

My name is Genevieve Ortila. I am a native of the Philippine Islands, and I immigrated to the United States with my mother at age seven. As a young girl, I had to master another language, fit into circles of friends that were already established, and find my place in a society that was completely new to me. Desperate to belong, I stopped speaking my language, and even got embarrassed when my mom would speak Tagalog in public. I suppressed a lot of my cultural heritage thinking that was the key to becoming a true American.

When I went to high school, there were many Filipinos like me, yet we were divided. American born Filipinos hung out with one another, while newly arrived, Tagalog speaking students gathered at one section of the school called the "T-Hall." I was friendly to everyone but made my interactions at the T-Hall very brief, not wanting to be seen with the "Fresh off The Boat" kids, and not wanting to be heard speaking this ugly language- not at all sexy like French or Spanish. I spent 4 years at that school having fun, yet feeling a bit empty, like something was missing. I didn't really do well except for my History and English classes because I got to write. I got to write about everything, think critically, and question authority.

However, it would take me seven years after high school to pursue higher education, and happened to stumble on History as a major on accident. My boyfriend had picked me up from community college one night and asked the standard "how was your day" question, to which I answered "man if I could just take history classes all day, I'd be pretty happy."—To which he replied, "Well then why don't you?" and it was that simple. All of a sudden I was excited, like I had something to look forward to. And I realized I said that that night because I had just come from a History of the Philippines class. I never realized how disconnected I was with my own culture, my own identity. Determined to learn more, I decided to transfer out to a University, and here I am.

My time here at UCSC has been unbelievable. I have been blessed to have professors that allowed me to write about the Philippines, our history, and our struggles as colonized people and immigrants in this country. I was able to create digital projects that reunited me with what being part of a Filipino community meant. Most importantly, for senior seminar, I spent a whole quarter researching the effects of American Imperialism on Filipino Americans and their identity formation. I learned so much about myself; I can't even begin to articulate my gratitude to this institution and my professors for allowing me to re-discover and reclaim my identity.

A million rough drafts, citations, endnotes, and annotated bibliographies, later, I feel no sense of embarrassment speaking my language in public, or being seen reaching out to my fellow immigrants. I find joy in being able to create and facilitate discussion around my heritage, and I find myself willing to share with anyone willing to listen about what makes the Philippines and Filipinos so special. At age 29, 18 years after immigrating here, I finally figured out that being an American doesn't mean abandoning my culture; rather it means holding on to it, and taking pride in it. Being able to study about my own history and the history of others here at UCSC has given me a sense of purpose, a thirst for knowledge, and compassion for others. So today, I celebrate all of our hard work, and all the unique qualities we have that make us every bit a part of this country. I feel confident in what our brilliant minds can contribute to society, and it is up to us, as students of history to share our knowledge with the world, in order to fix it, and make it better.