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E. San Juan Jr.

**Ambil: Mga Pagsubok,
Pahiwatig & Interbensiyon**

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Ambil: Mga Pagsubok, Pahiwatig & Interbensiyon

Storrs, CT: Philippines Cultural Studies Center, 2014. 38 pages.

Known mainly for his dozens of books of criticism written in English, E. San Juan Jr. is also a prolific poet in Filipino, and *Ambil: Mga Pagsubok, Pahiwatig & Interbensiyon* marks his continued engagement with Philippine literature through Filipino poetry. *Ambil* continues the politically engaged and formally experimental poems found in his earlier collections like *Kung Ikaw ay Inaapi, Bakit Hindi Ka Magbalikwas?* (Makibaka Publications, 1984), *Alay sa Paglikha ng Bukang-Liwayway* (Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2000), *Bukas, May-nilad!* (Philippines Cultural Studies Center, 2009), *Pananambitan, Parangal, Alay kay Cherith: Piniling mga Tula* (Philippines Cultural Studies Center, 2010), *Ulikba at Iba pang Bagong Tula* (University of Santo Tomas Publishing House, 2013), and *Kundiman sa Gitna ng Karimlan* (University of the Philippines Press, 2014). But as modern and as politically radical as the poems found in these collections are, *Ambil* takes San Juan's poetry into more experimental directions.

The word “ambil” has three meanings based on Jose Villa Panganiban's *Diksyunaryo-Tesaurus Pilipino-Ingles*. First, it is a “pet name.” Second, it is an “interpretation of a word, phrase or statement, different from what was originally intended.” And third, it is the “constant repetition of a word or expression, for the pleasure of the sound or for being a favorite expression.” *Ambil* then becomes the guiding concept for the collection, and as the subtitle *Mga Pagsubok, Pahiwatig & Interbensiyon* (attempts, suggestions, and interventions) suggests, San Juan attempts to convey his political critique through indirection and word-play.

The chapbook is predominantly composed of poems that demonstrate the third meaning of “ambil.” Many poems use conjugations that create dangling clauses and phrases that disturb the sentence and create a defamiliarizing effect. This technique is in contrast to the aesthetics of the formalist American New Criticism, which favors the completeness of the poem and the heightened use of poetic language. “Pagpapasubaling Di Mabali-bali?” uses the conjugation “subalit” (“but”) to highlight the political violence in the Philippines. “Hindi Madala sa Dalahira” uses “dahil” (“because”) to show the effects of globalization and its links with military

repression. “Romansang Balbal, Kinakaos Tapos Naubos” uses “tapos” (“and then”) to tell the desire and lust for foreign beauty as expressed in Philippine and American pop culture icons like Marian Rivera and Lady Gaga. “De Gustibus Non Disputandum” repeats the phrase “gusto ko” (“I want”) to express the desire for answers to global and Philippine political issues. These poems are reminiscent of litanies and religious prayers. But instead of reaffirming preconceived beliefs, San Juan uses the same techniques to unsettle and disorient. The poems, then, become tools for political critique.

The second meaning of *ambil* is highlighted in the collection as San Juan also appropriates and reconfigures other texts to express the slipperiness of intended meaning. “Natagpuang Burador ng Kathang ‘Isang Punong Kayo’ ni Jose Corazon de Jesus” revises Jose Corazon de Jesus’s classic poem “Punongkahoy” into a lamentation of a lost era. Ildefonso Santos’s “Sa Tabing Ilog” is turned into an advertisement to juxtapose the traditional power of the sea to the capitalist reimagining of the sea as a resource for tourism. “Pinakahuling Paalam ng Koro ng mga Taga-salin ng ‘El Ultimo Pensamiento’ ni Rizal” collects the last lines of the different Filipino translations of Rizal’s last poem and expresses the many meanings that the translators understood or misunderstood in Rizal’s words. The title of Amado V. Hernandez’s nationalist poem “Kung Tuyo na ang Luha mo, Aking Bayan” is repeated many times in the final poem of the collection, an attempt to recapture its essence and meaning that have been lost in the erosion of nationalism under the weight of globalization.

Other techniques used are collage, found poetry, and graphic design that heighten San Juan’s political statements. Direct scans from Panganiban’s *Diksyunaryo-Tesaurus Pilipino-Ingles* show the many words and concepts that San Juan tries to grapple with in the collection. In scanning dictionary entries for “sining” (art), “tula” (poem), “salita” (word), “titik” (letter), and “kahulugan” (meaning), San Juan creates a dialogue with language as he confronts and critiques the meanings of these words. Illustrations and diagrams are also used throughout the collection. His attempts toward mixed media, texts superimposed on image or images sandwiched in words, are reminiscent of the graphic design done by the early-twentieth-century Russian Futurists in their poetry. Here, San Juan’s attempts in mixed media may be seen as amateurish compared to those of the Russian Futurists. But in today’s virtual world of memes and the hyperreality of the Internet, San Juan’s efforts highlight the democratization

of graphic design and how it has exposed many writers and artists to new means of expression beyond words.

Repetition can be interpreted as hollow and meaningless, but in *Ambil* it does not translate into words losing their power. The meaning of words is transformed and used toward a different end. The repetition of conjunctions and the creation of dangling clauses and phrases reconfigure the logic of the sentence and startle the reader into reflection. Although the use of canonical poetry can be seen as irreverent and parodic, San Juan reuses these same works to reaffirm the radical tradition that these poems and their poets came to stand for in Philippine literature.

The collection, with its self-referentiality and intertextual play, is very conscious of itself as art and its position in this radical tradition. Not content with just mouthing off repeated exhortations of Marxist ideas, *Ambil* invites the readers to join the play. “Iskema sa Pagkari’t Instalasyon ng Simulakra Kontra sa Tradisyon nina Botticelli & Leonardo Da Vinci” becomes a guide in writing poetry that avoids the pitfalls of the totalizing European vision of Renaissance art: the world is unfinished; it is continuously remade and revitalized by rapid technological advancement and the flattening of global cultural into the image of Western civilization. San Juan asks the reader not to close their understanding of the world by just parroting and copying Western epistemology, as exemplified by Botticelli and Da Vinci, and be fooled by this totalizing Western vision. It must be interrogated and confronted, as seen in “Transkripsyon ng Ilang Bytes ng Kompyuter ng NASA, Washington, DC, USA,” which is made up of interrogative sentences that show a mind lost in information overload in the current era of mass data collection, but which is still alive as it grapples with a nonsensical world.

Like much of San Juan’s later poetry, *Ambil* attempts to revive political writing reminiscent of avant-garde writing of the early twentieth century. However, San Juan foregrounds the twenty-first-century world, a world dominated by global capitalism and its attendant violence, particularly in developing nations like the Philippines. The seeming incompleteness of the phrases and even of some poems expresses San Juan’s argument on the incompleteness of the nationalist and anticolonial struggle. The dominance in Philippine poetry of American New Criticism, which favors formal stability instead of political engagement, must be challenged. This incompleteness is not a weakness but a powerful tool to unbalance the

social order made according to the West's image of the world. For San Juan, globalization must be unbalanced. The Filipino people must reimagine and recreate itself within this totalizing and oppressive order. And the writing of poetry in Filipino becomes, for San Juan, the site of struggle to emancipate the Filipino masses.

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MOTOE TERAMI-WADA

Sakdalistas' Struggle for Philippine Independence, 1930–1945

Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2014. 348 pages.

While there have been studies on the Sakdal movement, a political peasant and urban worker's organization founded by journalist and writer Benigno Ramos, Motoe Terami-Wada's *Sakdalistas' Struggle for Philippine Independence, 1930–1945*, is the first comprehensive study that presents its development against the backdrop of the pursuit of Philippine independence. Terami-Wada's emphasis is on the Makapili, a paramilitary group of Filipino collaborators during the Japanese occupation. Relying on the records and publications of the Sakdal, the interviews collected by US colonial authorities of the Sakdalistas after their May 1935 uprising, and personal interviews of former Ganap Members by Terami-Wada herself, she examines the backgrounds of the Sakdal members, casts light on Benigno Ramos's leadership, and draws attention to Sakdalism's guiding principles (8).

In nine chapters Terami-Wada traces the crucible of the Sakdal's struggle for independence from the 1896 Philippine Revolution to the Japanese occupation until 1945, thus highlighting not only the continuity of the Sakdal movement and the persistence of popular nationalism, but also the resoluteness of the Philippine movement for independence. Independence, the Sakdalistas believed, was the only viable solution to be free from American rule and its deleterious effects on the Philippine economy, in particular, and Philippine society, in general.