

## Where is Home?

### Examining Diaspora Tourism and Immigration via Marigold Santos' *Aswang*

What would it mean to return to a homeland that you cannot remember? Growing up I would extract bits and pieces of our cultural history from my father, yet my mother's side and the island where I was born were topics only carefully broached in his grief. While I do hold affection and some semblance of loyalty, I simply do not believe that there would be a revelation or sense of belonging upon return. I have spent nearly all of my life here in Canada though that is not to say that I have felt recognized or understood here either. Rather, I exist in a limbo, just enough of a difference to be considered foreign in some circles whether it be in Canada or the West Indies. In terms of Caribbean authenticity, I can be 'elevated' in contrast to those that claim to be from the islands though were born and raised in Canada, but I am distant enough in that I have spent my life elsewhere and thus not the same as those that have remained. So, if I were to return is it truly a homecoming or am I another tourist? This is a question I have considered heavily, further nuanced by the fact that so much economic value is placed on the tourism sector in the West Indies. Would I not be contributing to the ongoing colonial servitude, exacerbated by the fact that I can pass as another kind of Canadian tourist? While these questions are my own to reckon with, I have been drawn to artists that are processing similar reflections in their respective practices. The works of Filipina-Canadian artist Marigold Santos have been especially insightful, considering the idea of multiple selfhoods, immigration, and cultural engagement.

Given that returning to an ancestral homeland is distinct from visiting somewhere of no relation, traveling back is known as 'diaspora tourism'. One of the questions I asked myself when I was introduced to the term was: how is this distinction visually represented? What elements of memory and nostalgia are imbued to communicate migrant ancestry? How are physical and emotional ties to origin translated? Santos considers these questions in broader themes stemming from her experience immigrating from the Philippines to Canada as a child. Her practice is informed by this shift in home and how it affects her identity, actively reflecting on how she engages with her culture.

As mentioned, Santos was born in the Philippines and immigrated to Canada as a child, first to Scarborough, then to Calgary, then to Montréal for her graduate education, and is currently operating her interdisciplinary practice out of Calgary once more. Her works maintain an autobiographical component, contemplating immigrating as a child— what it means to carry narratives and stories with you, as opposed to material goods. With that change is assimilating to a new culture, learning a new language (possibly at the sacrifice of one's first language), and identifying social politics. So, what does it look like to return home, to return to the narratives within one's culture after time within another?

The fragmented identity is the focal point of Santos' practice, with the primary subject of Santos' works being the *aswang*, a shapeshifting creature within Philippine folklore. The *aswang* is a danger to humans and animals, feasting on flesh and blood as a "viscera sucker". Despite being a

conflation of vampires, witches, and were-beasts, the *aswang* disguises itself as a human (typically a beautiful woman with long black hair) in daylight. Women have been falsely accused of being *aswang* due to the threat that native leaders and healers (*babaylan*) within the community posed against the Spaniards' efforts to colonize. These women were deemed evil, and the community were encouraged to see them as such. Further, the *aswang* is feared for preying on children and fetuses— directly opposing the Filipino values of unity and the family. If the *aswang* is the inversion of Philippine values, Santos' identification with the figure complicates the cultural relationship. The *aswang* captures the multifaceted aspect of identity in that it is a shapeshifter, yet is also a threat to what it means to be Filipina, in that it embodies the antithesis of Philippine values. Moreover, would immigration not also threaten Philippine culture? Living outside of one's homeland and facing a loss of language is a fear as it poses a danger to the propagation of culture. That is, how does one manage to carry their culture with them? On the obverse is the reality of living abroad as part of Philippine culture— overseas Filipino workers send back capital to boost the Philippines' economy, keeping it afloat through remittances. The layered identity of Santos and her identification with the *aswang* falls in line with the complications of cultural identities, constantly changing shape.

As mentioned, Santos' experience is informed by existing in a cultural belonging limbo. This limbo relates to diasporic tourism in that her engagement with her own culture (one of them being Philippine) can be seen as an outsider participating, despite having a direct connection. Since she does not “exist” within the culture “full-time” is her engagement as an outsider perceived as participating in a cultural drop-in? Does the artist feel like an outsider, experiencing the need to constantly shift shape to belong in multiple communities? While I do not have these answers, I do not believe she is an outsider, I believe she should feel welcome participating in and within both cultures. Otherwise Santos, and others with a hybrid identity including myself, would be relegated to participating in a culture of nothing.

On the topic of hybrid identities, I often find myself returning to the ideas of Stuart Hall, the Jamaican-born cultural theorist. Hall's contributions resonate given that he is also from the West Indies; his work recognizes the pigmentocracy and related resentment, the realities of being mixed-race in the Caribbean, and receiving an education ‘elsewhere’ since that ‘elsewhere’ grants more credibility to due colonial hierarchies (him England, myself Canada). The duality in cultural experience lends itself to a balance in credibility. One can tap into an intellectual background accredited to nations that are more valued and trusted in western circles. Whereas the Other background diversifies the perspective, giving breadth to the echo chambers of thought while having a link that is more than an outsider anthropological observation. Like Hall, Santos cannot participate as a third party observing, ensuring not to interrupt the local population, since we are linked to said culture. However, there is still a distance in that we are not the ones being observed, there is still a gap between ourselves and those that participate and pass on the culture more faithfully. This gap in identity is present with the introduction of the cultural background as a whole: what is a Filipina artist to a Filipina-Canadian artist? The hyphenated qualifier marks the difference between the two, a filter from the first-hand perspective of one undiluted identity. It is not the same experience as someone living on the island if

you're home is elsewhere. It is the difference between an artist being inspired by folklore versus being reduced to a folk artist.

Santos' engagement with folklore presents two opposing ideas: engaging with one's cultural history to strengthen Philippine identity versus identifying as a figure that elicits fear within the Philippine community, one that inherently threatens Philippine values. Santos' relationship to the *aswang* is relatable as it is the desire to connect with one's culture, however if one felt that connection as is, would they seek to fortify it? This situation is a reality for people that have immigrated young, seeking a tether to connect them to their origin— a link that would reinforce that they belong.

Toni Morrison considers the idea of a 'belonging limbo' (my paraphrasing) in her chapter "The Foreigner's Home" in *The Origin of Others*: "Of not being home in their homeland; of being exiled in the place where they belong" (p.100). While in the context of Black American perceptions of Africa, the reality of a homeland with which one has a delicate relationship is shared. There is a shared relation of mythologizing, Otherness cultivated within the new 'home', and some level of ignorance. Ignorance can relate to biased perceptions of one's origin, in addition to not knowing one's history or one's mother tongue. Distance from one's culture presents a compromise of safety and security when you do not have the same hold of language, whether it's the ability to communicate on a literal or cultural level it would be evident in how one engages with the local population. It affects how one navigates the country of origin in addition to relationships, failing to recognize the conversational nuances that exist within the community. At the most fundamental level, losing one's language jeopardizes the way in which belonging can be found. There will always be a difference of fluency for the native speaker in contrast to the tourist.

There is a question underlying each exploration, including my own: How can we locate home within the self? This yearning for somewhere to belong is evident in the reflections, yet it is not guaranteed either in the homeland or the site of immigration. If one takes immigration out of the equation, the issue of belonging would still exist. To find one's community and a place of belonging (and acceptance of hyphenated identities) assuages the dilemma, though not entirely. Perhaps the idea of belonging is like the *aswang*, constantly changing shape and ever-elusive.