteers for cause-oriented groups, therapists, journalists, and writers. Others have remained in the mass movement. Writing and publishing autobiographical narratives about their experiences of martial law is one way for these survivors to construct their identities as such.

Philippe Lejeune (1989), one of the main theorists on autobiography, points out that referentiality and authenticity are the main criteria of autobiography. The “aim” of autobiography and biography “is not simple verisimilitude but resemblance to the truth” (ibid., 22). A thin line separates autobiography from fiction: autobiography differentiates itself from other literary genres through its truth-telling function (Eakin 2001, 115). The novel may also be autobiographical in the sense that it draws from actual events. It may reveal historical and political “truths” more freely using the “protective shield of fiction” (Schmitt 2010, 127).<sup>1</sup> The author of the novel may evade the consequences (such as libel) resulting from implicating people and exposing controversial events by invoking creative license and asserting the genre’s fictionality (Adams 2001, 66).

In this article, I limit my discussion to writers who explicitly proclaim their works as autobiographical precisely because they must face the challenges and consequences of declaring their works as factual—grounded in historical realities with volatile political implications. I focus on autobiographies of dissent, which assert the truthfulness of lived experiences through controversial and contested narratives that fall outside official history (such as those that deal with the inner workings of the underground movement) or challenge official history (as in testimonial writing). Those

written and/or published during the martial law period had to contend with censorship and military surveillance; those written decades after martial law are marked by the political tensions arising out of the schism in the Left.<sup>2</sup>

Although autobiography may be used for historical revisionism (one thinks of *Juan Ponce Enrile: A Memoir* [Enrile 2012]), I am not concerned with proving and disproving the truthfulness or accuracy of one’s work as some have done. For instance, studies have focused on the content of autobiographies and treat these works as historiography. Portia Reyes (2018) scrutinizes three collections of autobiographies written by multiple authors and set during the Marcos dictatorship—two anthologies, *Tibak Rising* (Llanes 2012) and *Not on Our Watch* (Maglipon 2012), and one family memoir, *Subversive Lives: A Family Memoir of the Marcos Years* (Quimpo and Quimpo 2012). In their respective autobiographies, Reyes maps the commonalities in the trajectories of the lives of these authors as well as the patterns in their narratives. She also writes on how these texts counter the prevailing discourse of that period and sees them as part of martial law historiography.

In this article, I study the textual production rather than the content of these texts. This focus sheds light on the challenges of writing about one’s life during the martial law period. It also analyzes the effects of such writing on the self. Through interviews with writers who have published full-length autobiographies as well as with activists and members of fact-finding missions, I explore the motivations and processes of writing and publication, by which one’s contested narrative of martial law is circulated to the reading public. Using a ground-up approach with these interviews as primary sources, this article examines the material conditions of writing during and after martial law. These autobiographical narratives may come in various forms such as letters, diaries, prison diaries, interviews, sketches, spiritual reflections, memoirs, family memoirs, testimonials, and autobiographical novels. The choice of genre is also affected by these material conditions.

Although these writers were all dissenters against martial law, their subjectivities and degrees of involvement differed. Moreover, most of them belong to the educated middle class given that they needed cultural capital and connections with the academe, the mass movement, NGOs, religious groups, and respected journalists to get their narratives published.

Among the writers, two are Mindanao-based members of religious orders: Redemptorist brother Carlito “Karl” Gaspar, who hails from Davao and was

a documenter of the Task Force Detainees of the Philippines (TFDP); and Italian missionary priest Peter Geremia of the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Mission (PIME), who was a target of the vigilantes for organizing work among ethnic minorities. Both have written diaries with strong religious themes that mostly document state persecution in prison (Gaspar) and in the countryside (Geremia). Gaspar's (1985) prison diary, *How Long? Prison Reflections of Karl Gaspar*, was published in 1985 before Marcos's downfall, while Geremia's (1986) diary, *Dreams and Bloodstains: The Diary of a Missioner in the Philippines*, was released after the end of the dictatorship in 1986.

Real-estate broker Thelma Arceo was not part of the national democratic movement but was sympathetic to it. Family and religion figured as strong themes in her spiritual reflections, *Recollections* (2013), as she reminisced about the life and sacrifice of her son Ferdie Arceo. A student of the Ateneo de Manila University, Ferdie went underground during martial law and was later killed in a military encounter in the Visayas.

Some writers had to survive not only state power but also the differences within the underground movement. They directed their criticisms not only against the government but also against the leadership of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). They wrote about how they faced internal contradictions in the midst of familial pressures and betrayal by party comrades. American professor Dolores Feria wrote for an underground newspaper and became disillusioned with the movement while in military detention, as revealed in her prison novel *Project Seahawk: The Barbed Wire Journal* (1993). Mila Aguilar, underground poet, belonged to the CPP's top leadership. She recounted her conversion as a born-again Christian in her autobiographical novel *The Nine Deaths of M* (Aguilar 2013). Most of the Quimpo siblings had different degrees of involvement and wrote about their misgivings in the movement following the Reaffirmist–Rejectionist split in *Subversive Lives* (Quimpo and Quimpo 2012; on the split, see note 2 below). Finally, Lualhati Abreu, a victim of the communist purges after martial law in 1988, nonetheless affirmed the necessity of party rectification and revolution in her testimonial *Agaw-Dilim, Agaw-Liwanag* (2009).

Telling one's life story was necessary for physical and emotional survival. These narrators evolved into survivors and writers. Tensions between secrecy and publicizing, writing and non-writing, belatedness and recognition, and life and death characterized their writing processes. Ultimately, these processes were marked by the paradoxes between the survival and destruction

of the self and the written word. Time—having too much or too little of it—was a crucial element that impelled them to write. Visions of the past and trajectories for the future informed the present conditions of writing, as these authors were cognizant of the personal and historical value of their memories.

### **Letters and Oral Testimonies: Trails and Destruction of Recording and Recorded Lives**

Under the conditions of martial law, the survival of the self came at the expense of the written word. Writing had to be suppressed, lest the writer be caught and obliterated. In the underground movement, one could not leave a trail for “the enemy” and keep a diary.<sup>3</sup> Martial law activist, writer, director, and critic Bonifacio Ilagan (2014) explained:

Alam mo, kung tama ako, kung ikaw ay nasa underground, you are not supposed to keep a diary at detailed recording of what you are doing. Kasi any moment pag nahuli ka at nahuli sa iyo yan ay patay ka. Kaya nga ang tendency namin noon nung nasa underground kami ang puwede sunugin sinusunog kaagad. Nothing na maiiwan just in case magkaroon ng raid, na mahuli walang mahuhuli sa katawan mo. Sinusunog lahat iyan. Nakakapanghinayang isipin, pero wala kang magagawa kasi iyan yung hinihingi ng sitwasyon. Anyone who is on the go, on the run ay walang maiiwan na trail. Kaya sunog lahat.

You know, if I am right, if you are in the underground, you are not supposed to keep a diary and detailed recording of what you are doing. Because if at any moment you got caught, or got caught with that, you are dead. That is why our tendency then as part of the underground was, whatever could be burned we burned immediately. Nothing that could be left was left behind in case there was a raid, and in case you got caught nothing would be found on your body. They are all burned. I shudder to think of it, but you couldn't do anything because that's what the situation called for. Anyone who is on the go, on the run, would not leave a trail. Hence, all are burned.

The impossibility of keeping a diary in the underground movement was due not only to self-censorship per se, but also to the demands of being

an activist. One moved from one safe house to another and was busy with waging the revolution. There was no time to write lengthily about one's life.

While the circumstances of underground life discouraged the writing of diaries, autobiographical narratives in the form of letters were circulated with much secrecy. Letters were carried at high risk for their tactical, practical, and emotional value. They were important sources of news to and from the mountains and gave instructions to families and comrades. Moreover, they conveyed messages of revolutionary hope and fervor. The guerrillas encouraged fellow comrades in the cities to wage the armed struggle, sustaining the life of the movement.

Letters were passed from the city to the countryside and vice-versa, through the *pasa-bilis* (literally, pass-fast) method. The courier would go down the mountains and, in the town market, meet an ally who would pass the letter to another ally in another town ad infinitum until it reached the recipient. However, the word "fast" (*bilis*) was a misnomer, since it could take months for the letter to be received.

The physical structure of these letters would make it easier for them to be hidden and destroyed. Thelma Arceo (2014) explained that her son Ferdie's letters from the countryside were "long, with very small handwriting. By this time, you would have very bad eyes reading it. And the folding is small. During that time, they would call it 'Chiclet,' so that if the courier was caught, he would put it in his mouth, chew, and swallow it.<sup>4</sup> It was their system of communication."

Compared to dying from the enemy's bullet, "eating paper" was a sacrifice that seemed innocuous, but not without its possible dangers. The written word could also endanger other lives, and one destroyed the word at the risk of one's own life. A former activist in the teachers' movement narrated how fellow comrades would hand her lists of members of the underground cell. As the soldiers were fast approaching the University of the Philippines Faculty Center, she would furtively memorize the names on the list and then chew and swallow the paper as if she were chewing gum: "At that time, I did not worry if I would get poisoned by the ink. Heaven knows, I ate a lot of paper during martial law" (*ibid.*).

In contrast to the secrecy of letter writing in the underground, fact-finding missions publicized oral testimonies to raise local and international awareness of those who had been imprisoned and tortured. The testimonies were either recorded and circulated overseas through Amnesty International

or sent to Ferdinand Marcos. The TFD<sup>5</sup> would also print them in newsletters, distribute them openly in churches, or display them on community bulletin boards.

Church workers, who spearheaded the TFD, were at the forefront of the human rights campaign. In a Catholic country, being a priest, nun, or a religious lay person would give an "illusion of immunity" from military harassment. Caring for the poor—including those from the militarized communities and political prisoners—was their pastoral mission. Ted (not his real name [2014]), a former political detainee, explained,

Sino ang lumalaban para sa mga tao at political detainees? Hindi puwede yung mga aktibista kasi nag-underground na. Yung ibang nag-underground, nakulong pa, naging pol-det na rin. Sino ang natitira? Eh di yung simbahan.

Who were fighting for the people and the political detainees? The activists couldn't because they had already gone underground. Others who went underground were sent to jail and became pol-det [political detainees] as well. Who were left? Well, the church.

Because these testimonies challenged the dictatorship and were subject to scrutiny, fact-finding missions had to be "professional[ized]" to maintain the accuracy of the report and the "truth-value of the testimony they collect[ed]" (Schaffer and Smith 2004, 36). A lay person and a TFD member in Mindanao during martial law, J (2014)<sup>6</sup> asserted, "There was a need to make sure that we have real facts, not just leaks of facts and you know imagination. So we're clear." The fact finder took on a journalist's work—to rein in a victim's free-flowing narrative into a concise report.

The townspeople would go to the church, or the fact-finding team would go to the communities. Then the respondents would "tell the story as freely as possible because that is the healing process. And then we cull out the basic facts" (*ibid.*). Additional training was necessary to get the facts straight: "We actually had a documentation skills workshop because we realized that when people tell stories, it's a flowing narrative. So we had to discipline ourselves and to have workshops where people would know 'who, what, why, when, where' and all the journalistic kind of skills" (*ibid.*). As J suggested, the preoccupation with facts in human rights reports, in their

very recording, would be done in a standardized format (cf. Schaffer and Smith 2004, 36–37). However, the telling and sharing of stories would lead to psychological healing, which would be further addressed by counseling sessions organized by the church.

Even if these testimonies were necessary for political lobbying and catharsis, there were times when they needed to be destroyed. While the church workers might have, according to J (2014), “a bit of leverage, since Marcos wanted to prove that he is a good Catholic,” the logic of fascism exempted no one. What could be an instrument of the people’s liberation would be incriminating evidence in the hands of the enemy. When warned of military raids, the human rights staff burned or buried these documents. Some of the voice tapes (recorded with much difficulty since the townspeople were wary of taped interviews) were placed in tin cans and then buried. After the raids, the staff would retrieve the tapes, now heavily damaged.

Erasure of the word also meant the erasure of the self. Fact finders and church workers became victims of military harassment. Forty soldiers raided J’s house. Some fact finders became political detainees themselves or, worse, *desaparecidos*.<sup>7</sup> Cruelly and ironically, the documenters became the documented in the end.

### Passages of Prison Writing

Found in the Bantayog ng mga Bayani (Monument of Heroes) museum in Quezon City is a replica of a prison cell. Measuring two-by-two meters, around fifteen inmates crowded this cell, which was meant for only two people. Gaspar (1985, 21–22) described this congestion succinctly in his prison diary:

Life in a military detention center is not very comfortable. Anyone in their right mind would never opt to live in a place like this! The rooms are limited to cells where the detainees are padlocked for most of their waking hours. The cells are small and congested, and there is hardly any privacy. The beds are primitive and occupy so much space that there is hardly any place to do physical exercise. Lucky are those who do yoga for they only need their bed! Because of the small space and very limited ventilation (only a small open hole near the ceiling), the cells are very warm and humid most of the day and early evening. The lights are inadequate and we don’t always have running water during the day. No matter how hard we try to

clean the cells, we cannot eliminate legions of ants, cockroaches, mosquitos, and even rats.

Within this small space, we eat our meals, do our laundry, read our books and newspapers, play the guitar, listen to the radio, write letters, pray, sleep, stare endlessly at the ceiling, explore ways to make community (no matter how artificial) and serve time.

Prison conditions varied: some activists were jailed together with the common criminals, while the high-ranking ones were put in solitary confinement. However, prison conditions during the latter part of the dictatorship became somewhat lax because local and international pressure was beginning to mount against Marcos.

Prisons—although cramped and filthy—could be transformed into spaces for writing. Incarceration might be deemed a “loss of freedom.” However, one gained the time to sit down, read, and write. In contrast, underground activists could not write because of their busy schedule and the secrecy of their work. As many political detainees ruefully reasoned, they could no longer be caught because they were already in prison (ibid., 173; Feria 1993, 180). Nonetheless, they had to creatively maneuver these spaces and deal with military surveillance. Obtaining books, writing materials, and documents in and out of prison required stealth and cunning.

Ironically, writing in prison, in order for it to be a solitary activity, required the cooperation of other people. Gaspar recalled that he created that space to write with the help of his cellmates, who allowed him to use a small table in a corner. To deter him from the noise, Gaspar wrote when his fellow inmates were sleeping—during their bedtime or before sunrise.<sup>8</sup> The space, although it could still be limiting, allowed him self-reflection, which informed his use of symbolism: “But actually, that space was very conducive to writing. There was something about being in that little space, with the little light coming in. You see only a shadow there, a sky, a piece of the sky. It was conducive to that kind of easy use of metaphors” (Gaspar 2014).

What was lacking in space made up for infinite time, and writing was done to pass away the time. Gaspar (ibid.) explained, “The only thing that you could do inside was read and write. And the rest is sleeping.” Time stretched on because of the uncertainty of being released: “I thought I would take advantage of the time because at that time we really didn’t know how long we will stay.”



Unlike Gaspar, Dolores Feria kept her diary secret. Her fellow inmates were wary and gossiped that she was writing a book, which, if the planted spies overheard it, would lead to the confiscation of her writing materials. To avoid suspicion, Feria (1993, 101) wrote at dawn and hid under the blankets on her upper bunk bed. Her writing had to be rushed, with no time for deep contemplation and refinement of expression. “Who invented that charming myth that great books can be written in prison?” she caustically remarked (ibid., 118).

Prison time was also used for reading since books were allowed inside. Gaspar (1985, 30) wrote in his diary, “When will we ever find the time to read all the books we want to read if not in prison?” Jose Maria Sison (2014), the CPP’s founding chair and Marcos’s top political prisoner during martial law, quipped, “I must have read hundreds of books, at the least 300 to 500. Maybe I finished a number of doctoral degrees.”

In Gaspar and Sison’s cases, books were allowed inside prison, subject to the screening of prison guards.<sup>9</sup> According to Gaspar, the prison guards were, at most, high school graduates who “don’t really know,” so the books would pass through easily. The books should not have titles with words charged with obvious subversive meanings such as “communism,” “Marxism,” and “rebels” nor should they contain photographs of such, even if the books were anticommunist (Gaspar 2014). In Sison’s case, it was only during the later years of his detention that he was permitted to have books. Yet, Sison was not allowed hardcover books, or he would sometimes wait for three to six months since the books would be inspected by prison authorities. Because he had specifically asked for law books for him to study law, he was denied law books as punishment. Sison (2014) had to read instead about twenty to thirty volumes on church history and the history of philosophy, and he read the bible several times.

Pen and paper were allowed and were brought in by visiting friends and relatives. At one point, the prisoners were given old typewriters,<sup>10</sup> which Gaspar (1985, 24) called “a luxury.” According to Sison (2014), “at a certain point, everybody got a pen and paper, especially if you have a lawyer. Pen and paper are necessary for your defense and the lawyer can insist to give you one.” Gaspar (2014) affirmed, “There never was a problem about the availability of pen and paper. But the problem was how to get the note out because they would read whatever is written here, like it’s a letter to another.”

Getting the writings in and out of prison required precision, as one calculated the timing, the political events “outside” prison, and even the disposition of the prison guards who one could befriend. Gaspar would offer coffee and cigarettes to the guards, converse with them, listen to their problems, and give them advice. However, the guards would be strict if “something has happened outside,” such as big rallies or prison escape. The writings would then go to the higher authorities, “the guy at the office who can really read” (ibid.). With the collusion of guards, Gaspar would send out his writings, which was limited to two pages and folded up in an envelope. Sison (2014) also used the same strategy: “What I do is to confuse the enemy. It all depends on the timing. Besides, I have nothing to tell from the inside in terms of violent criminal action. That is how the enemy thinks.” Because he was on solitary confinement (and, later on, partial solitary confinement), information was already contained in prison.

The other tactic was to smuggle the writings secretly through visitors and fellow inmates. The physical structure of the writing materials was important since they should be inconspicuous. Onion skin paper was ideal. According to Sison (ibid.), it was “light and soft” and easy to hide on his body or the small gaps of his cot. Everyday objects *inside* prison would also be transformed into writing materials, such as empty cigarette cartons and the white side of cigarette foils.

Through these notes circulating *within* prison, the prisoners were able to establish solidarity with one another—both through the subversive messages they contained and the clandestine way these notes were passed. The notes were passed underneath, hidden in shoes or folds of clothes, and were furtively handed to the next prisoner during formation or exercise period. If there was a railing that separated them from visitors or prisoners from other cells, the political detainees would throw the cigarette boxes or matchboxes with the messages hidden or written inside, which the intended recipient would casually pick up. The prisoners were able to coordinate and hold simultaneous protest actions like noise barrages and lightning rallies to demand for better prison conditions, much to the surprise of the prison guards (Simbulan 2014).<sup>11</sup>

These writing materials also informed the kinds of writing circulated within prison. According to Roland Simbulan (ibid.), a former detainee, the political detainees also produced underground newspapers on cigarette foils—complete with layout and editorial, but only one copy was produced

per issue—depicting prison life. The paper would also contain news from the outside that visitors would relay verbally. These external news reports then would provide material for discussion groups and continuing political education within prison.

From *outside* prison, visitors also passed notes hidden through everyday objects. During visitation on Sundays, the visitors folded paper into small pieces, wrapped them in plastic, and inserted them inside slits of fruits like watermelon or placed at the bottom of a pot of cooked rice.

Notes were also concealed within the body—hidden inside a wallet or carried innocuously through women. Both Sison and Gaspar were sparse with details. According to Gaspar (2014), the visiting nuns would bring in these writings. Since they were very well trusted, they were allowed to enter: “These nuns, they look so innocent, but they find a way to hide them. There are ways in folding.” Sison (2014) wrote close to the visit of his wife, Juliet de Lima-Sison, and passed his notes to her: “I don’t know whether you need to put that in detail. Whether it is a poem or a politically sensitive letter, there are things only a woman can do better than a man.”

What the men were hesitant to articulate, Dolores Feria (1993) wrote in full detail in her own prison diary. Writing at four in the morning while her fellow inmates were sleeping, she would transfer her notes written on five-by-twenty-centimeter “scraps of onion skin” paper to her “trusty bra” during exercise period (*ibid.*, 87). These notes in turn would be placed inside an empty biscuit can (*ibid.*, 118). But when she was ordered to move to another prison, it was difficult to transfer her notes:

I fell asleep with the greatest of difficulty, fretting for hours over and over one logistical problem: how to get these journal notes through the rigorous clearance inspection by a WAC, for we have watched many times the destructive thoroughness with which every scrap of harmless paper was ferreted out, every item of clothing held up like a flag-raising ceremony and then thrown back to be repacked in the inspector’s presence. As far as we knew, no woman in this unit had ever had a thorough body search. But an unusual bulge would elicit one on the double by an immediate request for WAC. How? How? (*ibid.*, 140)

The solution involved some self-reflexivity on Feria’s (*ibid.*) part, borrowing a practice in other prisons:

Only one way, if I am to believe all relevant prison literature, past or present. I swiped a Kotex pad<sup>12</sup> from Maureen’s open box and began operating on it. I knew she would not mind. . . .

I had solved my logistical problem with the diary in the only anatomical way possible, and I was not only nervous but extremely uncomfortable.

As discussed earlier, concessions by the prison guards, fellow inmates, and the “luxury” of time could enable the political prisoner to write. Nonetheless, having too much time could be an obstacle to writing. Being cramped in subhuman conditions with a variety of personalities in infinite and indefinite time could give rise to an uncontrollable ennui, “a lethal combination of boredom, frustration and despair [that] coalesce in the psyche of a detainee or a group of detainees simultaneously” (Gaspar 1985, 34), known as the prison *buryong*.

These physical conditions caused mental torture. *Buryong*, which made one feel trapped in an existentialist void, became an enemy. For Feria (1993, 188), it struck when someone was released from prison, and the others left behind just watched: “The sanguine performance that can be mustered in a matter of minutes when releases are announced contrasts with the hours that invariably follow: long, long silences alone in one’s curtained-off bunk in which abject depression descends like a thick fog. *Buryong* was the name of this special kind of despair.” This collective misery that caused irritability and paranoia could last up to a month. Gaspar (2014) admitted that *buryong* made him too lethargic to write:

It does affect writing. If you think because you have time, it will just flow. But you know I mean some people may be able to write it in their *buryong*. But not me, when I’m *buryong*, I can’t write. You’re really just left to reading and lying down, and just imagining things, or talking to people, or joining singing. It’s really an enemy.



You just feel this space, the constriction of the space. You know you're at your end and it gets frightening. I had moments when I thought I could die.

You really ask how far I can extend my patience. Especially the early part was no big deal. You know you're strong and you can do things and you're very excited about this new set up. Within a year, you're still okay. But it goes towards the end of the hearings in court. But especially after when the judge said I was not guilty, and therefore technically I should already be out of prison, and yet there was no assurance. Everything was not sure. That's why I wrote very little toward the end.

Everyday, you just know every day was a struggle to survive. You just get this sense you just want to be out. Out of there!

And then I also sensed it with my companions. We were in such a small space. And the capacity of each one to deal with it of course varies. And you really pity those that have very shallow capacity to deal with things. It gets scary. It can get scary there when you're inside.

Thus, the external conditions could give way to internal sufferings. For one who wrote to survive, torture finally boiled down to the self no longer being able to write.

### Writing to Live, Living to Write

Prison diaries and other writings managed to survive because they enabled the survival of the political detainee-turned-writer. On the exterior level, they demanded prison release. Prison writings had a practical and immediate purpose because they were used for human rights campaigns, which mounted local and international pressure on Marcos. Gaspar's smuggled letters and diary were printed as reports for Amnesty International and TFDP. Later, Claretian Publications<sup>13</sup> collected these prison writings and published *How Long? Prison Reflections of Karl Gaspar* in 1985. Since very few books that would challenge the dictatorship were published, his book was "selling like hotcakes" during that time, reaching third printing.

Prison writings portrayed the humanity of the detainee-writer, who was locked up unjustly in prison. It proved the inhumanity of the dictatorship. Gaspar (2014) explained, "A political prisoner becomes a symbol of a people that can be oppressed by the authoritarian state." The self became a living metaphor of the imprisonment of the whole country: prison diary "allegorizes the individual's imprisonment . . . relating personal and national detention" (Lovesey 1995, 32).

Prison writing also elevated the political prisoner as a person of letters. To counter the stigma of being a "common criminal" and illustrate one's integrity to the cause, one should write and publish.<sup>14</sup> The written word—especially poetry—had propaganda value to demand prison release, especially for top political prisoners who were high-ranking officers in the underground movement. Sison (2014), who also wrote prison poetry, clarified:

There is value intrinsic to the poems. It shows exploitation, oppression, how I was victimized. As it extends to other people, you might call that propaganda. And in the Philippines, poets are respected. Kasi kapag tinawag kang "komunista," kung ano-ano ipupukol sa iyo—kesyo mamamatay tao, magnanakaw [because if they called you "communist" they would call you anything—thief, murderer], etc., all the negative. They will see you as a common criminal. But then if you write poetry, you can't entirely be that bad.

Poetry has that effect of ennobling someone. Someone being dignified becomes ennobled by being able to write poetry. You don't have to be a poet—as long as you have a profession or someone who can write a novel or any prose book. Someone who can do that is a serious person and not a common criminal.

On the interior level, keeping a diary maintained the sanity of the detainee because writing established a daily routine and allowed self-reflection. Moreover, writing added to one's self-importance as a historian, given one's unique subject position as a detainee. Gaspar (2014, italics added) explained, "So, I knew now that I was already in prison, I was in a *privileged* position to write from inside. Because I was convinced already, but also people from the outside were really saying, 'let us know what has happened there.'"

For Feria (1993, 65–66), her writings did not need to be published or disseminated during her imprisonment. She reconstructed her prison notes into a book a decade after her release. She wrote in order to survive and chronicle history:

But tonight, I feel a special quiet on an interior level. I have reached a major resolve—to keep this prison diary, no matter what the cost. . . . The day will come when we will all be called liars although that is statistically impossible.

An even sadder time will come when this painful period in our history will be forgotten or piously diluted, like the 1950s, or the sufferings of Ka Amado Hernandez, a good and noble creature whose spirit was almost destroyed. Someone has to write these things down. God only knows how it will survive discovery. But it has to be. It will have to be written before sunrise, the only safe time.

While Feria wrote in order to survive, Lualhati Abreu struggled to survive in order to write. The *thought* of writing in the future fueled her will to live. Even if the early parts of *Agaw-Dilim*, *Agaw-Liwanag* (Abreu 2009) recounted her life as an activist during martial law, the main focus of her autobiography was her torture during the killings within the underground movement in the late 1980s.<sup>15</sup> While she was on hunger strike, her friend Romy convinced her to write her story as a testament to such horrors: “Someone has to write our experiences. The lessons from these mistakes shouldn’t be buried and forgotten. Do your best to live” (*Dapat may magsulat ng karanasan nating ito. Hindi dapat mailibing sa limot ang mga aral sa kamaliang ito. Sikapin mong mabuhay*) (ibid., 4). Seeing that living to write had more long-lasting gains than martyrdom, Abreu quit her hunger strike. Unfortunately, Romy was killed by his fellow comrades. Writing and publishing her autobiography after two decades was a fulfillment of this pact.

### **Belatedness and Writing in the Aftermath**

Shortly after Marcos’s downfall in 1986, the “democratic space” saw the proliferation of print and broadcast media that discussed topics such as mass movements, human rights, and other national issues, which were previously censored during the dictatorship (Manzanilla 2016, 8–9). Political prisoners,

especially celebrity cases, were able to recount their activist involvement and torture in interviews, articles, documentaries, forums, and conferences. However, only a few full-length autobiographies documenting resistance to martial law were published during this period. The long period of time needed to write resulted in the boom of autobiographical narratives thirty to forty years after the declaration of martial law.

Writing a sustained book-length narrative might take decades in the making. Even if one were a literary writer, one also juggled other responsibilities. One also needed to be emotionally prepared to write. Bonifacio Ilagan (2014) explained:

Siguro kung ikaw ay active participant sa underground movement at umalis ka na and you have all the time to write, still kailangan mo pa rin ng isang panahon for you to keep some distance to be able to collect your memories and mai-record.

Maybe if you were an active participant in the underground movement and you left, and you had all the time to write, still you need some time for you to keep some distance to be able to collect and record your memories.

Unlike prison writing that was written and circulated during the martial law period for the writer’s survival, *not writing* about one’s experiences of torture in the immediate aftermath could be a survival mechanism. Cathy Caruth (1995, 6) viewed this as a “paradox,” where “in trauma the greatest confrontation with reality may also occur as an absolute numbing to it, that immediacy, paradoxically enough, may take the form of belatedness.”

To illustrate, one torture survivor who worked as a trauma nurse in New York explained her trauma by linking it to the body. When wounded in a fight or accident, one does not feel the pain right away in order to fight back, flee, or seek help. In the same way, the emotional pain would not manifest right away in order for one’s life to normalize. She noticed the psychological impact of her torture when she migrated to the US a decade after martial law. The distance afforded by time and space eventually allowed her to heal.

The linguistic inchoateness due to trauma (cf. Gilmore 2001, 6) resulted in the belatedness in writing, which was further put off by practical considerations of making a living. To illustrate this point, Abreu and Susan

Quimpo, the youngest in a family of activists, relayed the internal and external hindrances in writing that resulted in their books' late publication.

The initial beginnings of *Subversive Lives: A Family Memoir of the Marcos Years* (Quimpo and Quimpo 2012) started as early as 1989, a few years after the end of the dictatorship. Susan Quimpo wrote the earlier essays about her family of activists as class requirements in Ohio University. She recalled that when writing those essays for a graduate class, "I would write two sentences and cry two days" (Quimpo 2014). She eventually entered these essays in literary contests, and they were published in prestigious literary magazines. Urged by her professors, she arranged her essays into chapters, which could eventually be a book prototype. However, she dropped her project in 1995 when she returned to the Philippines to work and raise a family.

With the encouragement of Vicente Rafael, a well-known professor of Philippine studies at the University of Washington in Seattle, Quimpo consolidated her manuscript with the essays of her siblings from 2005 to 2012 (Quimpo and Quimpo 2012, xvi). The most difficult part was the editing stage—to weave the free-flowing narratives of nine out of ten siblings into a coherent whole:

What happens is that my mother dies nine times, as told by nine siblings and the FQS was told four times. It was horrible! My dad dies again and again so this can't be. At the same time I toyed with the idea of making it into an anthology, but as an anthology it was horrible. I mean the poor reader has to go through the same. It is not an anthology. It has to be one narrative, written by nine authors. Could you imagine the horrors of that?

So I'd cut page 2 and 3 from Ryan's chapter I will put it to page 5 of Nathan's, page 10 and 11 from Norman and put it on that, and then rewrite everything eventually. (Quimpo 2014)

Abreu also wrote sporadically and with many failed attempts. Two months after surviving the communist purges in 1988, Abreu (2009, xv) tried to write when the events were fresh in her mind:

Pero hindi pa man ako nakakabuo ng pangungusap, basa na sa luha ang pahina ng notbuk. Nakailang notbuk ako—maliit, malaki, spring, refillable. Nag-yellow pad rin ako, baka ika umaliwalas ang aking pag-iisip.

I haven't even formed a single sentence, but the pages of my notebook are already wet with tears. I have already used up many notebooks—small, big, spring, refillable. I tried writing on a yellow pad, maybe my mind would be clearer.

A friend advised her to pause to clear her mind, so she abandoned her project for some time.

After ten years, new discoveries and historical developments related to the killings agitated her. These forced her to confront the past. She angrily finished her first manuscript within three months and showed it to another friend, who likewise advised, "Cool off, so that you won't be angry at yourself" (*Magpalamig ka muna para mawala yung galit mo sa sarili mo*) (Abreu 2014). She shelved her first manuscript for six years until she finally revised it in 2004. The second manuscript was eventually published in 2009.

Publication was delayed not only because of the belatedness in one's own writing but also because of the belatedness of others' recognition. Studies on trauma emphasized the need for a sympathetic listener to one's testimony (Caruth 1995; Felman and Laub 1991); the unwilling listener or reader hampered Abreu's writing progress. Moreover, discourse could affect the reception of the work. The reader needed to be prepared for such retellings; history might not be ready for such revelations. Her fellow comrades felt hesitant with her book, especially since it dealt with sensitive issues within the movement. One comrade did not read her manuscript:

Hinayaang mawala ang manuskrito sa gabundok na mga libro sa kanyang malaking bahay. Hindi raw siya magkalakas-loob na basahin ang sinulat ko. Baka raw mag-ala Pandora's Box. Takot siya sa maaring epekto sa kanya ng aking mga pagtatapat.

He allowed the manuscript to get lost in a mountain of books in his big house. He said he could not muster the courage to read what I wrote.

He said it might be a Pandora's Box. He was fearful of the possible effects on him of my revelations.

Another comrade commented, "It could be published but after about ten years" (*Maari daw ito mailathala makalipas ang mga sampung taon*) (Abreu 2009, xvi).

Abreu's fellow comrades might have interpreted her manuscript as an outburst of anger or were afraid of her disclosures of the movement. One of her close friends who read it even expressed pity, but Abreu (*ibid.*) retorted,

Salamat, pero ayoko ng awa. Ang gusto ko—at ang nararapat—ay matuto sa aming karanasan ang sinumang babasa: kadre man o masang aktibista, legal man o andergawnd, organisado man o simpatisador, o maging sinumang mamamayan na interesado sa kilusang rebolusyonaryo.

Thanks, but I don't want pity. What I want—and justly so—is for any reader to learn from our experiences: whether cadre or mass activist, legal or underground, organized or sympathizer, or anyone who may be interested in the revolutionary movement.

For Abreu, her intention was clear: for the future generation of activists to learn from her generation's mistakes.

Even those who wrote during martial law also needed time to face their writing and prepare for rewriting. Already in her fifties during her two-year imprisonment, Dolores Feria retired in Baguio, where she lived alone, painted, and did some crafts before she could tackle the diary again. Monica Feria (2014), her daughter, expounded, "She told me, when you get out of prison, you can't write right away. I think it took her about ten years before she could unroll the diary and come to terms with the experience, enough to write. That's the prison experience. I wouldn't use the word depression, because you have to put it in the context of imprisonment. All those who have been imprisoned know that." But when Dolores Feria finally had the courage to unroll the diary, she began working on it seriously and earnestly. She described coming to terms with her diary in terms of time—of that aspect of her past being over and of her own self as split and no longer the same as before:

In terms of clock time, the following pages occupy two years, two months and seventeen days, and were secretly removed from military camps on two-by-eight-inch scraps of folded onion skin. I found them painful to contemplate or decode until one strange morning, I found myself unfolding them like mad, a counterintelligence operative but without the frigid detachment. Clock time was over. These yellow slips were no longer mine, for our roles had now become chronic. (Feria 1993, 20)

The discovery of the finished manuscript had a strange parallel with death. After Dolores Feria died in 1992, Monica Feria (2014) recounted, "Her diary was already bundled up as a manuscript—two manuscripts and a message." Her friends published her prison diary posthumously in 1993. Even if the self no longer existed, her diary remained.

## Death and Reflections of Time

Despite the belatedness of writing, the awareness of one's own death could hasten writing and publication. Failing health prompted Abreu to finally finish her manuscript. Mila Aguilar (2013) ended her autobiographical novel *The Nine Deaths of M* to close unresolved issues: "I have written it for fifteen years. It is difficult because it is emotional. I think I was able to finish it only at the end of 2012 only because I have gotten over so many things already. And I was finally ready to die" (Aguilar 2014). She was diagnosed with cancer of the uterus a few months after completing the novel.

Retirement also made one reflect on one's own mortality. It gave one time to sit down and write—and to ponder one's running out of time. Numbers took on a special meaning as days were numbered and structured one's spiritual musings. Through these dates and numbers, Thelma Arceo (2014) comprehended her life: "My whole life, if I look back, I could say I lived a charmed life. Because everything that happened to me, whether happy or sad, falls on certain days so that brings a message to me. So that's probably why that also gives me strength, understand life, knowing that there is a plan for each of us." The meaningful dates and numbers were related to death, and her book *Recollections* (Arceo 2013) was about her spiritual reflections on the life of her son Ferdie Arceo, who died fighting the Marcos dictatorship at 21 years old. She has survived her son, and it was through his death that she remembered life. While alive, she made an imprint for the

living: “I’m 87 years old! If I don’t tell the story, who will, after I’m gone? I’m the only one who knows them” (Arceo 2013, iv).

Like Abreu, Arceo had no intention to write but was urged by her friend, former detainee Iting Isberto. To pressure herself to write, Arceo (ibid., iii) created deadlines that revolved around her husband and son’s death anniversaries. She wrote in her introduction to the book (ibid., iv): “There was no plan on format or length or subject—just recalling events as they came to my mind. Then as I started recalling it occurred to me that soon it will be July 29, 2013! What’s that? Ferdie’s fortieth death anniversary! Other thoughts came to mind—our family life, his childhood, good times, hard times—not just death!”

Despite these ideas of closure, finitude, and finality, writing could leave a mark of one’s life and was a way of achieving immortality, of living beyond death. Publishing ensured the continuity of these memories for the next generation, which could be as intimate as writing for one’s own children and grandchildren. Arceo (2014) mulled: “Maybe after I am gone, maybe my children will see or read it.”

What started as a personal activity became a social activity. Since 1986, Arceo has been advocating for the preservation of the memories of martial law through the Bantayog ng mga Bayani. She suggested that the families of the martial law martyrs record their memories. Arceo showed excerpts of her work as sample. Thus, this commemorative activity served not only to remember the dead, but also to enable the living to cope with the loss of their martyred loved ones and ensure that the atrocities during the Marcos dictatorship would not happen again.

Some writers have deliberately addressed their texts to an abstract future generation of readers. Autobiographies articulate a distinct moment in history and illustrate one’s unique personal circumstances. Susan Quimpo (2014) reminisces, “As activists, there were arguments at the dinner table in the house, very tense. At a very early stage, I knew it was something important. I really did not understand it much, but to see the actions in the streets and then see the same actions being brought into the home. I remember as a child, I said, someday I’m going to write about this.”

Explaining martial law for those who did not experience it in a language that was easy to understand was a conscious decision for Quimpo (ibid.): “I was thinking of the next generation in anyone, any American, any Indian, any Pakistani who can relate to the human experience to pick it up, and

resonate to at least parts of it.” She lamented that a lot of books on martial law and the underground movement were written primarily for other activists, with lingo that only they could understand. She asked her siblings to explain terms such as “line of march,” “red area,” and “white area,” and she arranged the book so that it would give readers some breather. “If the reader was reading about the ideology of Marx and how it was applied in the Philippine underground movement, the next one will be just about my mother because everyone has a mother. So that somehow if you do not finish the book you still have a sense of martial law as a human being,” added Quimpo (ibid.).

Writing took a long time because the writer needed the time and distance to be emotionally prepared to write and for readers to be ready to accept controversial narratives. But as also discussed in the next section, writing would have its cathartic effects after the writer had undergone this long and painful process.

### **Affirmation and Catharsis for the Accidental Writer**

Written words are valuable because of their reproducibility (Benjamin 1968). Unlike other artifacts such as paintings and crafts, texts can be kept and disseminated easily. They aid in the preservation of historical memory. Gaspar (2014) elucidates:

They have a value in society because human beings tend to forget. And how are we able to revisit the past if we don’t have the books? Because somehow the text of a book would sit there. And since it’s there, it’s in the library you can just pick it up, unlike other artifacts that may disappear or get damaged. They’re just so few that when the few are gone, then it’s lost. Whereas if you have 5000 of this book, even if 2000 have disappeared, you still have a few that you can retrieve. [It is a] way by which you record significant events even if the significant events really are out of the ordinary life of ordinary people, which in extraordinary circumstances like under the martial rule are really part of the ordinary because that’s the reality of how life is here.

With the desire to commemorate and record one’s memories, catharsis is made possible. Catharsis happens when these writers “convert their trauma into stories” (Kearney 2007, 60), thereby articulating what was once untellable. They feel empowered for they have written *in spite of* and *because of* martial law, when the material conditions made it difficult to do so during



the moment and even in the aftermath. Furthermore, the publication of one's narrative brings further emotional release as their trauma is transformed into a book—something tangible that can be shared with others.

Writing during the moment made Gaspar (2014) survive the dire prison conditions throughout the martial law period: "I thought that I was doing some healing by allowing myself to sort of express my emotions through writing. That's how I think I coped with pressure and stress." A missionary in Mindanao, Geremia wrote a diary for self-introspection, self-direction, and self-reflection as he witnessed extrajudicial killings. According to Geremia (2014), "one way to avoid the memories, the trauma become negative is by writing. It is like you're facing your own feelings in all of these."

The death and destruction that one felt during martial law can be transformed into a creative work that affirms life. Gaspar (2014) admits that his prison diary narrates experiences that "can cause grief and suffering and inconvenience and fatigue, and a life that is really not a good life. But despite all, it's like you're grabbing this animal by its horn. You know that you can grab it, hold it, and you can reverse it that something good can come out of it." Quimpo (2014), an art therapist by profession, knows the power of writing: "I will write about martial law, and I will do the therapy through the writing, and it will be great writing."

The catharsis from writing can affect one's health and disposition. Ilagan (2014) notes the positive effects of writing on Abreu, who he had known since their youth: "I think when she wrote and published the book, it was a big relief for her. She smiles often now. It's lighter to converse with her. Her personality became lighter. I think it was therapeutic for her" (*I think nung nasulat at lumabas yung libro naibsan siya ng malaki. Mas ngumingiti na siya. Mas magaang ang pakikipagusap. Gumagaan na siya. Palagay ko naging therapeutic sa kanya*).

However, for Sison (2014), the historical value of his prison poems and other writings outweighs their inward, emotional value, "I feel not so much emotional catharsis. It's a successful sharing with many people far beyond you. So it's a condemnation of what was evil, martial law, and also getting to know how we suffered and how we struggled." He points out that even if the trauma does linger—usually manifested in terrible nightmares—he tends to belittle his own torture even if he was Marcos's top political prisoner. His vision is more collective and transcends the individual, "What I experienced were experienced by so many other people" (ibid.).

Overcoming one's personal trauma can make one talk about historical trauma more objectively. Abreu is able to narrate her story sans the tears, but acknowledges that the pain remains. She writes, "I can already narrate it to anyone without crying, in an objective manner. But I can no longer erase it from my mind and feelings" (*Naikukuwento ko na ito kaninuman nang hindi lumuluha, sa obhektibong paraan. Pero hindi ko na ito maaalis sa aking isip at damdamin*) (Abreu 2009, xx). Susan Quimpo (2014) shares a quote from her psychologist friend, "You know you're done with the trauma if you can talk about something really terrible like you were just buying a new pair of shoes."

Through repeated storytelling and sharing, one is able to heal. Because of her book, Susan Quimpo has been invited to speak in high schools regarding martial law. Initially, she balked at the idea, but eventually accepted all invitations to speak: "I found it to be very liberating because the new challenge was to turn this story into a story that these young kids in high school or college can relate to as human beings" (Quimpo 2014).

Through the healing effects of writing, the writer becomes empowered as a survivor.<sup>16</sup> Through the public recognition and validation of publishing, the survivor becomes empowered as a writer. To rephrase an oft-quoted line from Shakespeare, some works are born to be published, some achieve publication, while others have publication thrust upon them.

These writers were surprised at themselves for publishing a book. They might have had prior training in technical writing, documentation, and research, but not in creative writing. Prior to his incarceration, Gaspar dabbled in campus journalism, but mainly described his work as "amateurish." Gaspar (2014) muses, "The idea of writing a book was just, you know, only the intelligent can do that, and we cannot reach them. (*Sila yan na matatalino na ang taas-taas na ng kanilang ginagawa*) [They who are so intelligent that lofty are their deeds.] Our generation was not made to feel empowered to write, especially a book that would be published. It was unthinkable. So I have never imagined that I would have books published later on in my life." In the same way, although Quimpo (2014) felt she "wasn't good enough" for the campus paper of the University of the Philippines, her professors and classmates in the US encouraged her to write since they found her life story during martial law interesting and relevant.

What started out as a simple sharing of memories suddenly thrust Arceo's diary into publication. She said,



I am not writing for anybody. I am just jotting down my own, because I had no plan of publishing. So there was no target, like I do this because this is rule number 1 of writing. No, I just wrote down. Maybe after I am gone, maybe my children will see it or read it. But it's just giving vent to my feeling at that moment. I will write not necessarily to be sent out to anyone. (Arceo 2014)

Incidentally, her friend Cynthia Lumbera showed the book prototype to her husband, National Artist for Literature Bienvenido Lumbera, who asserted that it should be published. The staff at the Bantayog ng mga Bayani then worked on its publication. Geremia (2014) likewise declared, "I had no intention to publish," but he showed his notebooks to award-winning journalist Sheila Coronel, who recommended parts of it to be published.

Publication as legitimizing one's story may have a positive effect on Abreu, who literary critic Gelacio Guillermo (2014) describes as "aggressive. Because she is threatened all the time. That is why she has to establish or publish her side." Abreu (2009, xv) echoes this observation in her first lines in *Agaw-Dilim, Agaw-Liwanag*:

Hindi pala biro ang magsulat ng ganitong prosa para sa isang nasanay sa paggawa ng mga ulat at sulating pananaliksik. At lalong mahirap kung ang nagsisikap sumulat ay may binabantayan sa likod at harap, may bagabag sa ulo't dibdib.

It is no joke to write prose such as this for someone who is used to writing reports and research documents. And it is more difficult if the one trying to write is on the lookout at the front and at the back, with her head and chest restless.

Abreu has stirred up many controversies in her writing and may have received some negative feedback even from among fellow activists. The threat of communist witch-hunting under the Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo administration in 2006<sup>17</sup> pushed Abreu to let her book vie for the prestigious University of the Philippines Centennial Literary Prize Award to "legalize" her narrative (Abreu 2014). Winning the prize and being published by the University of the Philippines Press had given her the confidence to write.

That which propels these survivors to write for the survival of the word and the self, for others, and for memory has boosted their confidence to write more books. After publishing *How Long?*, Gaspar has written five other books on the church, the tribal communities, and Mindanao. Similarly, Abreu has written a scholarly book on the Bangsamoro and is currently working on a biography of a revolutionary in Mindanao. Ilagan (2014) observes, "The book *Agaw-Dilim, Agaw-Liwanag* paved the way for Louie to be productive in writing. I think she is pursuing this preoccupation" (*Naging daan yung librong Agaw-Dilim, Agaw-Liwanag para si Louie ay maging productive sa pagsusulat. Sa tingin ko ito na yung tinatahak niyang preoccupation*).

However unintentional and accidental it may seem, publishing is made possible because these activists have connections with writers, journalists, editors, and human rights organizations. Gaspar (2014) declares, "The only reason why I can write is because I have a circle of friends who can edit." Nuns Helen Graham and Breda Noonan edited Gaspar's book, which was published by the Claretians, a Roman Catholic missionary and publishing congregation. In addition, Gaspar is a member of the TFDP, which has local and international connections like Amnesty International. Sheila Coronel encouraged Geremia to write. In addition, he had connections with the church and human rights groups based here and abroad. The Claretians also published his book. Vicente Rafael helped Susan Quimpo, whose brother, Nathan, is a professor at the University of Tsukuba in Japan. Arceo belongs to the same social circle with Bienvenido Lumbera, a former detainee and National Artist for Literature. She is also with Bantayog ng mga Bayani, whose staff works on the book. Activist, writer, and director Ilagan, a comrade of Abreu, edited her book.

Yet there are many more martial law survivors who cannot write because they are intimidated by the written word. Ilagan laments that the word and the self will not survive decades after martial law—people will die and bring their memories to the grave. He adds, "Well, I myself have not yet written anything about my experiences, what I went through. But I was always interviewed. But to sit down and write, I don't know" (Well, *ako na nga lang wala pa akong naisulat sa karanasan ko, sa pinagdaanan ko. Pero lagi akong nai-interview. Pero para umupo ako at sulatin, parang*, I don't know) (Ilagan 2014). As chair of the First Quarter Storm Movement (FQSM), an organization composed of martial law activists and former political detainees,

he feels that preserving the memories of martial law can be their greatest contribution to the movement: “The only thing that we can do and do with a difference is to write our experiences. Because no one else can do that but us” (ibid.).

Ilagan opines that oral history can be an alternative way of recording their life stories. He explains:

Sa totoo lang, kaya namin itinayo yung FQSM ay para ma-encourage namin yung mga miyembro na magsulat na, kasi isa-isa nang nangangamatay. Nasa edad na kami na mawawala na, konting-konti na lang. Ang naging problema namin sa organisasyon na iyan ay may mga panahon na wala na kaming ginawa kundi dumalo sa burol at dumalaw sa ospital. Sa FQSM hindi sila kumportable sa ideya na uupo sila at magsusulat ng article, intimidated sila kasi hindi sila writers. Kaya nag-decide na kami 'yung members namin, i-interviewhin na lang. Haharapan ng recorder para magkwento. So they will not anymore worry about their grammar. Kasi baka 'yun ang problema—written ito, tapos mali-mali ang aking grammar, di ba. Eh di wala nang problema.

But really, we established FQSM in order to encourage our members to write already, because we are dying one by one. We are of that age when we will be gone and there are only a few of us. The problem in our organization was that there were times when we did nothing but attend wakes and pay hospital visits. The members of FQSM are not comfortable with the idea of having to sit down and write an article; they are intimidated because they are not writers. That is why we decided that our members will just be interviewed. We will place a recorder before them so that they will narrate their story. So they will no longer worry about their grammar. Because perhaps that is the problem—this is written but then my grammar would be ridden with errors, wouldn't it? So, there would be no more problem. (ibid.)

If indeed many obstacles have had to be overcome in writing, more so in publishing. Hopefully, the word will continue to survive and outlive the writer. By opening up alternative modes of narrating their stories—whether oral or verbal—these martial law survivors are able to achieve the

therapeutic effects of telling one's own life story for the future generation to know. Ultimately, the fear of the written word may be the threat to its own survival.

## Conclusion

The material conditions and processes of writing is a point of departure that informs my discussion of the texts. Knowing the story behind the text would make one appreciate autobiography during the time of the dictatorship. One realizes the challenges of revealing the self in autobiography, given the censorship and military surveillance that prevailed during the period.

Writing is inextricably linked to the survival and continuation of personal and historical memory. The interplay between the forces of creation and annihilation, life and death characterizes the making of the book: the survival and destruction of the written word is inevitably linked to the survival and destruction of the self.

Amid the constraints of martial law, the writers recounted the creative ways in which they had evaded military surveillance and censorship. They created spaces to write in their cramped prison cells and smuggled their prison notes. These underground activists and fact-finding documenters elaborated on the great risks they took in recording their lives to the point that they had to destroy their notes for their selves to survive. Prison diaries were published and circulated abroad to demand the release of notable political detainees during martial law. But most of the writers explain the difficulties in coming to terms with their experiences and their need to have the “time and distance” to overcome their emotions and write. Hence most of these autobiographies were written and published decades after the dictatorship.

Writing about the dictatorship had profound effects within the self, as these activists and political prisoners-turned-writers felt emotional catharsis as well as empowerment in the discovery that they could write and publish. In so doing, they preserved their memories of the dictatorship and demanded historical justice for the victims of martial law.

## Notes

*This article is a revised version of a paper originally presented at “The Remains of a Dictatorship: An International Conference on the Philippines under Marcos,” held on 3-4 August 2017 at Novotel Manila, Quezon City, organized by this journal.*

- 1 See, for example, the debates surrounding Mario Miclat's (2010) *Secrets of the Eighteen Mansions*.
- 2 The irreconcilable differences in political ideology and tactics caused the division of the Left into two camps, a split formalized in the 1990s. On the one hand, the “reaffirmists” or RA are those who uphold the basic tenets of Marxist-Leninist and Mao Zedong thought and the necessity of armed struggle in the countryside. On the other hand, the “rejectionists” or RJ are those who deny these principles and disagree with the class analysis of the Philippines as a semifeudal and semicolonial society.
- 3 Mila Aguilar (2013, loc. 3113) recounted that underground activist Boy Morales's diary, which was seized by the military, was “so detailed and day-to-day that he could not help sign the confession.” During the Cultural Revolution in China, Mario Miclat (2010, 252) cautioned his wife not to keep a diary “lest we be accused of spying.” However, labor leader and guerrilla Cesar Lacara wrote his memoir *Sa Tungki ng Ilong ng Kaaway* while in the underground, but did not divulge many names or personal information.
- 4 Chiclet is the brand name of a white-colored chewing gum measuring one-by-one centimeter. Regarding underground letters and their transmission, Ninotchka Rosca (2016) writes, “You drop the vowels, turn “ako” to Q, write “sunog” (fire) to convey someone's arrest. You write on a tiny piece of paper or on the white side of a cigarette pack foil and fold it to the size of a chiclet. Thus did the message of the resistance against the dictatorship fly from one island to the next, all 7,100 of them. If/when you're caught by the military or police or para-military agents, you swallow the chiclet, like a communion host—because it is trust; it is love, and it is hope. Years later, you see the crude code re-surface as the language of texting.”
- 5 The Task Force Detainees of the Philippines (TFDP) was established by the Association of Major Religious Superiors of the Philippines (AMRSP) in 1974, two years after the declaration of martial law. Its mission was to provide legal assistance and document the cases of political prisoners and other victims of human rights violations. It also gave them physical, emotional, and spiritual support.
- 6 This person's real name is not used.
- 7 A Spanish word, literally translated as “disappeared.” It means a victim of enforced political disappearances.
- 8 Like Gaspar, another political detainee who I interviewed said, “You have the luxury of time inside prison. It is like a seminary.” He wrote during the evening when it was quiet. Or, when his fellow inmates were outside at the prison courtyard playing basketball, he was left writing inside the room.
- 9 Gaspar was arrested three times. First, on 23 Sept. 1992, on the day of the declaration of martial law, he was placed under house arrest for three months. The second arrest lasted overnight. The third arrest, in 1983, lasted for twenty-two months. During his third arrest he wrote what would eventually be collected in *How Long?* Out of more than eight years of imprisonment, Sison spent more than five years in solitary confinement. The remaining years were in partial isolation, when

he could share the same cell with his wife, Julie de Lima-Sison, and meet other prisoners in a yard. Sison narrated that he had no writing materials and books for two years. He was given the bible and Marcos's *Revolution and Democracy* later on. After the assassination of Benigno Aquino Jr., he was allowed reading materials. He described his captors and custodians as becoming lax after 1983. Sometimes he was able to get hold of restricted documents such as the interagency discussions of the US on how to handle Marcos. These materials were passed on through Julie after she was released from prison.

- 10 Having a typewriter affected the writing of Sison's poems, since the sound of the typewriter made him more conscious of the poems' measure and rhythm. He explained, “When I didn't have a typewriter, I didn't know the measure of the words. It is in the rhythm. My poems are not so much more on the counting, but on the rhythm. I memorize the poem until I fall asleep. By repeating and memorizing, you preserve the poem until you are given paper.” He added that memorizing poems and plots of novels was a technique used by writers in prison.
- 11 Even in prison, the political detainees formed collectives, called “chow groups.” They were grouped together during meal times and were scheduled to cook during assigned days. Aside from eating and cooking together, they also held educational discussions on Marxism, Leninism, and Mao Zedong thought and talked about the current issues of the day. Simbulan (2014) observed, “Detention is like a school—a revolutionary school, a political school. Because one would be with very committed people with a lot of experience.” He further explained that the integration and political education could be more intense inside than outside prison. For instance, first-time student activists would be mixed with veteran activists—some who even went underground—for 24 hours.
- 12 Kotex is a popular brand of feminine sanitary napkin.
- 13 Claretian Publications is the publication arm of the Claretian Missionaries of the Philippines from the Roman Catholic Church. During that time, they published books on liberation theology. Gaspar explained that in publishing his book the Claretians took a “calculated risk.” After Benigno Simeon “Ninoy” Aquino Jr.'s assassination, the political climate was not as repressive. The book was openly launched, sold, and written about in newspaper columns.
- 14 Although there were a number of writers and artists imprisoned during martial law, writing alone—especially literary works like poems, plays, short stories, and songs—could not be a ground for imprisonment unless one was a well-known journalist who exposed the abuses of the Marcoses. One was jailed because of one's activist involvement, not because of one's writing. For those who wrote protest literature during martial law, there was no separation between community organizing and writing, for both were one's revolutionary tasks.
- 15 From 1985 to 1986 the CPP launched an anti-infiltration campaign in Mindanao known as the *Kampanyang Ahas* or KAHOS. It included tortures and killings of suspected undercover military agents in the CPP and its armed wing, the New People's Army. Other anti-infiltration campaigns were the Oplan Missing Link in Southern Tagalog in 1988 and Olympia in Manila around the same time.
- 16 This whole process illustrated what Dori Laub (2009, 139) wrote: “Testimony is not a ready-made text. It emerges from a process that is set in motion in a place that provides safety through the presence of the listener (interviewer) for the witness (interviewee). Once the survivors start the mental journey into their past, once they look inside themselves in the presence of an attuned listener, testimony assumes a life of its own. It is unpredictable which memories will

come alive and what narrative gestalt will eventually emerge. Indeed, many survivors have voiced astonishment toward the end of their testimony because they did not expect to be able to say so much. They seem surprised by themselves and what came to their minds during their interviews. In that respect, testimony is a new experience to them: the testimonial process does not only take the survivors back to the horror and sadness they encountered. It engages them in claiming a story of their own which holds together the fragments of their memory."

- 17 Pres. Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo placed the entire country under a State of Emergency through Proclamation 1017, dated 24 Feb. 2006, following a supposedly thwarted coup d'etat that coincided with the twentieth anniversary of the 1986 People Power Revolution. The government claimed that there was a conspiracy within the disgruntled military and the Left to overthrow her administration. This was because of her declining popularity due to impeachable offenses such as the "Hello Garci" scandal, which gave evidence that she cheated in the presidential elections. Rallies were declared illegal and warrantless arrests were allowed. Even if the emergency powers were lifted after seven days, human rights violations and extrajudicial killings continued during her administration (*Philippine Daily Inquirer* 2016, A20).

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