

A Pacific Pilipina in the Ocean of Palouse

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The Palouse of Washington is famous for its expansive, rolling hills of yellow, gold, and green. It is marked by its abundance of legumes and wheat and thick, fresh forest. Known as the “lentil capital of the nation,” red farmhouses are interspersed across acres of farmland, and combines can be seen combing the hillsides for the harvest. The air is crisp, and magnificent sunsets streak the blue sky with pink and purple.

Yet, my head and heart turn back constantly, toward home in the Pacific. I have lived my life within borders—as a third-generation Filipina from Guam who still is no island girl, as a local growing up between the fences of the Anderson Air Force Base and Guam Naval Base, and as an unincorporated territory American; I have learned to live in liminality. As Filipino, Guamanian, and American, I straddle the three cultures and their value systems, undergoing a struggle of borders, like Anzaldúa’s *la mestiza*, in an inner war—a cultural collision. I add now the collision of moving from the Pacific to the Palouse, just one in the many waves of Filipino immigration. This space is home.

While it is home, I cannot deny the tension, ambivalence, and unrest within my borderland. I experience rupture and contradiction in my everyday world in this quaint college town of about 32,000 people, and I contemplate how I can use this as a “prelude to crossing.” Here in the United States, indignation at having to prove my mother’s US citizenship for my lease application almost caused me to come to Washington homeless.

“I need your passport because you’re international, and your emergency contact has to be in the US.”

“I see, but Guam is part of the US. We’re US citizens.”

“No, they have to be *in* the US.”

Sometimes I hate that preposition. People have told me directly that I “need to be less deferential” and that I “shouldn’t apologize.” Because my Asian meekness is weakness in their culture and displays the fact that I am different, I need to do what I can to look and sound “in.” On Labor Day, one of my handful of Filipino friends here invited us to his house for *kaldereta*, a type of Filipino beef stew. A policeman drives by and looks in. Maybe we are parked in the wrong place? He comes over to tell us he received an anonymous call from “someone who said they heard you three talking about drugs.” I have never had the police called on me, but I guess here we look like we are up to good. With shame and tears, we told people what happened. Someone said, “They probably thought you were Mexican,” and I cried more. We know what this means. We are all people of border culture. But what happens when we attempt to cross them?

I have hope that the possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not react. We cope by developing tolerance for contradictions and a tolerance for ambiguity, sustaining contradictions, and turning ambiguity into something else. But what is that something else and how do I make it? Anzaldúa (2001) claims change in the “real” world happens only when it happens first in the images in our heads, but I have few words for this change, and it frustrates me. I want to, like *la mestiza*, create a new consciousness, a new mythos, a new way to perceive reality and ourselves. But truthfully I approach these borders tentatively, with terror, trepidation, and self-consciousness. I fear that I will be caught. And when I am questioned, I will not have the words, and they will assume I am “illegally” crossing. I know they will not hesitate to send me back to the borderland that I came from. But ultimately I know their greatest fear is that I will be back.

These stories, my *mga kuwento*, make me miss my family and my community, an ocean and a day away on Guam. However, I am both heartened and overwhelmed by the magnitude of Villanueva’s (2003) claim

that Filipinas carry their landscape of family, memory, and culture to recreate a recognizable semblance of home. I have quite seriously considered going back home, but I realize I carry home on my back. Before I left Guam, all my colleagues told me to “Remember why you’re doing this.”

The irony is that while I have left a place surrounded by ocean for a place surrounded by opportunity, I have never felt so isolated. As a child in Guam, I used to sing “America the Beautiful,” but never once imagined myself among its amber waves of grain. I sent a picture postcard home that read the caption, “Ocean of Palouse.” Its waves do not crash or come towards the shore but are, to me, perhaps more sinister because they appear staid, stationary, unflinching. However, propelled by the undercurrent of change, I suppose they will learn to move like I have, parting as I venture out and swim through them.

References

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