

## Culture Redefined

The walls of EDSA began their rebirth in late March of 2013. As my family drove past the stretches of bare, weathered concrete, little clumps of people appeared, clutching buckets, rollers, and the occasional brush. From my passenger window, the crowd blurred into a zigzagging line of ants roasting in the sun and as weeks passed, the clumps of people only grew. They painted pictures of life: browned farmers plowing with carabaos, children receiving vaccinations, swirling text crying for peace and much more. To me, the mural seemed like a collage of mismatched pieces sewn by a rough hand. Some parts would have men with gigantic hands or tiny heads and others would have creatures drawn with precision and realism. Big, bright and inexplicably strange in many, many ways, it was called the "Lakbay Para Sa Kapayapaan Sa EDSA."

When the mural was inaugurated, I was just beginning the fifth grade. Every morning drive to school, I would stare out the stretches of paint and grumble. Clearly, it was a disaster: a perfect example of things that were not meant to be put side-by-side. My classmates and I shook our heads at its obvious errors. Why didn't the project leaders smooth out all the wonky proportions beforehand? Why didn't they enlist a group of good, reliable artists who colored inside the lines? Who decided that soldiers wielding paint buckets could just go and say that they had created art?

We believed that art, or more generally, culture, was perfect and carefully refined - the marks of our heritage and the partner of history. It was Juan Luna's paintings and Noli Me Tangere; it was a carved clay pot in a glass display and epic poems that went on and on. We knew what it was and what it meant, and we cared little for it beyond the occasional field trip. After all, Don Juan's exploits and Spoliarium's gore were barely interesting enough in a classroom and much less outside. For the common student, they were beautiful, remarkable, and very much stuck in the past.

However, the mismatched mural stayed in my head like a stain, and it seemed to be pulling up window shades wherever I went. My eyes began to linger longer on the graffiti on garage doors, or I'd absently knock down a Taglish Wattpad romance by the bookstore checkout. Every time, I'd wonder. What made them so different from my Filipino textbook or the painting down the hall of a hotel? Why had I never seen them in that way - as equals of what are hardcover published and framed up in exhibits?

Strangely enough, contemporary art slotted into our Facebook feeds and our peripheral vision almost every day, yet somehow, it never got much farther than a passing glance. On the other hand, the traditional side of Philippine culture sat in a spotlight of national focus without ever penetrating the lives of the people outside of their uniforms. Given those, wouldn't the greatest solution to the flaws of both be to combine the two - to regain the interest of society with contemporary culture and preserve the relevance of past culture by association?

This idealistic solution is easier said than done. In truth, everyday people do know that contemporary culture exists; they just refuse to acknowledge it. They blur it in the back of their minds, just like how I refused to acknowledge the mural back in the fifth grade. To break away from this cycle, we, the youth, need to be the figureheads of this movement: the introduction of contemporary literature and art into the recognition of culture. By supporting the development of contemporary forms and mediums of Philippine culture, we can restore its relevance and the interest of the Philippine people in their culture once again.

First of all, we must redefine the concept of culture. Unfortunately, the current curricula of Philippine schools often fail to support contemporary culture and instead result in the perception that culture is something perfect and old. However, such a belief is far from truth. In reality, culture is a living phenomenon, and it evolves with every generation. Perhaps it is untraditional and avant garde: vulgar slogans spray-painted on public property, nude figures on Instagram feeds, or nonsensical poetry flying off presses. Maybe our elders mumble with distaste - how can things so blatantly ugly qualify amongst the perfection of traditional literature and art? But the answer lies in the definition of the term, or perhaps the lack of one. Culture is not a gated subdivision; it is the alleyways of downtown Tondo and the decrepit farmhouses in Marinduque. It is the ever expanding record of who we are and what we choose to leave behind.

Also, thanks to our modern time, contemporary culture is not just about new concepts and ideas. With the tools of 21st century innovation, emerging forms of culture bring new relevance in the fields of Filipino literature and art - not only for the Philippines, but for the record of humanity. Four-line *saknongs* and gouache on canvas may have been the tools of great masterpieces in the past, but now that we can go even further, to express ourselves in huge screens, vivid animation and virtual reality, the products of these contemporary mediums are equally deserving of cultural recognition. In fact, the culture of the old can emerge in the new in so many ways - perhaps video games set in the 1700s, or programs to educate about Philippine heroes. The possibilities that the present offers culture and its creators are endless. Still, the question remains: how can we, as the youth, develop these?

Recently, I found my answer in Ampersand. Ampersand is a community of young Filipino writers and artists from high school and college. Many artists made their masterpieces digitally, posting collages and edits, while others posted abstract concepts and built sculptures from toothpicks. On the other hand, writers used language with power and clarity, molding words in a way I had only ever read in foreign books.

Indeed, these creations were far beyond my imagination and beyond that of others too, if the 1,500 likes on Ampersand's public page were any indication. Two years old, Ampersand was already a rapidly growing fount of modern Philippine culture. It and similar groups could be the perfect avenues for young creators to find support

and inspiration. Communities like Ampersand support and guide young creators to develop our culture against the tests of fear, time and opposition. These groups, present on platforms such as social media and open to membership for the youth, show our peers that we need not give up or look abroad for a culture that we can relate to: a Philippine culture of our own time exists to be shared and appreciated. Most importantly, communities of strong support and following can prove to the ignorant mind the legitimacy and growth of Philippine contemporary culture.

As most great movements, acceptance of new ideas, especially for a cause such as culture, is a painstakingly gradual process. However, with every ounce of support we give to our fellow artists and writers, we come closer to our goal: that someday, in perhaps a not-so-distant future, contemporary culture and its successors will sit prominently upon the pedestal of Philippine pride, right alongside their predecessors. The youth will look no further for their representation in the hugeness of the national culture, and they will stand as advocates against the consuming influx of international influence. By weaving the concepts and opportunities of the present into the Philippine culture we once thought past, we can build a new future, a time and place where the Filipino youth will see how they are not merely culture's observers - they are its maker and muse. In that universe, they will see not only their roots, but how they have grown and borne fruit. Culture will represent how they perceive their unique world. There, they will look out of their passenger windows and wave to a still standing mural of Philippine pride and we will be remembered as those who brought it back to them.