

“Eyes of Humanity,” a Creative Non-Fiction Piece Written and Performed by Jennifer Tehani Sarreal at the Miles Playhouse in 2015

Standing barefoot on a dirt path leading to the ocean, I closed my eyes and listened to the rhythm of drums floating in the wind. The throbbing beats were louder than they have been in previous days, transporting me three kilometers away to where schools of *tribus* were rehearsing their dance-dramas. My heart smiled as I imagined the excitement and passion motivated by the coming competition. In just one day, the *tribus* would invade the streets with their music and release me from a life of obligation and restriction with the grand closing of a long festival. My body (usually aching to dance) stood completely still, absorbing the percussive cadence that, like rainfall, pounded into me a sense of peace and saved my mind from the unnecessary. I opened my eyes to a red-orange sky. I had to return before someone noticed I was gone and forgotten that, in Miagao, I didn't even have the right to reverie.

I ran down the road until I reached the gate of the little house, next door to the even smaller thatched *nipa* huts of bamboo. It was a humble home, but I felt ashamed walking through its doors knowing it was a blatant symbol of the two separate realities that never intentionally intermingled in the barrio of Palaka. I have been in Miagao for three weeks, and I still cringed with guilt when I flushed a toilet or took a shower indoors while across the street little kids were shitting in holes in the sand. I walked straight into the kitchen and into the maids' area next to the cooking fire where my hosts never ventured. It was a place of solitude and sanity. It was where I prepared my coffee on even the hottest days under the *Pinay* sun. It was where I quietly asked myself why I was in the Philippines.

Six months ago, never saying no to a plane ticket, I agreed to fly to Miagao to participate in the Salakayan Festival. A professional dancer with a degree in Cultural Anthropology, I was

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ecstatic at the idea of being introduced to the people and culture of the Philippines in such a unique way. I didn’t believe in visiting a country for the sake of visiting. I had to breathe it in, give back and volunteer to feel satisfied. This was my opportunity and I couldn’t be happier. The only catch was that I was required to participate as the “Queen of Miagao”. Being labeled as “queen” of *anything* rubbed me the wrong way, but I tried not to think about it. Who says no to a free trip?

I immediately discovered it was *not* good to be queen. It was miserable. I was starting to believe it was the reason they had to journey all the way to California just to find a girl gullible enough to do it. My hours, days and weeks were planned without me and those rare moments of liberation were façades. I couldn’t go anywhere alone; if I crossed the street without supervision, someone would grab my arm and admonish me about the dangers of “wandering off”. All of my ideas were met with opposition before I articulated them and I was constantly harangued about my weight, my skin color (I was too dark) and my lack of their version of “femininity”. My feminist rants, in particular, earned me a nickname I will never comprehend: Cowboy.

My chaperones (a first in my life) started to call me “the politician” because they said I was too friendly with strangers. During my first week in Palaka, Miagao, I had the misadventure of visiting an international medical mission with the Mayor – an actual politician. We entered near a big sign that read: *Through the efforts of the Mayor!* It was a sobering experience: children with cleft palates, injuries I cannot name, cataracts that covered the entire eye... I was helping a blind woman find her place in line and write her name on a slip of paper, when I was pulled away from her and the Mayor said, “We visited once. That’s enough”. My innocence of political “efforts” was lost that afternoon. And I never understood any of my nicknames.

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I felt like a puppet. I only lacked the pull-string on my back to regurgitate the disempowering pre-written script. When it became unbearable and I lost my good humor somewhere with my patience, I ran to the beach or sat in the back of the kitchen with my coffee to count the days until the festival would end and I would be free to leave Miagao on my own. This was madness I did not sign up for.

Dark, steaming comfort flowed up into my nostrils and warmed my unusually cool hands as I stared down into the Mother Earth browns and swirling sea foam whites of my caffeinated safe haven. I savored the smell and heat that brought me comfort I couldn't find elsewhere. I appreciated the constancy of a beverage that felt like an enveloping embrace I needed so badly. Sitting alone, I could hear the drums again – faint, but audible. It gave me hope. That evening, the whole town would be at a fundraiser for the children of Miagao. I was to give a speech and (if I could evade my chaperones) enjoy the evening as myself and not the counterfeit version. I had to remember the reason I flew 16 hours across the international dateline (and lost a Wednesday in the process). This suffering could not be for nothing.

Night came and we arrived at the fundraiser on time (15 minutes late), but it took me several moments to realize I was still in Miagao. The main plaza was draped in beautiful fabrics, beaming with strobe lights, pulsing with the D.J.'s speakers and a long buffet covered the length of a basketball court. I couldn't believe such a shameless display of wealth could possibly occur at a fundraiser for impoverished children. Then again, many of these “philanthropists” who visit just to “give back” were personally driven to the event from mansions they owned only blocks away. The event entirely consisted of foreigners (like myself) and city officials who were

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dressed as if they were at a Prom. Confused, I left my hosts’ table using the pretext of having to prepare for my speech.

Walking to the podium, a sinking feeling took hold of me. It clogged my throat, dropped down to paralyze my heart and finally settled into my stomach that gave me a nausea I can still invoke years later with the recollection of the heartbreaking sight before me: eyes. Eyes, literally *hundreds* of pairs of eyes, watched the festivities from outside the open-aired plaza. The big, unrevealing eyes of the children held a stoicism that can only be learned. Grasping the bars that kept their families out of the plaza, I witnessed betrayal and exploitation on a whole new level. Those eyes – so hardened and empty – created a dense perimeter of injustice that left no room for explanation, discussion or my petition for forgiveness.

Something within me snapped like a marionette’s strings that only provided false freedom. I felt an unfamiliar rage boil within me as I slowly and deliberately turned toward the buffet and grabbed a plate. I forgot about the speech and felt those eyes looking in with a childhood curiosity stunted by hardship. I automatically piled as much food as I could onto the plate, kicked off my shoes and walked outside the gates without looking back. I heard one of my hosts laughing in her seat behind me. Children who had no shoes, no shirts and clearly no dinner kept a safe distance away as I approached. I held out my plate to hungry eyes that would not move closer. The kids who inched forward were pulled back by their parents and reprimanded quietly. The crowd outside and their intense eyes all turned away when I approached. I stood between the unfazed gluttony inside and the cold rejection outside the plaza. Silent and confused, I began to tremble.

Defeated, I sat on the steps in front of the gate and wept. Lloyd, a Peace Corps volunteer, saw me crying and sat next to me. I met him the week before and he introduced himself as “the

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guy in town from the Midwest” (who spoke perfect *Ilongo*). The few moments I had free to speak with Lloyd, he was the familiar panacea for my loneliness – when I felt alone in my convictions, when I felt misunderstood, when I felt there was no one to talk to in a town where no one actively listened to me.

“I don’t understand!” I exploded, “How can you handle this?!”

“It used to really bug me, too,” Lloyd responded calmly. “I used to blog about the huge disparity between the rich and poor...how I would go to events with all the poor people locked out...”

“It *used* to bug you?”

“You gotta understand something about Filipinos... Some of them just like watching. You’ll get used to it...” he tried to reassure me.

I couldn’t force anyone to feel human. So alone in every way, I tried to grin for Lloyd’s failed attempt at bleeding solidarity. I walked beyond the crowd and into the darkness to cry. It was silent and dark. There were no drums in the distance to grant me optimism. I couldn’t even hear my own barefoot steps. I wanted to scream in that silence, but only cried. The old adage: *blood, sweat, tears...* I wondered if there was anything more honest than the body’s weeping. We cannot fabricate just as we cannot shake these authentic experiences that change us forever. I will never forget those eyes. I saw those eyes everywhere, but mine wept alone as I walked forward into the darkness that violently grabbed at me like the rape of a people by conquistadors.