

## Under My Invisible Umbrella

By Laurel Fantauzzo

I accepted the man's service without question, as if he had been standing at the doorway of the Olongapo office building waiting only for me. As if I knew he would head into the downpour, open his umbrella, hold the tenuous shelter of it over my head, and walk at my pace, getting wet himself. I accepted his work without a "Salamat po." I was second to worst in my class of Filipino American would-be Tagalog speakers that July, and, in 2007, at age 23, I was still too embarrassed to try.

As I waited for the rest of my Fil-Am classmates, my Tagalog teacher Susan Quimpo approached me, holding her own umbrella.

"Did you notice that he held the umbrella only for you?" she murmured.

Then—as people of the Philippines are inclined to do, when a situation seems too absurd in its wrongness to repair—she laughed.

My classmates and I sounded the same: Fil-Ams managing our emotional confusion with loud inside jokes about our two months together in Manila. But they were brown and they were damp. I was pale and I was dry.

The man was not holding the umbrella above me. He was holding the umbrella above my whiteness. He was holding it like a flag for everything he assumed my whiteness represented: my wealth, my station in life—higher than his—and my deserving extra service.

This worship of whiteness is not a phenomenon unique to the Philippines. But

that day in Olongapo, I felt a surge of shame.

Of course, whether I felt guilty or not, I was still dry.

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Before moving to the Philippines, I had no idea how closely my class would be identified with my face. In America, my face had been merely diverting, a prompt for racial guessing-games that always made me shudder. “Mexican! Polish! Sephardic!” “You kinda look Spanish and Oriental at the same time. What is that?” Or my face had been an inspiration for the saying of strange, murky compliments that made me shudder more. “I wish I had your nice, smooth, Asian skin.” “You’re so lucky your nose isn’t too—well, you know.”

In Manila, my ambiguous whiteness was no longer ambiguous. It was simply whiteness.

Thanks to my face, and the strength of the dollars I had, I was top one-percenting for the first time in my life. I lived, overtly, the troubling inventory Peggy McIntosh outlines in “White Privilege: Unpacking The Invisible Knapsack:”

*Whether I use checks, credit cards or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.*

*I can choose public accommodation without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated in the places I have chosen.*

Perhaps, in Manila, I lived a variation of McIntosh’s theme: Moving Under The Invisible Umbrella.

Last August, I spent only forty pesos at an upscale cafe in Greenbelt mall to wait

out a cloudburst. I used the café's Wi-Fi for hours, while servers impatiently thrust menus at more-melanined customers who had dared sit for too long.

I wandered onto a fenced-in, exclusive university campus for the sole reason that it was a nice walk, and I wanted to be there. The guard smiled and tipped his hat to me. He did not require me to sign his security book.

In a live, crowded theater, I crossed a restricted area to use the much less crowded staff restroom. Four guards said nothing.

As I slowly learned my motherland's arithmetic of identity—repeated in countries once brutalized by white rulers around the world—, I realized what members of the service sector assumed of me: English speaker + pale face + black hair = A foreigner. Or a mestiza. She looks like the rulers—Spanish, or American. She and her family must have some authority—perhaps political authority. She merits extra courtesy.

As I spent more time in the Philippines in the late 2000s, developing my understanding of the society my mother left in 1979, I tried to reconcile what I saw with the reality I came from. My mother was the second-to-youngest child of seven. The last home she shared with her family was a small apartment that flooded regularly. She was a scholar at Ateneo de Manila University, always explained to me as the Harvard of the Philippines. Her classmates' easy, entitled affluence depressed her. We lived in a wealthy California suburb because my mother was always conscious of the necessity to perform wealth. And we ate bread from the Wonderbread surplus store. We never, ever threw away expired meat.

But the education my parents guaranteed me, in a wealthier country that once

controlled the Philippines garnered me grants and scholarships—advantages of travel that few middle-to-lower-class scholars in the Philippines will ever see.

My favorite karinderya serves scrambled eggs and rice for twenty pesos. My presence amuses and annoys the guards and drivers who were never granted scholarships to study me in my birth country. As my Tagalog improved, I began to understand their objections. Didn't I have a more sosyal place to eat as a foreigner? What was I playing at, treading into their space?

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I occasionally see my relatives in Tandang Sora, a long but narrow street with many working-class neighborhoods. My cousins often think about strategies to become Overseas Filipino Workers. It isn't their first choice to leave. But they have no other escape from the criminally small wages given them. Last summer they were developing their own small karinderya.

I always consider their position against mine. It is an uneasy comparison. Had my mother not been a scholar—had her own, elder sister not married an American, and petitioned for her to join them in California—had my mother not found my father, a U.S. Naval officer who made her laugh—I too might be starting a karinderya, finding strategies to go abroad.

Whenever I visit Tandang Sora, I always bring dessert—a box of donuts, or a bag of cookies, or ice cream. My cousins always feed me: sopas, afritada, fried chicken, tilapia stuffed with garlic and tomatoes, which they know to be my favorite. They joke

about my Italian side when spaghetti is on the table. They feed me well.

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Of course, none of the economic struggles that once haunted my family approach the reality of the kalesa driver, who winces when he tells me about his wages, as he plies the avenues of Malate. He is allowed to take home only twenty pesos of each 100-peso ride. The rest he owes to the owner of his kalesa. It's perfectly legal. He does not say the rest, but I can perceive it: he can go to no one for fair wages.

Or my cab driver who dozes off at a stoplight—who apologizes when I nudge him—since it's the twenty-third hour of his twenty-four-hour shift. How often will he get the chance to sheepishly say, “Extra charge, ma'am,” for a cross-Quezon City ride?

Or the server who looks at me in terror when we realize she brought the wrong order. Who will stop her boss from automatically deducting the two hundred pesos from her own small paycheck? Who can she look to, besides me, and the narrative of wealth my pale face projects, to momentarily assist her with a generous tip?

When I find shrewd charges added to my bills, I argue as briefly as my Tagalog-in-progress will allow. My Filipino friends say I should argue, for the principle of it. The workers are likely being dramatic, performing their desperation. My friends say they get cheated too as Filipinas.

In the end I call the overcharges my “dayuhan tax.” My foreigner tariff. The extra cost I owe for the postcolonial privileges of my face. As long as the population remains economically stranded, I suspect my American whiteness continues to be a kind of

cheating in the modern Philippines.

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Besides the *dauyhan* tax I joke about, there are other subtler, more personal taxes intrinsic to my pallid appearance. No one in the Philippines will ever immediately believe I am Filipina, no matter how strongly and how affectionately I choose the country. My Tagalog will take years to reach everyday, pun-level proficiency. My mother chose not to teach me and my two younger brothers Tagalog, for fear that our Italian American father would feel excluded. My brothers feel no connection at all to her home country. I alone return regularly.

Sometimes, expats of Western countries who hear my California accent and see my pale face assume they've found a friendly audience for their Philippines frustrations. I'll hear their complaints coming—Corruption! Traffic! Terrible customer service!—and I will say, stiffly, "My mother was from here." Sometimes it gives the expats pause. Sometimes it doesn't.

I do not know when I will deserve to say, "I am from here." My language difficulties and my face still prevent me access to that statement. But I often hear that I am lucky. I may not belong to a ruling family, but I look and sound like I do.

On some days I don't know what to do with all this, when I leave the room I rent in Quezon City. On some weekends I grow so tired and confused, I don't leave. I stay in and watch the subtitles on the local music video channel, Myx, to try and gain a little more Tagalog. I harbor dreams of using my white mestiza privilege to become a VJ,

until I hear how fast and natural the VJs' Tagalog is.

I catch a commercial for a whitening soap. I see a soap opera ad with an actress in the indigenous equivalent of blackface. I watch a cell phone commercial pandering to the longings of Overseas Filipino Workers. None of it is terribly surprising. All of it makes a certain kind of sense.

I turn the television off.

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One night, a new friend invites me to a party in Forbes Park. I know the neighborhood's name as code, the way I know certain last names as code: upper-est class, highest security, a servant for each family member, etc.

A private gate guards the house. It reminds me of the palatial, forbidding, buttery mansions I used to pass on drives through Malibu in Southern California with an ex-girlfriend who knew where celebrities lived. The young man hosting the party here in Forbes Park is connected, in a way I don't immediately grasp, to a political family.

Inside the house, a fog machine distorts the regal dark. A DJ's bass line shakes my skeleton. A man dressed like a pirate urges us to drink. Small, oval-shaped rainbows glow intensely at a slick, temporary bar. Servers call me "Ma'am!" and gesture toward the rainbows. I realize they're drinks. I pick one up. It illuminates my hand. My rainbow shot is very, very sweet.

Outside, serious-faced cooks grill hamburgers. I grew up knowing never to spurn free food, so I stand in line for one. I watch more and more young Manileños arrive.

They are, I realize, all part of the ruling classes somehow, or they have befriended members of the ruling classes. Many of them—though not all—are as white as I am, or more white.

I see a mechanical bull.

“What?” a Filipina friend mocks me later, when I describe the bull and the bass line and the sweet rainbow and the Malibu-celebrity-style house and the free burger that was really very delicious. “Were you just judging it the whole time?”

I flinch. But I fail to explain to her that the same thought occurred to me at the party, too.

Why, I argued to myself, should I judge this? Why should I worry about my complicity in racial hierarchies and class hierarchies and family entrenchments that were constructed long before I ever arrived in my motherland? Why not imagine, for just one night, that I *am* part of a powerful family? Why not just laugh?

So I drink another rainbow. I get photographed. I exchange business cards. I memorize new names. I watch the whipping hair of socialites who ride the now-bucking bull. In the small hours of the night, I feel glad I am able to enjoy myself.

When I finally exit the gate, I am surprised to find another, more muted party—*party* in the most utilitarian sense of the word.

These are the drivers and bodyguards, waiting for the members of the Philippine elite inside. They smoke and murmur to each other and check their cell phones. Their own families are waiting for them at homes far from Forbes Park.

I have no easy explanation for my feelings about this moment. The workers

would not welcome, and do not deserve, my pity. But as I move mere footsteps from the company of the sovereigns to the company of their servants, I feel the uncertainty and shame that blur so often in me here. In the Philippines, I can get past the gate.

For a chance at the social mobility I perform effortlessly, many Filipinos, waiting forever, unprotected, outside barred mansions, will leave. They will hope for work in a place—Europe, or my birth country—that helped create and enforce the intractable inequity forcing their displacement today.

When I cease imagining the difference of those lives—when I choose dismissal over compassion and self-examination and criticism, to make my own path in the country feel less unnatural than it is—

Perhaps that's when it will be time for me to leave the Philippines.

Or perhaps that's when I will finally be able to say I am from the Philippines.

I don't really know which.

How do I make space in myself for everyone on both sides of the gate?  
Protected and unprotected?

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I have a troubled relationship with umbrellas. They are daily necessities in Manila, where the weather can alter by the hour with the intensity of an erratic god. But I always lose umbrellas. Or I break them. It always surprises me when umbrellas break. I never expect them to be as fragile as they are.

Once, when the wind blew the trees horizontal in the business district of Ortigas, I paused in the lobby of an office tower, drenched. More and more passersby, each of their umbrellas brutalized and useless, joined me. The guards let us all stay. Most of us were waiting to walk to the MRT train. Over the next hour, we watched power lines whip and taxis forge defiantly forward and rain slash into the streets' now-surgingly floodwaters. We were all, for a brief moment, equally halted, equally soaked.

Then one guard noticed me.

"Taxi, ma'am?" he asked. "Taxi?"

He smiled, offering to go out into the rain for me. I smiled back, and told him no.