

Senegal



by Amelia Mayberry

Where All the Arrows Lead To

by Myra Aquino

I've tried for years to convince myself that though I am genetically a full-blooded Filipino, my most cherished dreams and aspirations would inevitably lie within the realm of the West, the antithesis to the backward, scandal-ridden, savage and ridiculous country where my parents came from. The frequent summer visits to the Philippines when I was younger should have discredited my discriminating preconceptions, but on the contrary: They only solidified my views. The piles of garbage on the side of the road, those dirty children imploring my parents to purchase loops of sampaguita (a species of jasmine flowers), the unintelligible racket my relatives made when they conversed with each other, and the movies that were too dramatic or too outrageous to be taken seriously, I arranged these unfortunate incidents and forced them into a puzzle of some kind of retroprogressive indolence upon which the Filipinos seemed at fault.

Myra Aquino was born in Guam and raised there until she moved to the Philippines in 1999. She lived and attended high school there until she moved to Seattle in 2004 to attend the University of Washington.

I say puzzle in its direct, metaphorical meaning: a mystery, an enigma, a conundrum. The nature of my innate, stormy relationship with the Philippines has always been just that: the constant teetering on uneven footing; that awkward power relationship where, whenever I attempted to elevate myself on the basis of my American background and to insulate myself against this tainted environment, I would only receive more ridicule back. It was I who was made the spectacle, with my American accent and my fear of the Philippines in general. Like Said's Orientalist, I positioned myself against these other people, defined myself with respect to them, within the oscillating curiosity and fear I had of those who were supposed to be my fellow countrymen. The further I placed myself on a pedestal, both to condescend others and to defend myself, the further I felt alienated and at the same time exposed for my ignorance in Philippine culture. I was both self-important and yet, more importantly, humiliated.

This relationship in particular exploded when I went to the Philippines in sixth grade. I was initially against living in the

Philippines, where I very crudely thought I was --- and this is a mouthful --- going to get kidnapped and killed just by stepping out of the house because there were so many criminals around, and my life was just too valuable to lose to these low-lives whom I was unfortunately linked to on account of blood. But aside from that, adapting to school itself was incredibly difficult. My tendency towards insularity surfaced once again; I persistently spoke English, sang “The Star-Spangled Banner” when “Lupang Hinirang” came on during the morning ceremonies and recited the United States Pledge of Allegiance during the recital of the “Pananatang Makabayan.” They were the Other, and I wasn’t going to submit to their culture.

Language acquisition, or more accurately the lack thereof, set the platform of my relations with my classmates. This sense of alienation left no room for the possibilities of ever reconciling myself with them. I was teased for my accent, among other things. I was made different, made to be the Other, and inside, I felt like I was marginalized. This language situation was further aggravated by the fact that I went to what I felt at the time was a pseudo-international school. It claimed to be international, but a large portion of the students was Filipino, raised in the Philippines, whose parents had enough money to send them to this institution. Because of this, I went to a school where the instruction was in English, but where outside the classroom everyone spoke Filipino.

Over the years, these sentiments mellowed. Back in sixth grade, for lack of finding any kindred spirits, I set out to interact with my fellow classmates and relate to them. I can say that it was the answer to my problem of alienation and humiliation. In order to reconstruct my life again, I was going to have to put myself out there and connect with everyone else. I was terrified. In the end, I made friends and had never felt more relieved. Even better, I was surprised to find myself somehow mirrored in them, and vice versa. But five years only proved to widen my bubble of exposure just a little bit. I hardly ever considered venturing into a middle-to-lower class environment, where Filipino was spoken more frequently. I stayed within the boundaries of my school, my home and the middle-to-upper class community who more often than not didn’t require me to communicate in Filipino. And more importantly, perhaps the truth at that time was even though my feet were in the Philippines, my mind, heart and future lay in the West, and I thought I was most likely not going back to the Philippines, thereby negating any need to learn Filipino. As a result, I left the Philippines with only a ‘palengke’ (market) proficiency in Filipino. I was and perhaps still am, shamefully unilingual.

Throughout those years, that other side of the Philippines has always been a case of derision yet fascination for me. The strong socioeconomic disparities were very evident in the discourse of the middle- and upper-middle-class students in my school. Terminology used by the children

such as “those squatters,” “squatters’ areas” and in general the seeming lack of social consciousness alarmed me. As the years passed, I let myself be more open to the issues of this other side, but that’s what it had always remained to be: This other side. Presently, I am a lot more open-minded than when I was a naïve, narrow-minded sixth grader. Thus, it has led me to a desire to proceed further into the many indistinctive layers of culture and thought, and the lives of the many Filipinos residing in the Philippines, to assess the history and conditions there with a persistently critical mind. My fascination and my curiosity have not abated; in fact, they have grown resolutely, despite the fact that I am here in the United States, learning at a Western institution. When I thought all the arrows led to here, they have all only managed to point back to the Philippines. My wish is that someday I can go back to the Philippines with a strong command of at least one of its languages and consequently open myself to the country in the hopes that it will open itself to me. Perhaps the puzzle then has a chance to be solved.