



Episode 3: Marjorie Evasco and Richel Dorotan

Podcast release date: October 26, 2019

URL: <https://agam.ph/podcast-video/>

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Padma Hi Joseph.

Joseph Hey Padma.

Padma So in this episode, we speak with Marj Evasco. She is a multi-awarded poet. She's also written biographies and oral histories. And many young people will know her as a teacher and a mentor and a very sharp but loving critic of young writers' work. Definitely someone who doesn't allow us to forget the craft or art of writing. And, it's lovely to have her sharing her creative prose and her thoughts on climate change with us in this episode.

Joseph It was really wonderful to get to meet her in the studio and she was also with one of her colleagues, Richel Dorotan, who's the literary editor for the Bisaya magazine that comes out weekly here in the Philippines with a circulation of more than 20,000. And it was really so interesting to have a conversation with them before we got to the interview about the power of language. About Bisayan which is also known as Cebuano.

Padma Yah.

Joseph Because of how the Americans have sort of recategorized or sometimes, renamed languages over the indigenous language. It's really being reclaimed and preserved, and promoted through Marj's work and the Bisaya magazine and I think for me, you know, hearing them talk about how much history and culture is embedded in the words themselves, which is an ongoing theme as we engage more deeply with the authors of Agam.

Padma Yes, and I loved Richel's reading of the piece. And also before we started recording, Marj insisted that he read the entire piece in Binisaya and not just an excerpt, and she said, and partly

because she wrote it in Cebuano but even if I don't speak Cebuano or Binisaya, just hearing him read it, it sounded so right. And I understood completely when Marj said that it would seem almost wrong to read it in English. Like she, she actually said "Now, I don't wanna read it in English anymore."

laughs

Joseph Yeah, one also was, when he was reading it, he looked so comfortable.

Padma Yes.

Joseph And it felt like there was a deeper connection...

Padma Yeah.

Joseph But like to them, to the deeper spiritual and emotional connection.

Padma Absolutely.

Joseph To what this means.

Padma And I want to say to our listeners that it's fine if you don't understand Binisaya because his reading is just so beautiful and parts of the poem, *Krutsay*, that Marj wrote for the Agam book, are based on a folk song. In fact, I think there are two folk songs in the poem and Richel sang them when he did his readings. So, it's a beautiful thing to just listen to the music of the language and let that speak to you rather than the words themselves.

Interview with Richel Dorotan

Joseph Richel, thank you so much for the reading.

Richel It is my pleasure, Sir.

Joseph Yeah.

Richel. Thank you din.

Joseph And reading it in Binisaya, am I saying that correctly?

Richel Yeah, yeah.

Joseph Binisaya, which is also known as Cebuano.

Richel Cebuano for the American people. For convenience's sake, it's called Cebuano, but for us, it's Binisaya.

Joseph That's the original indigenous name of the language. Thank you. Well, how did it feel reading Marj's piece today?

Richel I feel some kind of affinity for the piece because largely Cebuanos are, we are farmers, we are fishermen. So we can relate to the poem. So I have my personal experience going to the sea with my relatives who, who are fishermen.

Joseph And what does it mean to you to be able to share that in Binisaya versus sharing it in Tagalog or English?

Richel Marj Evasco is one of our best poets. It's really an honor reading her poem in its original language, the Cebuano. There is so much, there is so much angst in me while reading this piece because you know the words, the rhythm, the cadence of the words, feels so right and the poem itself.

Joseph Excellent. So, Richel, you are the literary editor for Bisaya magazine. Tell us a little bit about your magazine.

Richel Our magazine first saw print in the 1930's, at the height of the first wave of publication started during those years. And then, until now, after the war, we just stop the publication during the Second World War then right after the war, it started again running. Until now, it's still there. And we, you cannot be called a Cebuano writer unless you get published in this magazine.

Joseph So tell me about what the magazine is.

Richel It is really for the Cebuano audience. We connect ourselves in this magazine. It is like our journal. This is where we connect ourselves. You know, we understand each other through this magazine because our collective imagination is largely printed in this magazine.

Joseph So you're saying that Bisaya magazine is the place to be published, the magazine to read.

Richel Yeah. If you are a Cebuano, you must read the Bisaya magazine because it is where you can read your literary heroes, your aspirations as Cebuanos. It is there in this magazine.

Joseph And how can folks get a copy of the magazine?

Richel They can get this magazine in the book stand, the news stand. And then we have copies in the selected National Bookstores all around the, especially in the Visayan regions, Mindanao regions. And we have some in, in Metro Manila where there are concentrations of Cebuano communities. You can have a copy of this magazine.

Joseph Thank you so much for being with us today.

Richel It's my pleasure, Sir.

Interview with Marj Evasco

Padma Hello Marj, how are you?

Marj Hi Padma. I'm fine, thanks for inviting me here.

Padma Thank you for being here. We usually start this interview asking the authors to describe for our listeners the photo that you received for your piece.

Marj Okay. I was given a photo of a man in his early 30's wearing wet short pants and standing on bare feet on a sandy yard in front of a thatched bamboo house or hut. So that was all.

Padma And how was that process for you? Receiving the photo and being asked to use it as a writing prompt.

Marj Well first of all, I did a close reading of the visual text because nothing else was given to me. The only data I had was that this was taken in Mindanao. So I said, maybe I should just read carefully the visual text and then infer from the photo the man's livelihood in terms of how or what story he could possibly tell. And then after that process, I think I tried to see how I can listen to him and that's when I decided, this man is talking to me in Bisaya.

Padma Ahhh.

Marj So, I really just listened to that voice and then I had the shape of the story and it came out this long. I couldn't shorten it. Of course, I had to craft it but that's basically just straight writing.

Padma So his voice came to you and you had a conversation with it?

Marj I was more or less just listening. And then it was like I had asked him the question 'Can you tell me what your life is as a fisherman?' So that was the unspoken and then he, he was preparing himself to tell the story by greeting me and welcoming me. So that was how it went in my head.

Padma What does Krutsay mean?

Marj I learned the word *krutsay* in high school when I was singing in the choir. We have to sing the song for a competition and krutsay is actually the word that the fishermen of Bohol and the Visayas use to call the wind because they travel into the deep sea. And so they have to have the wind with them, the good wind to bring them to where they wanted to go. So you say krutsay, that's the first two notes of the song.

Padma Ahh. Could you sing a little more? Maybe two lines?

Marj (SINGING) Midagum, midagumna. Dapit sa atung habagatan. Pag bantay bantay mga kauban. Ang dakbayan dili pabayaan.

Padma Thank you. That's nice, the notion of calling the wind. I remember being taught as a child that if you whistle softly when you're feeling hot, the breeze will come and blow.

Marj. That's true.

Padma And I love that notion of being able to call the wind when you need it. Why did you choose this perspective for your story? Obviously the photo is of a man so that also dictated the story you could write and the voice that came to you was influenced by the image itself. But what is it about this voice you chose or that perspective that you feel makes for good climate change storytelling?

Marj. Okay. Well, as a Visayan, I grew up enjoying fresh seafood caught by the fishermen. And most of the time, in Bohol, you know when the fisherman would bring in the catch. It's not yet even the market. So, you actually see who is producing your food. And so, they did not just fish, they also farmed. So fishing and farming are very important, I think, to our survival in this world. So when you say going out to sea, pag langyaw sa kadagatan, I feel that this is a hard, mostly solitary life, but very adventurous. And there could be a lot of stories from that kind of life. I thought that looking or creating him in a fishing village would be also my way of recalling how it was to grow up on an island and, and because they are subject to changes in the climate, whether it's the wind or the heat, I thought it would be a very good voice of authority, to talk from experience about what it's like to go to the wilderness of the sea.

Padma I like that voice of authority because it overturns many people's conception of who has authority to speak. So...

Marj Oh yes.

Padma Thank you for making that point. You originally wrote Krutsay in Cebuano or Binisaya, we should say. And it's a poem with four parts with headings; Upon Meeting, Family and Community, Questions and Anxieties, and lastly, Warning. Could you tell us a little bit more about the poem's language and form?

Marj Okay. It's a free verse in Bisaya which is maybe the way modern poetry and Binisaya has evolved. And so I relied mainly in the inner rhymes of words in that language, in my language. The first section, Upon Meeting, if you're Bisaya, you will know that this is usually done in the small communities. It's a cultural thing. You set the discursive ground for story telling. So, it's like a meeting the other and really meeting him on equal grounds because it's your community after all. It's your story. So after that introduction when the man talks about his fishing community, then you can go to the second part which is the more intimate because you are entering family and community, with names, with identity. So he talks about his father, his grandfather, and then he talks about marriage and children and the difficulties of marriage. And even the ambition to, you know, get a woman to love him.

Padma Yes. Was that a courtship song that Richel sang?

Marj Yes, actually, it's an invitation. It's a Boholano song also. It's a, we have a joke about that, but anyway, we will not tell you. *laughs* But yes, the Boholano is the best lover or the best husband. So after that's done, the more serious questions and anxieties can then be, so it's going deeper and

deeper. It articulates what I would call now the ghosting of the seas, of its species, and then the rising of the waters, and the community's continued poverty, which they had endured for such a long time. It prepares, I think, that section prepares the reader for the last part, which is the Warning. And this is really where the voice of authority is, because the warning is just that. The seafaring life lends him the authority of experience. He warns his communities and the others about the changes they're already experiencing, bringing devastating typhoons, which come out of season. So they cannot read the winds anymore.

Padma Right.

Marj He changes the words and he changes the words of the old song and brings Krutsay up to our time because it ends with an urgent call to wake up. Those are the last words. Get up and, of course, the other one is get ready to leave. I think that's a question that we're all asking in the islands. If my island will be covered in water, where, where do I go?

Padma Yeah.

Marj Where do we live? So it's a crucial question.

Padma That, that, I'm just (chuckles) taking in that question. It's, it always makes me pause, in, this question in many different forms. It's really difficult to grapple with. What scares you personally about the current climate crisis?

Marj The speed of change, which I feel can go to irreversible levels. And therefore really make the sixth mass extinction upon us. In a, in a very real personal way. It's too fast, going too fast.

Padma And what do you do to face that reality or to keep going in the face of that reality?

Marj Well we have many avenues of action within our lifetime, one's lifetime anyway. Part of the, part of the things that I do for myself is of course, I choose a, to eat plant-based food. And I have just planted, last month, five trees, fruit trees in my garden to add to the other trees that are already there. Then, I'm very soon going to shift to solar energy.

Padma Nice. Personally, I feel like the transition to plant-based diets is one of the most difficult commitments to make but necessary. *laughs* Which brings me to another side, climate change might wipe away chocolate, red wine, and more seriously, our coral reefs, which as you said, as your poem

suggests, is a major source of food and sustenance for so many people, especially on our archipelago. How do you feel about that? Well, chocolate.

Marj Well, I think we love chocolate and have an occasional glass of red wine. But I think, climate change will wipe out more than that. And since we are talking about structural like the reefs are structures of survival or livelihood, not just livelihood, but survival, it makes me feel the urgency of that stark truth that in the anthropocene because I'm a writer, I'm probably writing elegies, if not obituaries. I would like to say that part of it is, is always a shade of hope. Because after all, you write because you're hoping to reach some sensibility out there, some consciousness out there. But if I'm just writing for myself and I'm listening to the poems, these are probably elegies.

Padma What have you seen that gives you hope? Hope is what so many of us need.

Marj Yeah, think actionable hope and I think writing is one of them. And I was so inspired for example, the making of Agam itself because you have collaborations of people doing their art to the best skills that they have right now. So, it's visually beautiful. It's very substantial and substantive. It calls out and brings your attention and so actions like that are always very inspiring. Collaboration, I think, is the way to go. So as I was saying earlier to you, even translations, collaborative work among writers, translating each other, bringing each other's works to the reader. This is very important.

Padma Yeah. I understand you'll soon be teaching a course called Poetry Techniques on a Damaged Planet. Why this title?

Marj Well, I added the last one not as an aside but really as a way of also accounting for the change, changes in my own, my own life because after six years of sweet freedom outside the academe, I realized that when they asked me to teach again, I cannot teach it in the usual way, that the context of art practice is really the context of reality. All our art is derived from the life that we live. And so if art, if the argument, art gives us access to beauty and truth is to be extended, it leads us to how we ought to live, right? But in our times, I think you need to extend that even a bit further. **bell rings**

Marj The furthering of that argument is really how we ought to die. Because if we're part of the sixth mass extinction, what will, what will those that survive say of us when they read our art. When they read our stories. Amitav Ghosh mentioned this in *The Great Derangement*.

Padma Yes.

Marj That denial is also in the arts, can be found among many writers and artists. And so, while we have nascent beginnings of that, I think we need to have more.

Padma I think this is one of those instances where silence is a form of denial.

Marj Yes. And just not, just not say that you're not the most important sensibility or consciousness in the world. So I have the first provocation. I'm planning the lecture provocation already and I hope to have the conversation with my future students. To know the difference between ego-centric poetry that only looks at the self and the world, the human self and the world and eco-centric poetry, the way that the Zen poets and Shan poets did it in the world that they were in that included them but did not necessarily have to put them in the center of things.

Padma Yes.

Marj So that kind of, there is a tradition on that.

Padma Yeah.

Marj But I don't know where it went in the modern age. (chuckles) When it became all about me, me, me, me.

Padma So, you'll be exploring this?

Marj Yes.

Padma In the class. And you work a lot with young aspiring poets not just in the classroom but in writing workshops also. How is the new generation of writers addressing our climate crisis?

Marj Well, I used to be director of the IYAS-La Salle National Writers Workshop in Bacolod. Before we collaborated with ICSC, I did not have very definite names of writers who were really taking it seriously. But in 2016, after the publishing of *Agam*, the attention on the anthropogenic condition became more pronounced. And I think, writers, young writers here and there, were already looking at it. But we did not have them together until IAS said 'let's advocate for the writing, writing and the environment, or writing the environment'. And that was when we had, I had the surprise of my life when we had scientists from UP applying for fellowships.

Padma Ohhh.

Marj Yeah and students, MA students doing their biology and botany. They were interested in using literature. And so, we have had three years of that, that collaboration and last year they get better and better, sharper and sharper tools.

Padma Great.

Marj And an example of, of really something that I liked this year. We had our first B'laan writer and her name is Elizabeth Joy Serrano Quijano and she was writing in Binisaya. Because in IYAS, we have five languages. The Western Visayas languages and the Central Visayas languages plus English and Tagalog.

Padma Uh-huh.

Marj And she wrote a short story, a really beautiful short story but it has a strange name. The title is called Barrio Tae.

Padma Tae?

Marj And, yes. And it's a poignant story of the katutubo, the Lumad and how they are coping with economic, political, and social pressures on their survival and identity, which I think are part of the entire problem. And so, she talks about composting in that, in her barrios. That's why it's called Barrio Tae.

Padma That's why it's tae, which means shit.

Marj Yeah, shit. Yeah, but, it's, it's so well-written. And while we were sitting with her, she was also telling us about the B'laan culture, even how to say B'laan.

Padma Yes, it's not Bilaan.

Padma and Marj. It's Blaan.

Marj Yeah. So, so, I think we're getting, we're growing the writers and gathering them together. And maybe that's one kind of acknowledging the importance of their work. Because sometimes, you

know, you say climate change, it might just be misconceived as being on the bandwagon. There's not even a bandwagon yet. I mean, you know, parang fashion fashion lang iyon.

Padma Yeah.

Marj No, no. I think they are very serious writers and they're writing very well.

Padma That's wonderful to hear. Because it's also a source of hope.

Marj It is. Yeah. We need to, we need to have that. If your best action is writing, then do it.

Padma And I think one of my takeaways in this conversation, Marj, is the phrase actionable hope rather than just hope.

Marj Yes. And, and the other word is advocacy, which I think is a bit *gasgas* already because it's for anything and everything. I think here, hope is crucial to the conversation that we should have on climate.

Padma Thank you Marj.

Marj Thank you.

Padma For sharing your poetry and wisdom with us and your time. Thank you so much.

Marj Thank you very much, Padma.