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Culminating Experience Reflective Essay

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explorations of a global Filipina artist

Looking back at the past year at the Berklee Global Jazz Institute, I am deeply grateful. It was a time of self-excavation, broadening one's perspective, stepping out of comfort zones and fully embracing who I am while also being reminded of how much there is yet to discover and continuously redefine for ourselves. My culminating experience was an opportunity to dig deeper into exploring what it means to be a Filipina artist in a globalized world. It was an opportunity for me to articulate, both through words and through music, ideas and thoughts that have been deep within my heart and to give focus to areas of my life that needed growth in order for the music to flow.

I named my thesis "**ahon**", a word in my native language Tagalog meaning "*the rising out of; the ascent; or the disembarkment*". For me, these words encapsulate what this project means to me as well as the evolution that it has taken me through, both as an artist and as a person.

The Seed

When I first started the Berklee Global Jazz master's program, I knew that my thesis was to be a continuation of a quest to unravel my cultural and ancestral roots. This was a personal project of mine that I began researching on in 2015, the year I first came to the United States to

pursue my first formal music education at the Berklee College of Music. Suddenly surrounded by a rich diversity of cultures, music, and people from all over the world, I began to embrace even more my identity as a Filipina while also realizing how little I knew of my own cultural traditions.

I spent the first 19 years of my life in Metro Manila, the National Capital Region of the Philippines. Though I was born and raised there, I found myself becoming aware of the fact that I knew more about Western music and literature than my own, more about Spanish colonial history than the rich cultural heritage of our indigenous people. Even as a Filipina artist, I had to ask myself, ***“What is Filipino music?”*** It’s not as simple of a question as it may seem because the term “Filipino” only even came about when a group of islands in the Malay archipelago were colonized by Spain and named after their king Philip II. Even after 333 years of Spanish colonization, we were also colonized by the Americans and endured the brutalities of Japanese occupation during World War II. Before these colonial and warring powers came to the islands, what is now known as the Philippines was inhabited by a variety of different kingdoms and tribes -- each with their own culture, language, music and traditions.

Uncovering my cultural and ancestral heritage meant peeling back all these different layers in the history of the Filipino and looking beyond what was presented to me. I began delving into the works of Filipina singer and ethnomusicologist **Grace Nono**, who spent much of her life living with, learning from, and documenting the different indigenous groups that still exist around the Philippines. Her books and music were a great inspiration to me and gave me a stronger sense of direction as I dug more into indigenous Philippine culture. I also started listening to the music of **Bob Aves**, a prolific Filipino guitarist whose works fused ethnic Filipino

with jazz. His music opened my mind to the idea of using my own unique musical voice as both a Filipina and jazz artist to tell the stories of my people through my own story.

What these Filipino artists did for me was to open my eyes to the fact that I am a part of the living and breathing history of our people; one that has many different layers of consciousness that would take me a lifetime to unfold but one that I can also redefine and create.

Research

One of the important things I had to consider in my research of the indigenous traditions of the Philippines was the fact that much of the knowledge I was seeking was passed down through **oral traditions**. I read as much as I could online and listened to whatever recordings were available but still I knew that the best way to learn was to receive directly from people who carried such knowledge. This also led me to recognize early on that it was important for me to connect with other Filipino artists who too have given much thought about their own identity and have done their own research and self-discovery on the subjects of Filipino cultural identity, decolonization, and the redemption of our indigenous cultures.

As providence would have it, I got to meet and collaborate with **Grace Nono**, a Filipina singer, ethnomusicologist, scholar of Philippine shamanism, and cultural worker whose work I highly respect and have gained much inspiration and insight from. In her book *The Shared Voice* wherein she documented chanted and spoken narratives from different parts of the Philippines, she brings to light the nature of these oral traditions and why it is important to understand that they “*are constantly adjusting, every version adapting to the context in which it is being told* (Nono).” In contrast, knowledge documented and passed on through writing hold the notion of

permanence, “certain versions become held as authoritative”, fostering linear historical consciousness. This was important for me to keep in mind when I was reading books and listening to recordings that I found online. Ironically, it was through reading her book that I felt the need to seek more direct sources of information; to connect directly with indigenous communities that still practiced their cultural traditions to this day.

Arranging Traditional Songs

During the earlier stages of my thesis work, one of my first ideas was to rearrange traditional songs from different parts of the Philippines, showing both the diversity of culture and music and as well as the different layers of Filipino. Each version of these traditional songs has its own voice, its own story. In a way, this is my way of breathing new life into tradition through my voice while also paying tribute to living artists who have kept our Filipino cultural heritage alive through song.

The first song I recorded is an arrangement of “**Ili-ili Tulog Anay**”, a very popular Ilonggo folk lullaby that my mom used to sing to me as a child. It was one of those melodies that remained with me as I grew up and often brings up feelings of nostalgia. I chose to do an arrangement of this song also as a tribute to the Filipino family and the strong familial ties that define us and keep us connected to our roots.

“**Salidumay**” is a chant that originates from the Igorot and Kalinga natives of the Cordillera Mountains in the northern part of the Philippines. There are many versions of this chant and the original chant itself has different interpretations in each Cordillera village, as Charles Wandag, a living Kalinga musician, shared with me. The version I based my

arrangement on is a popular adaptation by Grace Nono who recorded it in Tagalog, my native language. I kept the main melody and lyrics the same and incorporated my own voice by changing the harmony, adding different layers of rhythm and creating sections in the arrangement for different musical voices to improvise.

Early Challenges

One of the biggest challenges during the first two semesters was writing new music. Looking back, I must have felt like there was still so much I needed to learn about my culture to even begin writing my own songs about it. When it comes to writing songs, it's important to me that I give thought to my lyrics because I wanted to mean every word I sing and for the music to be part of a story. If I was struggling to come up with something, it usually meant that there was something blocking my flow and most often than not, it's personal.

Trip to the Philippines

My trip to the Philippines during the winter break was a huge turning point for me. After 4 years of being away, it was like seeing my home country through a different lens. My main goal was to do on-the-ground research and connect with people and organizations that worked to preserve these cultural traditions but it turned out to be more than that. It was a life-transformative experience that shifted my whole perspective on what I was trying so hard to understand and led my project down a more personal path.

The trip was graciously sponsored by **PEER Servants**, a Christian global microfinance organization I've volunteered with and whose community I've been a part of here in Massachusetts. The founders of PEER Servants, Todd and Leslie Engelsen, were both dear

friends of mine who knew me since 2015, knew my story and about my desire to reconnect with my country. Through their support, I was able to visit the Philippines to connect with their Philippine partner organization, the **Center for Community Transformation (CCT)**. It was an all-in-encompassing trip because not only did I see the incredible ministries of CCT and connect with their inspiring workers and communities, I got to travel to parts of my own country I had never been.

I travelled all across Mindanao, the Southern group of islands of the Philippines, and it was there that I fell in love again with my country. The beauty of our landscapes, our natural treasures, our rich culture and diversity of people -- it was like a breath of fresh air, a reintroduction to my country from a different point of view. It was the first time I felt like a foreigner in my own land because I was travelling around an area wherein most people spoke in Bisaya, a different language from Tagalog, which is the native language most people speak in Metro Manila. Another was the experience of getting to know people whose lineage is from the indiginous tribes in the area but who have integrated into the general society. One of the women who took me around spoke both English, Tagalog and Bisaya and dressed like a modern-day Filipina but was also from the Blaan tribe, a tribe I had never even heard of before. She taught me some words in her language and it had a lot of “f” and “fl” sounds, which is unlike what I would have imagined since it’s so different from the native languages I was aware of.

My trip to Mindanao was eye-opening in that I realized through experience just how rich and diverse the Philippines is. One of the highlights during my tour with CCT was my visit to the **T’boli School of Living Traditions** in Lake Sebu, South Cotabato. This was a school where the

cultural traditions of the T'boli tribe have been preserved and are taught and shared with those who come to learn. I was only there for a day and what I learned was just the tip of the iceberg but it was enough to spark the desire for me to come back again at some point in the future and spend more time with them to really gain a more comprehensive understanding of their traditions and culture.

Songs of the heart

The trip took a more personal turn when I travelled to Agusan to visit my father who I hadn't seen in more than a decade. For me, reconnecting with him was probably the most important part of the trip for me. Up to now, I look back at that time and feel that I'm still unpacking what that experience means to me. Coming back to Boston after my trip to the Philippines, it felt as though my heart was in so many different places at once. Classes started almost as soon as I got back and I was thrown back into the grind. There was still so much I was processing both from my own research, my trip, and from what I was learning at the institute that I was feeling a little overwhelmed with everything.

At some point I decided to take a pause and pay attention to my heart. I sat with my emotions and let my thoughts carry me to where my heart was and it led me to reflect on the profound experience I had with my father during the trip. I wrote down my thoughts into a poem, picked up my guitar and wrote "**Before The Dawn**". For me, writing this song was my way of remembering a moment of healing and forgiveness I had with my father during the trip. It was my way of letting go of years of pain and embracing the transformation that was taking place within me.

Music & spirituality

Writing "Before the Dawn" opened the door for me to look inward and reflect on the different areas of my life that informed my music. One of that was my spirituality. I was reminded of Esperanza Spalding's speech during the Berklee Commencement Address in 2018 when I graduated from my undergraduate degree. She said: *"To connect spirit with spirit -- that's your job now. And from here on out, nobody else is gonna tell you how to do it. From here on out, you are the vessels of communication. You are the vessels that have to listen, receive, exchange, and communicate and tell the truth."*

Spalding's speech spoke to me profoundly then and confirmed to me what I had always felt as an artist. It reminded me again of what my purpose is and always has been. As artists, whatever we put out there, whether through words, music, or actions, has to power the impact hearts and souls so must let it speak our truth. I started to ask myself different questions like: *How are our human emotions connected to our spirituality? What would it sound like and what impact would it make to create music that relies more on tapping into our emotions and spirituality rather than traditional musical concepts?*

As I pondered over these questions, I also sought the different perspectives of different authors, artists, and people around me. I came across a powerful book by Clarissa Pinkola Estes called "Women Who Run With The Wolves". In this book, Estes uses stories to heal and reconnect women with their intuitive selves or their wild self. In one of the stories, she talks about "singing over the bones", with the bones as the indestructible life force -- a metaphor for the indestructible nature of the intuitive self -- and the singing voice as a means of awakening

the wild self. This resonated with me as vocalist because it reaffirmed for me the power of the singing voice. In one of the chapters she says, *“To sing means to use the soul voice. It means to say on the breathe the truth of one’s power and one’s need to breathe soul over the thing that is ailing or in need of restoration (Estes).”*

Out of my reflections on these readings, I wrote **“Wild Woman”**. It’s an imagined scenario based on one of Estes’ stories of a wild woman coming back to life from the bones as the ancient woman sings her song. For me, it was like reconnecting to my own wild self -- “wild” not in the sense of untamed and out of control but rather of our natural state of being, our intuitive selves that we so often get severed and disconnected from. I wrote that song for myself as a reminder but also for other women and for all people to recognize and reconnect with that part of ourselves that is essential to the health of our whole being.

As I continued to explore my own connection between spirituality and music, I came about the idea of doing this collectively. I wanted to explore how tapping into our emotions and allowing ourselves to feel could be a way of connecting with our spiritual selves as we create music. **“Pag-aalay”** is an improvisational piece based on that. The concept was inspired by Don Ellis’ “Despair To Hope” from his ‘New Ideas’ album (1961) wherein he used the emotional framework of despair to hope as the basis of the piece rather than any musical framework.

In the same light, “Pag-aalay” is based on the emotional framework of **sorrow to gratitude**. Because this is a purely improvised piece, the musicians were challenged to not only dig within and express musically what these emotions hold for them personally, but to also listen sensitively to the collective, understanding that each voice is part of the whole and that it is through understanding the whole that we find reason for gratitude. “Pag-aalay” is a Tagalog

word meaning “offering” and that is what this piece is for me -- an expression of gratitude to the Creator for the experiences that have helped me gain a deeper perspective of myself and of life.

Moving Forward

There are many different layers to my personal quest that I shall continue to unpack, process and develop. One is the music -- using my songs and performances to tell my story and the stories of those whose voices need to be heard. Connected to this is my passion for music education. I envision this to manifest itself in a **mobile movement of artists-educators** who are passionate about using the arts to help others develop their own means of expression and creativity.

One of the first steps for me is to gain more experience as a community educator and continue to explore and develop effective ways of teaching music. I'd like to be able to teach **music workshops** around that world that are open to improvisation and adaptation, considering the different kinds of backgrounds the participants will be coming from. Eventually I would like to be able to travel together with other trained artists to teach in different communities around the Philippines as well as other developing countries around the world.

A more long-term goal is to organize the Philippine's first **World Music & Jazz Festival**, together with other like-minded artists and creatives. The hope is to be able to do it in Mindanao, a region of the Philippines rich with diverse indigenous people groups and cultural traditions. This is actually an idea that came up when I was speaking to Grace Nono just

recently. It's a vision that she and I both share and see as instrumental in bringing healing and peace to that part of the Philippines that has seen too much conflict.

The festival will focus on cultural exchange, bringing in world and jazz musicians from around the world and around the Philippines to perform, learn from each other, and interact in an open space designed to foster such interactions. The goal for this is to create a new form of **cultural education** through the sharing and performance of music, breaking through cultural barriers, broadening minds and ultimately enriching the communities involved. It shall be an act of coming together and celebrating all cultures of the world.

Conclusion

Though I conclude here, I know that this is all just the beginning. I am very grateful for my time at the Berklee Global Jazz Institute as it truly helped me gain a broader and deeper understanding of myself and the world around me. It challenged me to ask the necessary questions of purpose, identity, and vision and what it means to be an artist in today's world. As I look forward to the next chapter of my life, I shall look back at this past year as one that has strengthened my sense of direction and given me the encouragement and guidance I needed to overcome the challenges of this ongoing quest.

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