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Book review: The Singing Detainee and the Librarian with One Book: Essays on Exile (2023) by Michael Beltran

As founding chairperson of the reestablished Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) in 1968, Jose Maria Sison's life is inscribed in the revolution. He penned tracts on the history of the CPP, prospects of the National Democratic revolution and international solidarity building. However, his life story is mainly told in the interview format to show the foremost Filipino revolutionary answering questions to an interested reader. Interspersed with political analysis regarding the Philippine semi-feudal and semi-colonial state, he narrates his ancestry from the landed elite in Ilocos Sur, political awakenings and student activism in the University of the Philippines, rebuilding of the movement, torture and arrest during Martial Law, and exile in the Netherlands after the 1986 EDSA Revolution. *The Philippine Revolution: The Leader's View* (with Rainer Werning, 1989) was released shortly after his release from prison in 1986 and exile in the Netherlands in 1988, while *Jose Maria Sison: At Home in the World, Portrait of a Revolutionary (Conversations with Ninotchka Rosca, 2004)* was written after the American and Dutch governments put him under the "terrorist" watchlist in 2002.

Michael Beltran wrote *The Singing Detainee and the Librarian with One Book: Essays on Exile* as a biography on Jose Maria Sison, and was released a year after his death in 2022. Different from the interviews with

Werning and Rosca, we see much of Sison's personality from a biographer—a third-person participant observer who has integrated within the community of political exiles in Utrecht. And since most of the narrative is written in the first person, we also hear Beltran's voice as he captures the voices of his interviewees.

In *The Singing Detainee* (2023), Sison, now an octogenarian, is still in the thick of political activity in leading the resumption of the Government of the Philippines (GRP)-National Democratic Front (NDF) Peace talks in Norway, building international solidarity, and exchanging spats with then President Rodrigo Duterte. Beltran not only acts as an intermediary like the earlier interviews, but paints a layered dimension of the struggle. His smooth novelistic techniques with a combination of narration and description gives a more human portrayal of Sison. Beltran captures Sison's speech through dialogues in conversational Taglish (a mix of English and Filipino), different from the terse and serious tone in Werning's and Rosca's interviews.

Even as much of the book is about Sison, Sison does not take centerstage. His life is intertwined with myriad characters that encompass not only the political exiles from the CPP-NDF (constituents of the so-called "Barangay Utrecht"), but also Filipino expats and undocumented migrant workers (going by the moniker "undocs"), Dutch human rights activists, and fellow asylum seekers from conflict-laden places such as the Kurds and the Turks. By putting in all of these diverse personalities, the book conveys that the NDF—even as it addresses the roots of armed conflict in the Philippines—also continues with political organizing among Filipino and international diasporic communities in the Netherlands. The nondescript NDF office on Amsterdamstraatweg, Utrecht comes alive as a hub of both social and political activity where these characters gravitate to build international solidarity.

Through the book's strategic chaptering, one appreciates the totality of the struggle. The NDF is usually associated with Joma and Julie Sison, and Louie Jalandoni and Coni Ledesma. Though numerous writings detail their lives and contributions, the book illustrates how these "power couples" work not only as spouses, but also as comrades in the revolution with their own contradictory traits complementing each other—rambunctious Joma contrasts with the milder Julie, while gregarious Coni stands opposite to the more reserved Louie.

The book also devotes chapters to political exiles who may be minor players compared to the towering figureheads of the CPP and the NDF, but whose contributions in political organizing in the Netherlands are as important. Their names are couched in pseudonyms for security reasons and may not be immortalized in the same manner as the Sisons and the Jalandonis. Nonetheless, their life stories point to varying circumstances of their exile. Dennis, the NDF office staff and Sison's security "sentinel", had to endure the bureaucracies of asylum procedures and the challenges of staying in refugee camps with his young children. After being accused of plotting the Plaza Miranda bombing in 1971, Gillian Jane Perez was forced to prolong her three-week long study tour in China to ten years before seeking asylum in the Netherlands. Through her first-hand experiences, the readers learn about the gains of socialism under Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution in China, such as the promotion of women's equality and the advantages of collective work in mechanical and agrarian production. Finally, Luningning, housecleaner and cultural activist among various migrant communities, found herself in exile with her family after escaping the bloody extrajudicial killings in Mindoro under the orders of General Jovito Palparan in the 2000s. This shows that political repression continues even in the succeeding Philippine presidencies. Even decades after Martial Law, asylum seekers targeted by state persecution still find their way to Utrecht.

Inevitably, no book on Sison will be complete without accounts on the formation of the National Democratic movement. Told in the present day discourse of the Duterte and Marcos Jr. presidencies, the past is told with lighthearted candidness different from the usual serious textbook-style narrative. In Sison's recollections, Bernabe "Kumander Dante" Buscayno goes by the alias "Payat", thereby relegating a touch of familiarity to the otherwise legendary founder of the New People's Army. These small details and approximations of dialogue make the book read like a thrilling spy novel. Specifically, one could marvel at Louie Jalandoni's escape towards Europe with the help of foreign missionaries. A high-profile figure on the Philippine wanted list, his passage posed a challenge. Before the invention of the computer program Photoshop, the photographer took 120 shots for his passport photograph, adding slight modifications on his face to alter his image.

Part of the Cold War logic and propaganda, Sison is demonized as a communist. Portrayed as enjoying the luxuries of European living, Sison is often denigrated for his love for parties, discos and karaoke. The book tries to dispel myths of this "carefree lifestyle" not by denying it nor by being defensive about it. Rather, Beltran contextualizes this as a way to

integrate with the Filipino migrant community. Moreover, it is through these community gatherings that Sison becomes accepted as a normal human being. Beltran gets insights from a “Duterte Diehard Supporter” (DDS) in the Netherlands who sees Sison as a grandfather, no different from any other ordinary Filipino.

Just as Beltran humanizes the revolutionaries in exile, he offers a balanced view towards those with contrary viewpoints. Particularly, Beltran devotes a chapter on the Trotskyite Alex de Jong, who remains highly critical of the National Democratic movement in the Philippines. This may break stereotypes for readers with a National Democratic inclination since Beltran not only airs de Jong’s differing views, but also portrays him as a young handsome man that may differ from the menacing appearance one may expect from a revisionist. Hence, Beltran does not give a one-dimensional portrayal of those opposed to the National Democratic revolution—whether they be the DDS or Trotskyites—but rather situates them within their own circumstances. The “enemy” (a term that revolutionaries are wont to use) are not the DDS nor the revisionists, but rather the “-isms” that the National Democratic revolution fights against: imperialism, feudalism, bureaucrat capitalism—and yes, revisionism.

The book is timely in its release since it captures Sison’s last years of his life. Now that the biographical Sison is but a legacy, this book is a good way to remember him. This book testifies that though in exile, he never left the Philippine struggle and continued in his work in building proletarian international solidarity up until the very end.