

### Abstract

Scholar and critic Resil B. Mojares's humble beginnings are recounted in the article, as well as his laudable achievements in cultural and literary history. The young interlocutor, himself a Cebuano, views Mojares as a personality of national import yet had always been supported by local initiatives to realize the lofty goals. Mojares, a fictionist at heart, was not able to write many stories because he had to attend to academic concerns and during the Martial Law regime, there were not many publications that welcome literary outputs critical of the establishment.

### Keywords

Akdang buhay,  
interview,  
National Artist

# DR. RESIL B. MOJARES: *National Artist for Literature 2018*

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SOMEWHAT ASHAMED TO admit this in writing, but the first time I met Dr. Resil Mojares, I didn't know who he was, let alone his stature in the local community of letters—a community which, as a naive nineteen-year-old attending his first writers workshop, I was unwittingly about to be inducted into. This was back in 2010, at the 26th Cornelio Faigao Memorial Writers Workshop, where I was first introduced to other luminaries of Visayan literature, as well as other young literary practitioners better read and with already more poems and stories to their name. Though a linguistics and literature major, I was still just a couple of years past a high school education that had weaned me on Homer, Shakespeare, Harper Lee, and other esteemed works of the Western canon, so I was a long way off from even beginning the process of what many a literary website refer to as “decolonizing one's reading list.”

Flashback to a couple of months from this writing, when I received that first email asking me to interview Dr. Mojares for a video project

organized by the UP Creative Writing Center—I was just as excited as I was intimidated. In the years since my first encounter with him, the man had released several more books, mainly on the history of Cebu, and—most notably—been declared National Artist for Literature the year prior. I, meanwhile, though a little more read in his works, was still basking in post-thesis proposal relief, allowing my first chapter to simmer in the digital recesses of my hard drive so I could go back to it (eventually) with fresh eyes. Plus, all the other sociopolitical developments that had happened beyond the pages we students of literature operate in, and which require the mustering of a certain rare courage by artists and intellectuals alike to point out and, if necessary, criticize.

Our paths had also crossed on occasion during literary events (though he's often too preoccupied entertaining more familiar faces) and chance encounters at bookstores (where he's busy browsing the shelves), and whenever I walk up to him, I have this nagging, requisite feeling that I have to reintroduce myself. He is, however—true to the remarks of friends and colleagues of mine who know him more closely—“cool” enough to respond to email queries, which is how I reached out to him to let him know of our interview.

After confirming his availability on the scheduled date and agreeing on the venue, we meet up together with the crew from UP at the Cebuano Studies Center, that rich repository of historical and cultural documents of which Dr. Mojares was the founding director back in 1975. We spend the first hour or so setting up the location (a vacant room where a copious amount of light pours in from large sliding windows), agreeing on the angle of the camera (just over my shoulder—I'll be out of frame the whole time; I secretly sigh in relief when I hear this), asking him which of his works he'd like to read as a sample (anxiety distracted me from paying much attention to which one he decided on—certainly it was one of his books on display at the Center), and once everything was ready, we proceeded.

I begin, of course, with the preliminaries, asking him about his childhood in Zamboanga del Norte and early years as a writer. He was born in the small town of Polanco, on September 4, 1943 (Lato-Ruffolo 2018), with the Second World War still ongoing, and on the eve after his mother “hastily sloshed across” rice paddies—as he narrates in almost folksy detail in his column “War Baby”—to get away from Japanese soldiers who'd been spotted a short distance from the spring where

she'd been doing their laundry (Mojares 1997, 217). They were a Cebuano-speaking family residing in Dipolog, a part of Mindanao that had been settled by migrants from Central Visayas, and both parents were teachers at the local school.

His mother hailed from Ginatilan, a town in southern Cebu the family would regularly visit via barge from Dumaguete to attend fiestas and family gatherings, which were “almost always histrionic, loud, and rich with laughter and lore” (Mojares 1997, 223). I wasn't surprised, then, to find out that he has always felt a connection to our sliver of a central island, and thus saw no need to deliberately or consciously make that shift in identifying with a new locality over a past one, even when he'd settled in Cebu for good during his undergrad years, as an English major at the University of San Carlos (where he is now a professor emeritus). His father, on the other hand, he doesn't talk much about during our interview, but in a surprisingly heartfelt column of his *I read belatedly*, Dr. Mojares wrote of how the man—raised a Protestant of obscure origins and orphaned by parents the author himself knows almost nothing about, “[not] even what they looked like”—was remembered by others for his eloquence, though when around his family and regarding certain topics, such as his own childhood, he was remarkably silent (1997, 222).

Though Cebuano, as his first language, was reserved for speaking with relations and articulating more intimate sentiments (the exception being the school grounds, where the practice of slapping fines on anyone heard speaking the vernacular was still commonplace), English was the medium in which he wrote, because the colonial tongue was, in accordance with conventions of the time, then deemed better suited for the literary realm.

I ask him if he had any trouble reconciling his small-town Philippine upbringing with all the baggage his imposed written language carried. On top of this was the fact that there were still few models in the local literary scene to help bridge those “persistent language difficulties” Lucila Hosillos noted of early Philippine writing in English: grammar and idioms. Were Dr. Mojares's early writings marked by a “lack of restraint and imagination, exaggeration in expression, sentimentalism, and lack of originality and significance” (1969, 51)? Each language is, after all, as Octavio Paz observed, “a view of the world” and “each civilization is a world” (1992, 153). The difference gap between a Cebuano milieu and an American English lens inherent in the introduced language must have been, one imagines, still fairly wide during his formative years. And though there were already

Philippine periodicals publishing literary pieces in English at the time, the teaching of these Anglophone texts was still far from being official classroom policy, hence exposure to these works that may have served as a bridge between the two disparate worlds was still quite limited.

To my surprise, however, Dr. Mojares says he had no trouble at all reconciling the written language with his own reality. It was “understood”—almost by default really—that one spoke in Cebuano, or whichever vernacular tongue one grew up with, outside the school, but employed English when putting pen to paper. The two languages operated in different settings, with clear delineations as to when to employ one over the other.

While most millennials know Dr. Mojares primarily as a critic and scholar, his first published works, which came out in the *Philippines Free Press* and *Philippine Graphic*, were fiction. The latter magazine, it’s worth mentioning, was edited by National Artist for Literature Nick Joaquin, and Dr. Mojares takes a moment to proudly refer to himself as one of “Nick’s boys,” a loose group of promising writers of his generation who had received Joaquin’s stamp of approval. The next question I level at him then is a curiosity I’ve had since I first learned he started out as a fictionist: What brought about the shift?

Surprise, surprise—Martial Law. He had published about eleven or twelve stories in the years preceding that infamous chapter in Philippine history. Once the crackdowns came into full swing, presses all over the country were shut down—the one exception being *Focus*, “that Marcos-allied publication” (Melendez 2018) whose literary editor only permitted works that refrained from talking politics and avoided themes of social justice and dissent. And what is fiction—or really, literature in general—if it is restricted from even touching on these? Zine and blogging culture were still a couple of decades away, so without those aforementioned periodicals where he published frequently, there was no other venue for his works to see print, and therefore little motivation to produce. Ultimately, Dr. Mojares chalks up his abandonment of fiction to growing stale in those authoritarian years. Schoolwork, courtesy of his postgraduate studies, and teaching at his college alma mater also meant scholarly writing had to take a priority, hence relegating the fictionist in him further and further into the background.

This move, however, still didn’t stop him from getting into trouble with state censors. He can’t recall the exact work or words that got him

flagged, but there was something about the columns he wrote during this period that caught the eye of the authorities. He was incarcerated for a time, and then eventually released, but not before signing forms in which he swore he would no longer dabble with the seditious, that he'd report every once in a while to the camp to assure the officers that he hadn't gone underground, and a bunch of other stipulations that pretty much every creative working then became all too familiar with.

Now that we were discussing the academic portion of his life, I ask him about the venue of our interview. What inspired him to establish the Cebuano Studies Center in the 1970s, and how hard was it to gather all the documents necessary to come up with such an extensive archive? According to him, during that decade, a trend toward studying, understanding, and appreciating the grassroots was germinating throughout much of the postcolonial world—the result of a growing awareness of American imperialism, its worst facet most apparent in the proxy arenas of the Cold War, particularly in the napalm-torched fields of Vietnam, with the war there seeming to have no end.

In the Philippines, a young nation-state ruled by an authoritarian regime that was essentially a puppet of the United States, this resistance manifested in the form of a search for a genuine national identity, one freed of—or at least unencumbered by—colonial and neocolonial influences. Philippine writers who began their careers writing in English, for example, suddenly started producing works in vernacular tongues. Dr. Mojares even recalls how the fervor at the time—couched in a deep sympathy for the masses and the rural folk—compelled National Artist Bienvenido Lumbera to declare that English writing in the country was, just like Spanish, on its way out the window, boldly imagining a future where successive generations of writers would be writing exclusively in Filipino or in their own Philippine languages. Things even reached a point where one had to “apologize” for using English (a vestige of colonial rule, in the eyes of diehard nationalists) at local conferences or cultural events.

This was the context in which the seeds of what would become the Cebuano Studies Center were planted. If other localities throughout the colonized world and even in other regions of the Philippines had their own archives centered around that place's history and culture, surely Cebu—with its own rich past—must have one too. Hence, Dr. Mojares began the exhaustive (but I imagine, for a historian, also exciting) task of collecting all the necessary documents on Cebu—visiting the ancestral

homes of prominent families in several municipalities, diving into the collections of old publishing houses to uncover lost or long out-of-print books and magazine issues, and even traveling to various libraries and institutions outside of the region and the country to retrieve any sort of documentation they had on our island.

The Center's first location was in the basement of USC's Downtown Campus, which I recall likening to a subterranean cave of wonders those first couple of times I visited during my undergrad years. As of 2013, however, it has since moved to the more spacious second floor of the Josef Baumgartner Learning Resource Center at the Talamban Campus, where it's regularly visited by scholars and cultural enthusiasts from all across the world, as well as young students from neighboring schools and regions eager to know more about local history, culture, and language.

With our conversation almost past the two-hour mark, and considering we were already wading in the waters of politics, I broached one final question that I personally feel all artists should readily be able to answer, especially given the bleak realities of our time that the beauty and comfort we turn to in art can only do so much to cover up—from climate change, to rising authoritarianism, to the increasing influence multinational corporations exert on public policy, to fake news and the perversion of the postcolonial idea of multiple realities, just to name a few things that are worth criticizing or commenting on.

“Do you believe all art is inherently political?” I croak the first time I ask this, and after seeing his brow furrow, straining to hear what I said, I repeat the query.

“Yes,” he answers without a second's hesitation. He loosely cites a quote by Jean-Paul Sartre from his collection of essays “*What Is Literature?*”—a quote I'm grateful enough to have found and which I've reproduced below:

Why have you spoken of this rather than that, and—since you speak in order to bring about change—why do you want to change this rather than that? (1988, 39)

In other words, the mere act of bringing a certain thing to an audience's attention is political, for it asks them to focus on that one specific subject, to dedicate a moment of their time, and afterward reassess their relationship with the current order, often at the expense of other topics we could otherwise be bringing to the fore.

Why are we talking about, say, the construction of a potentially disruptive dam and how it relates to an ongoing water shortage, when this feud involving a celebrity love triangle is more entertaining? Why are we talking about police brutality, instead of celebrating the booming economy that business magazines report on a daily basis? Why are we yammering on about American imperialism, neoliberalism, and globalization, when a new Starbucks we can hang out in just opened at this commercial complex where an old ancestral house once stood?

In drawing the public's attention to issues that would otherwise be drowned out in the noise of everyday discourse, art—so long as it's wielded by a deft, ethical hand—helps shape public perception, alter public opinion, and hopefully even affect public policy for the better.

With Dr. Resil Mojares, I have no doubt that the works he's given us, and the works he continues to put out, will stir something in us as long as we have ready access to them. And it's great that Anvil Publishing is reprinting copies of some his older books in the wake of his National Artist conferment, so that newer generations of readers, born or coming of age in an especially precarious epoch, can learn to situate themselves within a greater historical context. If I may delve into the personal, Dr. Mojares's writings have given me a better sense of how we've arrived at where we are, not just as Cebuanos in particular but also as Filipinos in general, in ways the textbook history I was educated in can't even come close to matching. I sincerely hope this better understanding of our place in a postcolonial, capitalist, globalized order—how we fit in, how we stand out, how we are represented, how we are oppressed or are complicit in the oppression ourselves—seeps its way into the sentiments and lenses of other readers down the line. Armed with this knowledge courtesy of one of the most sublime, articulate minds of our time, we can then be better informed on how we choose to move forward, preferably toward a world that hews as close as possible to our own imaginings of an ideal.

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