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Book Review: Women Against Marcos: Stories of Filipino and Filipino American Women Who Fought a Dictator

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Women Against Marcos: Stories of Filipino and Filipino American Women Who Fought a Dictator. Mila De Guzman. San Francisco: Carayan Press, 2016. xv + 199 pp. ISBN: 0996469427. Paper.

When conducting my fieldwork on the anti-martial law movement in 2016–2017, activists often repeated the words of Spanish philosopher George Santayana, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”¹ Author and former anti-martial law activist, Mila De Guzman, begins her book with Santayana’s words and its resonance with contemporary Philippine politics. Published in 2016, the year the late Ferdinand E. Marcos was buried in the Libingan ng mga Bayani and Rodrigo Duterte became president, *Women Against Marcos: Stories of Filipino and Filipino American Women Who Fought a Dictator*, is an urgent and sobering read for Filipinx scholars, students, activists, and community members who seek to understand a critical and very personal account of the Marcos years.

Women Against Marcos is based on De Guzman’s interviews with six Filipino and Filipino American women activists, with the activists taking part in much of the writing and editing of their narratives. Together, their stories assert De Guzman’s claim that, “Despite the exigencies of fighting a dictator, [Filipino and Filipino American women] asserted women’s empowerment and opposed patriarchy within the anti-dictatorship movement” (De Guzman xiii). Given the increased academic interest in martial law and the publication of other activist narratives, such as the KDP memoir, *A Time to Rise*, and Jose V. Fuentecilla’s *Fighting from a Distance*, De Guzman’s focus on women’s stories and feminist politics fills a crucial gap in the literature on martial law and Filipinx diasporic activism.² Moreover, De Guzman puts Filipino and Filipino American women in conversation with one another, thereby emphasizing the transnational component of the anti-martial law movement.

The activists are well-known feminists and community leaders in the Philippines and the United States: Mila Aguilar, Geline Avila, Aurora “Oyie” Javate De Dios, Cindy Domingo, Sister Mary John Mananzan, and Aida Santos, with De Guzman and her sister, Viol De Guzman, contributing to the epilogue and introductions to each section. Organized chronologically and thematically, the first three-fourths of the book are focused on the Marcos years, starting with the First Quarter Storm and ending with the People Power Revolution, and the last fourth of the book is an epilogue of the activists’ lives, post-Marcos. Each activist is featured in several sections, and all are part of the epilogue.

The first two sections, “First Quarter Storm” and “Declaration of Martial Law” trace the political awakening of Aurora “Oyie” Javate De Dios and Geline Avila. Both started as student activists in the National Democratic (ND) Movement, a mass movement of left and progressive organizations dedicated to ending the “three basic problems” of Philippine society: imperialism, bureaucrat capitalism, and feudal-

ism, and building a genuinely sovereign nation-state with a socialist perspective. De Dios joined Kabataang Makabayan, the ND youth and student organization founded in 1964, while Avila joined the more liberal Samahang Demokratiko ng Kabataan (SDK). Both describe the upsurge of protests against the Vietnam War, U.S. military bases in the Philippines, and Marcos's attacks on civil liberties, particularly his suspension of the writ of habeas corpus. When Marcos's political repression culminated with the declaration of martial law in 1972, De Dios and Avila vividly recount their own fears as they and their comrades went underground. De Dios ends her chapter with her steadfast commitment to the movement, but Avila's chapter ends with uncertainty. After being arrested and her two-day detention, her family urged her to move to the U.S. for her safety.

The next two sections, "Filipino Women Organizing in the Philippines" and "Filipino American Women Organizing in the U.S." illustrate the personal and political struggles of being a woman in the anti-dictatorship movement. As UG (underground) activists, De Dios and her husband constantly evaded the military, and they ended up moving twenty times in three years. Mila Aguilar ascended to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), while coping with separation from her newborn son. Her mother became her son's primary caretaker, given Aguilar's political work. Sister Mary John Mananzan describes her "baptism of fire" as her participation in a workers strike in Tondo, Manila, and seeing the need for structural socioeconomic change. Aida Santos discusses in harrowing detail her arrest and undergoing psychological torture and sexual violence at Camp Crame. Meanwhile in the U.S., the narrative returns to Avila and her leadership in KDP, specifically coordinating nation-wide protests of Marcos's state visit to the U.S. in 1981. Cindy Domingo's story is intertwined with the assassinations of Gene Viernes and her brother, Silme Domingo, who were both KDP members and labor leaders in ILWU's Local 37 in Seattle.

The last two sections, "People Power Revolution" and "Epilogue," show that these women's commitment to social justice continued beyond Marcos's ouster. De Guzman and Mananzan explain the political unities that made People Power possible. The assassination of Senator Ninoy Aquino added fire to the anti-dictatorship movement and catalyzed a snap election. Though the CPP and National Democratic Front (NDF) leadership were notably absent from the election, Mananzan defends the movement as it led decades of organizing. For Domingo, the aftermath of People Power helped the Committee for Justice for Domingo and Viernes (CJDV) find allies in the Cory Aquino administration, which found evidence that linked Marcos to the Domingo and Viernes assassinations. The epilogue shows how these women have remained politically active. Some helped to found feminist organizations, such as GABRIELA and KALAYAAN, some became educators, and others turned to issues such as typhoon relief. The epilogue gives a sense of "no regrets." The anti-dictatorship movement

made them lifelong activists, and service to the people is as much a spiritual calling as it is a political commitment.

As a narrative, *Women Against Marcos*, has several distinct characteristics. First, the tone; the contributors write very candidly about their experiences, and there is no romanticization of political activism. They reveal the grim realities of being underground, surviving political detention, and witnessing tragic losses at the hands of the state. I caught myself reading with bated breath and feeling the tension of each story building with each page. Second, family (both biological and chosen) was a prominent theme. The support or lack thereof from parents and siblings often catalyzed one's involvement in the movement. Several women discuss long separations from their husbands and children, with some marriages ending. However, in the epilogue they proudly note their children's growing appreciation of their activism. Third, many activists critiqued gender relations in the anti-dictatorship movement and Philippine society writ large. The movement was progressive in some respects (e.g. male activists were expected to perform reproductive labor), but Aguilar critiques that women's liberation remained a "secondary" contradiction, while national democracy was the "primary." As they became feminists, activists drew connections between state violence and patriarchal violence in the home, and thus, many became dedicated to women's issues in the post-Marcos years.

Building off De Guzman's interpretation of Santayana, martial law continues to haunt the Philippines and its diaspora. *Women Against Marcos*, therefore, is an important and urgent read now, as the Duterte administration has echoed and built upon the repressive policies of Marcos: the declaration of martial law in Mindanao in 2017, the shut-down of ABS-CBN, the war on drugs, and the Anti-Terror Law. To heed the call, "Never again to martial law," *Women Against Marcos* asks us to listen to the stories of anti-martial law activists as we collectively confront fascism and imperialism in the Philippines.

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