

The Adventure of an Alien and the Matalino Kid

“Coco Martin, I met him” replied the Sampaguita vendor, barely over ten years old, munching on the wonder of American colonialism fine-tuned to the Filipino liking of *ulam* over rice. “My dad is an *artista*, he brought me to the set of *Ang Probinsyano*” he continued.

Admittedly I do not watch the *teleserye*, or anything on the network for that matter. What is installed on my phone is Netflix, where I binge endlessly on police fighting the Colombian drug trade. Surely, that is more amusing for me than the plight of police in the boondocks.

“When I grow up, I want to be an *artista* too, just like my dad! He’ll make me one when *Ang Probinsyano* is on again” he finished and left, with a quarter of rice still on his plate.

One day, I will be watching this kid on screen, telling a story. It could be the story of his everyday commute from Visayas Avenue to sell on Matalino Street by the Quezon City Hall, or the story of his three-day commute from Iloilo to the expanse of opportunity, Metro Manila.

Culture tells a story about the human condition – about the meaning of our lives – how we have lived and how we have learned to live in a society. The story of the Filipino can be a rather confusing one: either one strides in a blooming diaspora filled with *Adobo* and *Pancit*, or wallows in the ‘shallowness’ of an ‘impoverished nation’. Unfortunately, my story started off in a development towards the latter.

Hawaii is a rather peculiar State.

Only five of my classmates were white. It made sense considering that Caucasians were a minority, only a quarter of the population. Filipinos rivaled that number. The last white friend I knew was when I was seven, ending with his transfer to mainland United States and with my

parents disgusted that I ever wanted to have blonde hair. All my playmates thereafter shared my skin, pride of their blood rooted in a bi-monthly *Pinoy* touch to the school's lunch menu.

Perhaps I was *more* Filipino than most because I was the only one among my peers to have gone to Manila. Jeepneys, barongs, and maids was what I told them about. How arrogantly I boasted of the king's life in share-and-tells: did you know that they do everything for you there? You don't clean up at fast food chains! You can do anything you want!

It was, undeniably, a very romanticized Philippines, full of the freedom and the opportunities that I thought this island off the Pacific lacked. But its reality was hidden by the comfort that I sought in watching iCarly before the channel would flip to The Filipino Channel (TFC) at six o' clock in the evening. I whined: why can't we just swap TFC with Disney XD?

The story that I wanted to hear back then was perhaps the one that most could take, and probably the bare minimum that my family could ask from me. "Always say *manong* or *manang* first, always *mano* to your *Lola* and *Lolo*". That was it, that is the essence of a Filipino, along with keeping a visitor's mouth full no matter what.

"Just don't be a Jejemon"

My cousins gave me advice on a growing neo-nationalist trend when I moved to the Philippines – "remember how to text properly". The Jejemons were identifiable, clad in jerseys and a Snapback featuring the three stars and a sun. It was East Coast hip-hop and acknowledging one's heritage. "Pinoy *ako*" they would scream in the corridors and YouTube comments.

"Sure" I assured my cousins – I learned the difference between 'your' and 'you're', 'to' and 'too', 'their' and 'there' – minded my p's and q's, if you may. Around me, the way they spoke stayed the same, wearing me out by slaughtering a 'superior' English language.

What the hell is Wattpad?

In my first year of high school, I noticed that girls had pocketbooks instead of jerseys. No more alphanumeric cyphers. Finally, people grew up. Finally, we can act like civilized people, unlike the *masa* (around this time, my definition of *masa*, a rather ignorant one, encompassed anyone who enjoyed the pop-culture produced by Filipinos).

But alas, *Diary ng Panget* was the title displayed on the covers. Another product of the *masa*, and so I dismissed the work outright. I would later have a legitimate reason to dismiss it, by accompanying my mom to what I considered a ‘cheesy’ movie adaptation. The plot? A girl considered ugly because of her pimples goes for a dreamy guy. Her friend helps her by getting her facial wash.

At bookstores, I browsed through the Filipiniana section for my own entertainment. Wattpad novels, the new Precious Hearts Romance novels that used to litter the drawers of my aunts, filled the shelves with titles like *My Beki Boss* and *She’s Dating the Gangster*.

Of course, there is more than the aforementioned.

Nick Joaquin and F. Sionil Jose came into my life. Indeed, it was sad that their names were forgotten in my quest to find a fault in Philippine literature. *These* are the authors we should be reading, why aren’t more people reading *these* authors I would think, as I condescendingly ruffled through the pages to report its story the next day in class.

The next week my Filipino teacher would have us watch films like *Maynila, sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* – there was more than just *The Unkabogable: Praybeyt Benjamin* of Vice Ganda. Again, condescendingly, I quipped – we can produce intelligent material, after all!

More than the names in a social studies lecture.

Juan Luna, Claro M. Recto, Eddie Romero. A few of the many mentioned throughout my stay here, but nothing more than a citation in a mandatory curriculum. Maybe that was the reason F. Sionil Jose slipped my memory in my visit to the Filipiniana section. He was but another name in the cluster of ‘notable’ Filipinos.

Although it should have never been the way I was introduced to his brilliance, it was through a grade requirement that I was forced to open his books. The same goes for OPM, if not for a class project involving a concert for charity, I would have never really listened to Eraserheads or Parokya ni Edgar. If not for an extra grade, I would have never gone to the Cultural Center of the Philippines for a show on martial law.

Culture, if a representation of life, demands to be lived. It demands to be read, demands to be heard, demands to be danced, demands to be felt and sang and spoken in open mics, gigs, comic book releases, and mini shows.

But what about that kid? Did he meet Coco again?

Ang Probinsyano still does not really appeal to me, despite its homage to the legend Fernando Poe Jr. It would be a huge disservice to the rest of the population to discount Can't Help Falling In Love With You featuring love team KathNiel. As for Lav Diaz's eight hour films, there seems to be little interest outside the circle that can afford to take a day's worth of pay off their schedule.

Culture has been problematic in that it cuts deep through socio-economic lines. ‘High culture’ of elites and ‘low culture’ of the *masa*. Marx writes of culture as a tool to manipulate the lower classes and create a false consciousness, a hindrance to a true perception of reality.

Not everyone has gone to the University of the Philippines, nor does every school have a theatre. Three hundred pesos is a lot for an entrance fee, relative to the rest of the population. Five hundred pesos is not worth a book if one can get a pocketbook five times cheaper. What is the most accessible narrative? The love stories, the twists at the end of the *teleseryes*, the hope of rags to riches. That is the narrative they are able to afford, the narrative that is shoved down the masses throats in primetime hours.

And the middle to upper class? They enjoy the privilege to choose their indulgence, and their time in more ‘meaningful’ work. Narratives chock-full of cliché get boring. They enjoy the privilege to venture out into experimental culture and explore new ideas.

Sana, sisikat ka rin

What kind of culture do we want to promote? The upper classes would very much want you to subscribe to their enjoyment, which, is not relatable to the rest of the 99 percent of the country. Yet, they argue, culture is an intellectual stimulation, not found in the conveyor belt produce of the mass media industry. But not everyone can access the award-winning works of the Palanca website. Not every school is at the pleasure of teaching Amorsolo’s genius. Even I am alienated from most of my Ilocano ancestry. Not everyone has that exposure.

“Study hard, and hopefully you do get known throughout the industry” were my final words. Hopefully, the opportunity does come to the kid, and hopefully he would be picking up from the styles of Piolo Pascual and Nora Aunor. Hopefully, he would be inspired by Lualhati Bautista or influenced by Rolando Tinio. But if I threw around names like this, maybe it would be kept at that, a name, buried in that same messy cloud of curriculum citations. Hopefully, you would get to live out those names, and perhaps one day living out those names would be easier.