A love of prawns cooked in Fanta

A group of four young women, that I think I recognise from university, are seated at the table opposite me in the café. They're drinking and laughing – joyfully, with a crescendo-decrescendo modulation all their own. While I wait for my glass of French-style wine, I speculate on their respective nationalities, their cultural backgrounds, their homes and their heritages. Two are speaking with the unmistakable twang of an Afrikaans accent; one with the tipsy, private-school drawl of Melbourne's inner eastern suburbs; and the last with the lovely softened lilt of Indian-English. Across the street from the café are the once bright, now grim flats of the Carlton housing commission where a group of loose-limbed children, perhaps from East Africa, are playing basketball outside in the late, chill hours of the autumn evening. When I ask, my waitress says she's Lebanese, bringing me the Argentinean empanadas I ordered earlier to eat while staring at my blank notebook.

For in the middle of all this, I'm searching for the right words to explain my cultural identity and to legitimately or otherwise describe it as something, somehow *Filipino.* I'm searching for the way to say that in amongst the chill and the wine and the multi-accent din of this lovely café, some sort of an archipelagic imprint makes me feel justified – in certain circumstances at least – in calling myself an Australian with Filipino heritage, or an Australian-Filipino or, even more rarely, a Filipina-Australian. And once I'm done doing that, I'm going to try and find more words to explain that the lovely modifier *Filipino,* with all its coconut, fronded fragrances*,* changes much more about the desiccated, desert of *Australian,* than it does the other way round. I'm conscious and I'm nervous about this process precisely because I know how simultaneously loaded and silly terms like 'culture' and 'identity' can be, and how flimsy categories like Filipino or Australian really are. This trepid sensation is compounded by the fact that I realise that the less we know about a certain thing, then the more reliant we are on stereotypes and generalisations; I am as guilty as anyone of applying imaginary truths to my own descriptions of my ethnicity and culture.

When people ask, as they sometimes do, I let them know that on my father's side I am a seventh-generation Australian whose venerated elders were kindly given passage to Australia in the dank and slimy holds of the First Fleet. They were, needless to say, scurvy-dog convicts. Although Botany Bay didn't exactly live up to the picture-postcard representations of Captain James Cook, my presence here today is evidence that my ancestors stuck it out in the new country and over time made themselves a home. Although I hardly feel Mayflower special, the taint of convict ancestry has, over time, clearly dissipated and most people afford that part of my family tree the same courteous, passing interest they give the remnants of the convict buildings they hurtle past on the Hume Highway. Should I wish to explore myself better, there's a nice family history written about the whole thing. They even list my name in

the back. On the other side of my family tree, I have one quick, slim branch whose tendril green arm leads you out of Australia through my mother to the Philippines, where it promptly tangles itself up with a verdant jungle of relatives neither known closely nor wholly understood by me.

In many ways, it would have been and is easy to ignore the creeping vine of my family that leads to the Philippines. There are very many second generation migrants in Australia who feel no real connection with their parents' countries of birth. I'm more than happy to tell people that I'm from Ballarat, because I am. The Philippines rarely figures in the Australian news; no one agitates for Tagalog to be taught in schools because it's "in our national interest"; and I think the only large Filipino restaurant in Melbourne has closed down now. Given the anomalous nature of the Filipino variety of "Asian", it doesn't necessarily get included in voguish enthusiasm for Our Region, figured as it is to be a misplaced province of the United States, or perhaps a lost state of South America. I've never lived in the Philippines, although I've been lucky enough to live in Thailand, France and England at different points in my life. I speak better French and Chinese than I do Tagalog and few people actually realise I am part-Filipino. When guessing my ethnic heritage, people have suggested half- or perhaps quarter-Chinese, Thai, Maori, Spanish, Mexican, Burmese, Mauritian, and once, though only once – Madagascan. Part of me finds this facial guessing game comic and interesting: most people couch it in the language of compliments, "you have such lovely colouring", or "the most beautiful people are mixed race, don't you think?" Another part of me finds these conversations about my racial recipe curious and challenging, and from time to time upsetting and almost lamentable.

I was quite young when I first realised that there was something noticeably different about me. Nothing glaring, but something noticeable, an ill-defined sense of "but you're not *fully* Australian, are you?" Sometimes the hue of that different has been glaring and graphic: a child in a shopping centre telling me to "go back home, Chink " (*but my mum's at the check-out still*); or a family at a school function moving seats so that they wouldn't have to "sit with the slopes". Other times it has been comical and poignant, like the time my brother introduced us both to a newly arrived Ethiopian student at our school because "us black kids have got to stick together." Given enough space, I could probably take you through a shopping list of mildly racist incidents which have shaped and sharpened my suspicion of people's strongly held notions about what it means to "have an ethnicity", as opposed to "being white". Doing so, however, would hardly be a revelation and I trust that you understand how fear of difference has so frequently diminished the human spirit; highlighted the smallness of our souls; and illustrated the cruelty we are capable of. I try very hard, although sometimes without success, to live as a person, not just a collection of easily-applied stereotypes and pigeon holes, and to accept others as complex, nuanced, whole people deserving of the very same rights I demand for myself. Which means I try not to become belligerent or dogmatic

when I explain myself with my sex, sexuality, race, citizenship, political beliefs, religious affiliation or, more particularly, when others do it for me. I try to see what is more likely as a part of these categories without assuming there's something intrinsic in me which forces or permits me to be described wholly by them. I'm aware how quickly a term can move from clarifying explanation to degrading insult given just the right tone of voice.

Yet I can't help feeling something both ill-defined and potently precise about being an Australian citizen with Filipino heritage. In a sense, I'm not fully Australian, and that doesn't bother me. I feel it with a certain irony when non-Filipinos congratulate me on the lovely, olive tone of my skin, remembering that some Filipinos will equally congratulate me on its pale pallor, on my straight nose, and on my tall, Western stature. I feel it with suspicion when men approach me in bars because I look "so exotic", or I discover that their last three girlfriends were also of Asian descent, and paranoid that I'll somehow have to live up to a quiet, submissive, Orientalist concept of their ideal woman, deeply at odds with my own feisty, argumentative self. It's pride that I feel when I see the lives that my Filipino friends and family have built for themselves in a new strange place, working hard to send their kids to good schools and give them better opportunities than they felt they had themselves. The folkloric story of migrants "who did good" is about the only Australian cultural tale I feel deeply connected with. Yet, even though it's a story of Australians who arrived, I still feel it is an Australian story. And although it was confusing at first, I'm grateful for the extended family of aunties, uncles, godparents, cousins, sisters and brothers that are part and parcel of Filipino-Australian life. I no longer mind when my mum cooks prawns in Fanta, although I pleaded desperately as a child for her to serve Weeties, or "normal people breakfasts" when non-Filipino friends came to stay. I understand now why she assumes that I will be safe if when overseas I stay with Filipinos: no matter how remote their social connection is to our own associates here in Australia – she feels I'm with family.

Most of the time, I am privileged enough to able to regard my ethnicity as a bonus, a plus. The classic icing on the cake. It would be ludicrous to pretend to you that I consider myself a Filipino, or that I truly comprehend the some 7,000 islands of that country and the lives of the people who live in it. Given my circumstances, however, I now try to be grateful and luxuriate in the sensation of being just that little bit 'different' and to wonder at, revel in and respect the difference of others. Sometimes though, being an Australian of Filipino heritage is like a pebble kept in my shoe, stopping me from ever walking around too comfortably in a lucky skin in the lucky country. The shape of this pebble is oddly sharp and I can clearly remember the first moment I felt it and frequently see the impact that it has on my life. Like a real one it has given me a loping, confused gait and gradually altered the tilt of my spine. I don't know if I could walk without it. It is a funny thing, this pebble, formed as it is out of a single, strange statistic, a discovery made quite unexpectedly during a criminal law class at university.

While blithely working to make the most of the opportunities wrestled desperately for me by my family, my lecturer mentioned that Filipino women in Australia were six times more likely to die as a result of marital homicide than the general Australian population. Quite simply, in Australia, if your husband killed you then you were six times more likely to be a woman born in the Philippines. The only Australian population demographic that statistically experiences more domestic violence is the Australian Indigenous community and recent media attention on the issue demonstrates the complexity and difficulty of understanding the situation.

Like many statistics, it would have been easy to allow it to join the wash of information that floods our daily lives. Yet this one didn't. For I'd noticed the odd, gaping age differential between some Filipino women and their Australian husbands and the curious looks it aroused in certain circles. What's more, I'd felt the undeniable judgement of the odd person who wanted to know if my Anglo-Saxon father had met my Filipino mother on a certain kind of 'holiday' and worked hard to brush the comments off. People trade in these stereotypes quite regularly. My family had always been deeply involved in developing community networks to support newly arrived Filipinos, even going so far as to establish with friends the first Tagalog newspaper in Australia and participating in multi-lingual radio broadcasting in country Victoria. They had never hidden the complex experiences faced by fellow Filipinos in Australia from me; instead, we had always been aware and interested in our own community welfare. And yet, I wasn't completely prepared for that pebble when it came.

You see, six times is a lot. It is a meaningful, frightening increase in probability of dying at the hands of someone who more likely than not claimed they would care for you in sickness and in health, til death do you part. It's not the only formative event in my understanding of my identity but it shifted and distorted my ability to be proudly Australian, or to somehow imagine that this country was an oasis, a bubble of sanity in a world gone awry. Some of my relatives sought this oasis so fervently that they stayed here without the necessary papers to validate their right to occupy a country that claims to be safe, or without tyranny and poverty, or simply somehow better. So desperate were they to share this country's boundless plains, they did so without that official sanction, sacrificing along the way so much of themselves.

Discovering the sad statistics of Filipino women's experiences in Australia changed everything for me, like the first domino falling over in the line, I questioned then what it meant to be a Filipino-Australian. It's not the place here to truly explore italics-deserving phrases like the intersection of gender and race representations; or the underlying questions of economic power and dependence; or to throw out my personal theories on the whys and wherefores of the situation. Or to somehow defend or justify my parent's relationship. It doesn't need defending. Nor is it the place to give you a pious explanation of the ways in which I try to personally, intellectually, politically or professionally engage with the economic and human rights issues that contribute to the realities of Filipino women's lives in Australia. I won't

pretend that I work in international development because I am passionate about the impact that the global, capitalist economy is having on the Filipino Diaspora in Australia. For one, I don't think it's as simple as that and I know I won't do the argument justice in the way that other authors can. I'll trust you enough to draw your own conclusions and to explore the situation more if you yourself want to understand it.

All I want to do is take the pebble out of my shoe and throw it gently into your pond, only hoping that it will cause some ripples.