

Story Summary

Rebecca, a Filipino American, grew up in nearly all-white neighborhoods and schools. In 2000, she began reconnecting with her Filipino heritage and became a woman of color.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the story of your family's immigration to North America and settlement? If your heritage is Native American, where did your tribe(s) live before colonization?
2. Where in the world has your family lived? How are race and culture connected to those places?
3. What are the stereotypes about your race, gender, economic status, or geographic location? Do you feel these stereotypes reflect who you are or create pressures to be something you are not?
4. How often do you see yourself or your heritage portrayed in films? What do the main characters in these films look like and what do they have to do to succeed?

Resources

- Filipino American National Historic Society – <http://fanhs-national.org/filam/>
- Women of Color in the United States – <http://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/women-color-united-states-0>
- *Brown Skin, White Minds: Filipino -/ American Postcolonial Psychology* by E.J.R. David

Themes

- Asian Americans/Asians
- Education and Life Lessons
- Identity
- Immigration

Full Transcript

Hello, my name is Rebecca Mabanglo-Mayor. My mother and father left the Philippines in 1955 and met in Seattle in the Duwamish territory. When they met, it was a time of great upheaval in Seattle. There was a lot of prejudice against Filipinos and the civil rights movement was just beginning. The elders in the Filipino community told them not to teach me their languages because it would hold me back in school.

I was their American dream. So, we moved to a suburb south of Seattle. And I grew up in all white neighborhoods, attended mostly white schools, and went to a mostly white

church. Growing up, I saw Filipinos as my parents, the Filipino community in Seattle, but not myself. I was an American. My parents wanted me to succeed in school and so they encouraged me to not just do better than the girls in my class but to do well and exceed the boys in my class. I did so well that I was accepted into the physics program at Washington State University. I wanted to be Carl Sagan's assistant. The program was very difficult, and, eventually, I realized that what I really had a passion for was literature. I went to graduate school in creative writing and I met Rosanne Kanhai, an Indo-Caribbean woman. And she saw something inside me. And she asked me if I would go to a Woman of Color Conference. I was curious. I wanted to see what the women of color did as academics. After the conference, I was driving home and I realized that my internalized oppression had gone so deep that I had seen myself as a white man not a woman of color. That started me on a journey to understand what it meant to be a Filipino.

I began to research Filipino stories. I began to understand the values and worldviews of my people before colonization. Before the Americans had come. Before the Spanish had come. These stories taught me much. In 2015, I had an opportunity to visit indigenous leaders. To find out what it was like to be part of the land to be a certain people. In that time, they taught me many things. And showed me that their struggles were, very stru... very similar to the struggles of the native tribes, here in the United States. They were displaced by corporations and the military and the government. They were forgotten because they were seen as backwards and educated. They thought I was educated but I went to learn from them. I went to learn how to be part of the land. How to be in community.

There is a story of three artisans who made a beautiful statue of a woman. And that statue came to life. And these three artisans argued over who would get to marry the beautiful woman they had created. They went to seek the judgment of the Babaylan, the Wise Woman. The carver said, "I had taken a branch of a tree and carved her so I have the right to marry her."

The tailor said, "I clothed her and made her modest. I should marry her."

The jeweler said, "No, I arrayed her in the most beautiful jewels and made her a queen. I deserve to marry her."

And the Babaylan thought and looked at each man and considered their case carefully. Then she asked, "Have you asked the woman what she wants?"

And the carver looked at the tailor, and the tailor looked at the jeweler, and the jeweler looked back to the carver, and said, "Ask her what she wants?"

And the Babaylan said, "Yes." And turned to the woman and said, "Who would you like to marry?"

And the woman turned to the carver and said, "Thank you for creating my body. And I thank you, tailor, for clothing me and making me modest. And thank you jeweler for making me a queen. But I wish to be as I have always been." And she reached her hands to the sky and her arms became branches and her body became the trunk of a tree and her feet rooted to the ground. She became as she always had been, a tree.

The elders of those indigenous tribes - the T'boli, the Ifugao, the Magindinao, the Obo Manobo. They all taught me that what was most important was to be myself. I am Filipino and I am American. That is all I need to be. Myself.

And these teachings, their teachings, I am always grateful for. And I take their stories to other communities so they will know that Filipinos are not just one people. They are many peoples of the islands with many different traditions, many different languages, many different ways of seeing the world. And yet, we are all together a people. All tasked with taking care of this beautiful planet on which we live. For we are always in relationship, not just with each other, not with just ourselves, but with the greater world around us.