

IN CONTEXT  
(OR, WHY THERE IS NO GLOSSARY)

When I was little, growing up in Peoria, Illinois, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and for a time, the province of Saskatchewan in Canada, my parents spoke to each other in a language different than the one they spoke to my brothers and me. Theirs was a secret spelled out in syllables—fast and rhythmic where vowels lined up one right after the other—triple As and double Es—rupturing the air like fireworks—where Hs were nonexistent on my father’s tongue and my mother rolled her Rs. My brothers Mike and Manny and I spoke our first words not in Tagalog, but in English.

We were born in a time when the “experts” cautioned parents not to confuse their children with more than one tongue. Of course now we know that’s far from the truth. I have a nephew and niece growing up in Brooklyn, code switching between English, French, New York slang, and knotting Tagalog. I have nieces who, as toddlers in Santa Ana, California, were asking for water, *agua*, or *tubig*—flipping tongues like buttons on a DS video game. I have ten nephews and nieces with midwestern

twangs who call their grandparents Lola and Lolo, who lovingly end every conversation with *mahal kita* even as they learn Spanish, or French, or Mandarin in school.

I have never taken a course in Tagalog.

As a little girl, I watched my parents talking—the way they'd sit across a dinner table and debate politics, or snuggle on the couch watching television, joking with each other in Tagalog. At late-night parties, I spied grown-ups tumbling mahjong tiles and shuffling decks of cards, laughing and eating and speaking in that same secret language. And when my Lola Nikolasa was in the house, she spoke to her son in Kapangpangan, to her daughter-in-law in Tagalog, and to us, her grandchildren, she communicated in kisses, smiles, and little sniffing sounds she made whenever she held us tight. I learned the words from living them. I learned them from seeing them used in context.

By the time I was twelve, I had figured out their secret language. I understood everything. The ladies would come to the house and say, “*Dalaga na si Evelina—ang ganda niya.*” And my mother would warn them, “*Naiintindihan niya lahat. Be careful, you'll give her a big head.*”

And when, at the age of thirty-three, I returned to the Philippines with my teenage and twenty-something Fil-Am students—some who could not speak nor understand Tagalog—I found myself suddenly spewing my parents' native tongue. It was glued together and shaky, but it was Tagalog. And it was coming out without me thinking. I suppose I had been storing up all those words in my head and, finally, had a reason to set them free.

During my Fulbright in 2001, when I began interviewing surviving Filipina “Comfort Women” of WWII, women I addressed as grandmothers, I used a translator to ask my questions. I listened to the women’s responses.

One day, the translator got it wrong. I knew the answer he gave me was not what the lola had actually said.

“Ask it again,” I said. “Ask it this way.”

And when he did, the lola answered the same way. The translator looked at me in disbelief. “Tama ka!” he said.

Of course, I was right. I could tell what she was saying, not only by her words, but by the way she was looking down at her skirt, fingering the hem, holding her breath, then sighing like a tire going flat.

Shortly after that I let my translator go and began talking to the women directly. Once someone asked a lola, “Is her Tagalog getting better?” And the lola shook her head and said, “Hindi, pero naiintindihan ko siya.” Even though my Tagalog was broken up and turned upside down, she understood me too. We were speaking the same language.

And so *Angel de la Luna and the 5th Glorious Mystery* is drawn of many words—in English and Tagalog, in American slang and in Taglish. There is no Spanish here, though you will see Spanish influence and you will see Spanish words usurped into Tagalog and sometimes redefined. And, depending on who is talking, you will see English spun in circles and rearranged to fit squarely on the speaker’s tongue. On the one hand, the words come out of me organically—in the way I see character and place and in the way I hear the characters’ voices.

On the other hand, not everyone speaks Filipino. So I made it a point to use the Tagalog, the Taglish, and the slang in context by grounding them in character. I wanted readers to understand what was happening without interrupting the narrative, so I have sewn the definitions into the text. Still, it is not necessary to understand every word—but I hope the energy of the moment, and the emotional content are carried by the words as they are drawn here on the page, surrounded by other words and breathing through its characters.

In graduate school there was only one other writer of color like myself in my cohort—the poet Anthony Vigil. We struggled with the political act of defining ourselves through our words in ways our English-only peers were not asked to do. “If you mean gossip,” suggested my workshop teacher, “why not just say it?” He didn’t understand the subtext of *tsismis*—how it is always sitting not so far from *hiya* that often leads to embarrassment or humiliation. How the weight of that word placed in a Filipino American context means something utterly different than gossip—also two syllables, but quick and clipped by the *p*—gossip—unlike *tsismis*, an embarrassment that seems to go on forever—*tsismissssss* . . . also spelled *chismes* in Spanish, also means you have no shame. *Walang hiya*.

In a play between Tagalog and English, words order themselves not only to fit the rules of grammar, but to the culture and the perspectives of a specific people—Angel’s people. Characters conjugate, flip, subvert and reverse word order to suggest different ways of thinking, of understanding, and believing in story. A

Filipina “Comfort Woman” giving her abduction testimony may slip from past tense to present tense, from English to Tagalog to Waray, going deeper into her native tongue because the act of telling is the act of reliving, is the act of violence all over again. To translate word for word can be a dangerous thing. You might miss the point if you’re too wrapped up in knowing what each word means. And truth be told, the World Wide Web is not always accurate. Just because the internet defines a word doesn’t mean the word doesn’t change when it’s sitting next to another one. Tagalog (taga ilog or “from the river”) is as fluid as its meaning. I guarantee words will slip between rocks, go deep into a stream, and come up another dialect like Ilokano or Kapangpangan or Waray.

Late in the book when Angel listens to live Chicago blues, Jordan asks her if she understands the lyrics in a song. When she admits she cannot, he tells her, “Don’t need to understand the words—just feel it.”

I suggest reading the words in *Angel de la Luna and the 5th Glorious Mystery* the way you might listen to a song. Just feel it.

As a girl who grew up hanging upside down on easy chairs with a book in her hand, I often read words—English and other words—that I did not understand. I rarely stopped to define them. Sometimes I wrote them down and looked them up later. (I was a geek, after all.) But more often than not, having stepped into a fiction John Gardner called “that vivid and continuous dream,” and driven to know what happened next, I kept reading. Like Angel, I let the words wash right over me, I watched

them working next to other words. I listened to them. I tasted them and felt the weight of them in my mouth. I imagined them surrounded by nothing at all. I followed them as they floated down the page, bumping into semicolons, swimming through parentheses, slapping up against em-dashes, evading italics, and falling right off the page. I read the words in context and, right or wrong, I gave the words their meaning.