

Keynote Speech

Carol Burnett Fund Program

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**"Reporting Across Cultures, Writing About Your Own"**

*By Victor Merina*

I want to thank the dean for that introduction and thank Tom Brislin and all of you here for your kind invitation to deliver the keynote address of the 18<sup>th</sup> annual Carol Burnett Fund for Responsible Journalism Ethics Program.

The last time I was in Hawaii, I arrived here a bit more hastily and encountered a different kind of welcome. It was a Friday afternoon in 1993, and I had walked into the newsroom of the *Los Angeles Times* after spending all morning working on an investigative project. I had been buried in court documents and knew nothing about what was happening in the outside world. So, I was surprised when the national editor wanted to see me, and even more mystified when he asked me if I wanted to go to Hawaii. Absolutely, I said, which was, of course, the only plausible answer. When I asked when I should leave, he answered, "Right away." He told me to just grab a few things, and a copy messenger would drive me to the airport.

I hadn't yet heard what the story was about, but didn't have to wait long for the answer when I asked if he had any special instructions. "Yes, just one," he replied. "Get to Hawaii before the hurricane does."

As you may have guessed, the editor was talking about Hurricane Iniki, and I ended up staying nearly two weeks in Kauai reporting on the devastating aftermath of that violent storm. For a time, I was housed at the Westin Kauai, a luxury hotel where Steven Spielberg had lodged his crew during the filming of *Jurassic Park*. I had convinced management to allow me to sleep there, but the accommodations were a little different than Spielberg's because the property was heavily damaged by the hurricane, completely devoid of guests, had no running water, no electricity, and there were

hepatitis warnings around the pool. But the Westin did have that rare commodity: working telephones on an island where even cell phones were useless.

What I discovered during my stay and from my weeks of reporting on Kauai was the resiliency and generosity of the Hawaiian people--even during a time of disaster—as well as the friendship and assistance of Hawaiian journalists, even as we scrambled in competition to break news stories.

I am happy to note that my return visit to your state comes amid calmer weather albeit with a bit of <sup>a</sup> climatic condition called Vog which sounds strangely menacing to someone who splits his time between Los Angeles and New York. Still, I detect the same feeling of warmth and welcome extended toward this *malihini* who finds himself surrounded here by Hawaiian journalists, student journalists and media scholars. And I appreciate that. You make me feel like, if I may borrow another local term, a part of one big *ohana*. I am especially honored after seeing who has preceded me, an impressive lineup of speakers who have contributed so much to our profession over the years. I also am gratified and feel added pressure today because a number of those speakers are friends and colleagues including:

- Mark Trahant, a wonderful columnist at the *Seattle Times* and an important Native American voice in journalism;
- Bob Steele, a friend and colleague at the Poynter Institute, who is considered the ethical conscience for many newsrooms across the country;
- Peter Pritchard, former editor of *USA Today* and president of the Freedom Forum, which graciously provides a 42<sup>nd</sup> floor office for me in New York City;
- Ev Dennis, the former director of the Media Studies Center, where I spent last year as a Fellow; and
- David Shaw, the media critic of the *Los Angeles Times* and a former colleague when I worked at that newspaper.

Even James Merideth, one of your previous speakers who is a civil rights icon, has some connection to my life. I recall how my father stood on the campus of the University of Mississippi as one of the soldiers who maintained order while a young man named James Merideth became the first black student to enroll at the all-white university.

Finally, the first speaker in this Burnett lecture series, Norman Isaacs, was my old ethics professor at Columbia University. On graduation day, after I was fortunate enough to win a writing award, the class editing prize and a traveling fellowship, Professor Isaacs approached me. In his own inestimable blend of gruff friendliness and unmitigating candor, congratulated me for winning the three awards, then added: "I hope you don't think you're going to be some journalistic hot shot with all these awards because none of it matters if you don't uphold your principles, your ethical standards."

As some of you students, who are about to graduate, already know: being a journalistic hotshot was the farthest thing from my mind. All I was looking for that day was finding someone to hire me so I could begin repaying my student loans.

But now years later, here I am following in the footsteps of Norman Isaacs and these other distinguished journalists. The fact that our lives were intertwined seems a bit like the theatrical phenomenon they call the "Six Degrees of Separation." Although, having landed here in Hawaii from New York City, where it snowed during the St. Patrick's Day parade, it's probably more like *thirty* degrees of separation.

In addressing you today, I want to speak about a subject that I believe is one of growing importance in our profession, and for me, one of some passion. It interested me during my days as a newspaper reporter and has involved me even more deeply during my year-and-a-half as a Fellow at the Media Studies Center and as a Ford Foundation Fellow at the Poynter Institute.

The core of that issue is reflected in the title of my talk: "Reporting Across Cultures, Writing About Your Own."

Defining culture is an interesting thing. What exactly is our own culture? Clearly, we are talking about race and ethnicity, with the caveats that come with those labels, with those questionably scientific descriptions. But aren't we also talking about family culture? The community that nurtured us? Our geographic location? Our socio-economic status? Our educational background? Our religious or secular affiliation? Our civic or community organization? The people we hang out with? Even our athletic interests, because after all, aren't bowling, stock car racing and professional wrestling considered "cultures" all to themselves?

No wonder there is confusion, and sometimes that confusion extends to our colleagues.

When I was hired at the *Los Angeles Times* more than two decades ago, the editor proceeded to take me around the newsroom and introduce me to my fellow workers. After looking on, one veteran reporter took it upon himself to march in front of the staff and welcome me loudly to the *Times*. He said, "Well, I'm glad you're here because we certainly need more Latinos."

I was both gratified and taken aback by his gesture. Thanking him for the sentiment, I pointed out that actually, I was born in the Philippines. An experienced reporter, my Welcome Wagon man was only momentarily flustered and quickly replied: "Well, we need more of those, too."

He was right, of course. We did then—and we do now---need more Latinos and more Filipinos in the news business. In fact, we need more Asian Americans, more African Americans, more Native Americans, and other under-represented groups in newsrooms, as well. We need *more*, not less, diversity. More diverse voices. More people interested in covering what traditionally have been uncovered or undercovered communities. More journalists willing to help their colleagues cover those communities.

Ascertaining our culture or our affinity group may be mysterious to not only our colleagues in the newsrooms but to outsiders, as well. As a young reporter for the *Times*, one of my first political stories was to profile a powerful state senator, one of the highest-ranking black politicians in the state. I went to Sacramento to interview him, and when we sat down in his office, he smiled at me. "You know," he began, "I have been one of the leading legislators in promoting bills for your people—for Asian Americans."

Ignoring the reference, I continued the interview. But he took another stab: "As you know, I have done a lot for your people," he told me. "I have been one of the leading proponents of Latinos here in Sacramento."

Again, I said nothing and merely went on to the next question. But undeterred, he found another moment to explain that he had been an early supporter of "your people, speaking out for Native American rights." When I still failed to react, the senator finally had had enough and said in exasperation: "Okay, okay. So, exactly who the hell are your people?"

As it turns out, that is a pretty good question. And for us journalists, there is the easy answer. *Our people* are the readers, the viewers, the listeners, and—in the age of new media—the visitors to our web sites and those Internet users who dock at our site somewhere in cyberspace.

But it is actually more complicated than that. As individuals, we journalists also have our own “people”—our family and our community that, as I pointed out earlier, is sometimes elusive to define. But as journalists, we are shaped by our own views and biases, our own background and experiences, by the store of personal knowledge gathered through our reading, conversation, study, discussion, observation and actions..

The key, however, is the ability to retain our individual identity and recognize our own prejudices while at the same time report, edit and practice our journalistic craft with skill and sensitivity, fairness and insight, accuracy and perspective. We can and should be able to adhere to our own principles and not violate our own journalistic and ethical standards.

And those are particularly important when we report across cultures. But in order to do so, we must first recognize that our own cultures exist and what they are. And then, we must look more closely and more thoughtfully at those cultures which are different than our own.

At times, I have heard fellow journalists question why they need to know about any of this? I never write about a different culture, one argues. I never cross cultures, another maintains. I’m not on the race beat, still another would say.

But think about it. For many of us, when do we NOT cross cultures.

For many people, but particularly if you are non-white in most parts of the United States, you may cross cultures every day and observe customs and traditions that you did not grow up with but had to learn. You may endure prejudices and assumptions about *who* you are, about who *your people* are. In some communities, if you are white, *you* may be the ones who are the interlopers in the majority culture. Here in Hawaii, each of you may find yourself crossing cultures with regularity in a state where the minorities as singular people are no majority, but where the minorities---as so many people would automatically label people of color---are, in fact, the *group* majority.

Some people, inside and outside our newsrooms, can ignore this fact. They can turn their heads away, turn that blind eye towards the issue, or simply turn it into a matter that affects only other people not themselves. But as journalists--- whether a journalist of color or not---we must recognize that not only do we live in this milieu, but we work in it. And we should thrive in it.

Unfortunately, for too long, media have helped perpetuate some of the misperceptions and stereotypes that exist.

For example, there was a time when readers of mainstream media would never know that people of color ever got married, ever gave birth, ever held meaningful jobs, or retired gracefully from those jobs. Why not? Because depictions of those lives were absent from mainstream newspapers while the majority culture was covered. The only times that people of color were featured in those pages were when they were accused of crime, involved in sports, or engaged in some oddity of a story. Otherwise, they were nowhere to be found in business coverage, absent from community stories, gone from neighborhood pieces, vanished from our collective conscience.

Things have clearly changed, of course. But it wasn't too long ago that MSNBC headlined the Olympic loss by Michelle Kwan, who was born in Torrance, California, to a rival skater with these words: "American Beats Kwan."

Last month, staffers at the *Times-Union* newspaper in Jacksonville, Florida angrily denounced an editorial in their own newspaper that described the era of slavery in America as only a "brief" period of history.

And recently, when two professors, Frank Gilliam of UCLA and Shanto Iyengar of Stanford, studied the impact of local television news on how the public perceives crime, they found that many viewers automatically identified people of color as criminal suspects because of the frequency in which they appeared on newscasts. In fact, when the researchers played one news segment about an ATM robbery that had no suspect identified or shown on the newscast, more than 60 percent of those surveyed said the suspect had been identified and <sup>most</sup> concluded the robbery suspect was African American.

So, what should we do as journalists? We report. We write. We inform. And we educate. Both inside and outside the newsroom. Not with lectures from the pulpit, but with our practice of good journalism. Just as good editors have been advising for

decades, what is most effective in our stories is showing not telling. We need to take extra care in the use of racial identifiers in our stories. Also, we need to reframe some of our approaches to stories about other cultures and other races. We need to realize that good stories that deal with another culture are simply good stories, period, and not merely pieces published as a paeon to a particular group or community. These are good stories, which happen to be about race, and we are in the business to report and write good stories.

We also need to be creative, open-minded and patient in our approach.

After the Los Angeles riots, I wrote about one of the victims who had been shot as he left his family market. His death had been characterized as a simple hate crime, an Asian shopkeeper killed by angry blacks. But the story was more complex than that. Thanh Lam was a refugee from Vietnam, born in a Chinese family, and his family owned a market in Compton. However, among his loyal customers were African Americans and Latinos, including local gang members who were distraught over the shooting and tried to help in finding the killer.

I had suggested writing Thanh Lam's story after being the only outsider to attend his funeral and the Buddhist ceremony that accompanied it. One fellow journalist had told me that "it should be easy to do the story because you're an Asian American." But it was not easy, at all. I had to learn about this stranger's family, their culture, their religion, their relationship with the community, and the experiences that led them to be wary of investigators who were trying to find Thanh Lam's killers. It went beyond routine reporting into the realm of cross-cultural reporting, something all of us can do. But there was also that one poignant moment when I found that my particular skin color did matter. It came when the mother who barely spoke English and had been reticent to talk to me, reached over one day and stroked my cheek with the back of her hand and spoke emotional words I could not understand. One of her other son's translated: "She says your skin, it is like Thanh's." And with that simple gesture, she began to accept my questions.

Simple gestures can indeed make your story.

When he did a series of stories on the black community in Atlanta several years ago, Gary Pomerantz of the *Journal-Constitution* was in the home of an elderly black

man who asked if he wanted a glass of lemonade. I took it, recalled Pomerantz who is white, and then asked for another. Not because I was thirsty, he added, but because I realized there was a time not long ago when this man knew that no white person would ever have deigned to come into his home, let alone accept the offer of a drink.

Pomerantz's point was that in order to report on a community and on a people, you must understand their history and it will tell you about motivation and give you a glimpse of what lies behind their actions or words.

So, what else can journalists do to help report stories across cultures in a more meaningful, accurate way? Among other things, you must:

- Do your homework on that particular culture and study its customs, then use what you learn to assist your reporting, your interviewing and your writing;
- Avoid assumptions about people or cultures and don't fall victim to misperceptions and stereotypes;
- Utilize experts but don't rely solely on them for your information or perspective;
- Look for listening posts and seek out community guides who can assist you in finding sources and acting as intermediaries;
- If you are going to use racial identifiers in a story, question their relevance and accuracy.

Even with all these precautions, writing about communities and cultures is not without controversy and can be risky, particularly if you are willing to tackle a sensitive subject.

For example, Susan Kreifels of the *Star-Bulletin*, among others, has written about allegations of racism in local schools and the treatment of new immigrants. In her stories, she raised troubling issues that some people wish would go away questions, but as a reporter, she could not ignore them. In Los Angeles, Robert Lopez of the *Los Angeles Times* wrote critical stories of a local council member and was vilified by fellow Latinos for writing tough stories about one of their own, even though the stories were accurate and the council member would eventually step down. And reporters at smaller papers, such as some tribal newspapers, have been threatened with the loss of their jobs---



and some have lost them---for reporting stories that are true but deemed critical or overly negative of local leaders or their policies.

Although on a much smaller risk scale, I once had Imelda Marcos threaten to pull out of an interview I was trying to secure with her because she was irked over a story I had done about one of her late husband's cronies. "How could you embarrass your fellow countrymen?" she asked me. Astonished, I thought, "me embarrassing Filipinos? This coming from the person known as the Woman with Ten Thousand Shoes."

But even if you are the most accurate reporter, the most sensitive reporter, the most fair-minded, and have done your homework and more, sometimes it still might not be enough to overcome the animosity of a community that feels historically maligned or ignored by the media. In other words, you may go into a community and find that there are chanting protestors ready to demonstrate loudly about their extreme dislike for your presence and that of your newspaper or television station. And it may not be your fault.

They are angry at newspaper reporters and television crews who parachute into their community just to write about the conflicts and flare-ups, as if it were a war zone. They are upset with photographers from print and television taking pictures of those chalked outlines of bodies on a sidewalk or of body bags from drive-by shootings to tell their crime stories. They are miffed at reporters in their trench coats, or their expensive suits, or designer jeans that cost a hundred bucks--or what some people call a C-note. Or they disdain reporters oozing trust and sincerity as they try to get past their screen door, when all they really want is fodder for a headline or for "Film at 11."

They are irked at reporters who try to mimic neighborhood toughs with their pimp walks or thug-talking style as they interview them. Or those who try and act like they belong in *this* unfamiliar community, *this* different culture---like, say, here in Hawaii where they may start talking Pidgin, asking elders to "*talk story*" and reassuring them that he or she, the reporter, is on their side, "*eh, fo real, brah.*"—"It's true, brother."

But sources will see right through that. To them, you are like a method actor pretending to be Robert DeNiro, who is pretending to be someone else, role-playing to get a story. So, in a community's word of advice to you, the reporter, they will admonish you: "Don't DeNiro." Otherwise, what you have, as a result, are some angry community folk telling you and the media what they really think of you.

## "With Us or Against Us"

Are you with us? (*clapclap*)---Or against us? (*clapclap*)

Are you with us? (*clapclap*)---Or against us? (*clapclap*)

Are you with us? (*clapclap*)---Or against us? (*clapclap*)

Are you with us? (*clapclap*)---Or against us? (*clapclap*)

Hey, reporter superstar, think your act is going far?

Hot-spot, hot-shot, your journalistic sweet talk

Spouting trust, so we must. let you through the screen door?

Fat chance, do your dance, you're nothing but a news bore.

You with us? (*clapclap*)---Or against us? (*clapclap*)

Are you with us? (*clapclap*)---Or against us? (*clapclap*)

Are you with us? (*clapclap*)---Or against us? (*clapclap*)

Are you with us? (*clapclap*)---Or against us? (*clapclap*)

Listen up, anchor chump, sitting in your studio,

White-shirt editor, all you want's that video;

Line us up, put us down, for the evening newscast,

Page One, had your fun, like the time we saw you last.

You with us? (*clapclap*)---Or against us? (*clapclap*)

Are you with us? (*clapclap*)---Or against us? (*clapclap*)

Are you with us? (*clapclap*)---Or against us? (*clapclap*)

Are you with us? (*clapclap*)---Or against us? (*clapclap*)

Hey, there, photo-man, camera-man, poking with that mini-cam,

Lighting up the chalked street, toe-tagged body bag,

That's your only story here: "All Fear, Nothing Dear"

Guess what we're gonna say? "Go away!

Sell that rag some other way."

You with us? (*clapclap*)---Or against us? (*clapclap*)

Are you with us? (*clapclap*)---Or against us? (*clapclap*)

Are you with us? (*clapclap*)---Or against us? (*clapclap*)

Are you with us? (*clapclap*)---Or against us? (*clapclap*)

You want the inside, indepth, inner city, urban breadth,  
Talking to the common folk, peering through the gun smoke--What a joke!  
That's your goal? Bare our soul, promise us a better role?  
Get real, no deal, you *never* say what we feel.

You with us? (*clapclap*)---Or against us? (*clapclap*)  
Are you with us? (*clapclap*)---Or against us? (*clapclap*)  
Are you with us? (*clapclap*)---Or against us? (*clapclap*)  
Are you with us? (*clapclap*)---Or against us? (*clapclap*)

Trench coat, suit coat, blue jeans with a C-note,  
Making with the thug talk, pimp walk, street mocking  
Actor with a notebook, feigned look,  
No shame, just defame, leave us in the blame game.

You with us? (*clapclap*)---Or against us? (*clapclap*)  
Are you with us? (*clapclap*)---Or against us? (*clapclap*)  
Are you with us? (*clapclap*)---Or against us? (*clapclap*)  
Are you with us? (*clapclap*)---Or against us? (*clapclap*)

What to do newshound, going round downtown?  
Don't jive, tape or live, giving us some high five,  
Headline this deadline: "Don't get the facts wrong!  
Better make that story sing, but don't get caught DeNiroing!"

You with us? (*clapclap*)---Or against us? (*clapclap*)  
Are you with us? (*clapclap*)---Or against us? (*clapclap*)  
Don't DeNiro! (*clapclap*)---Don't DeNiro! (*clapclap*)  
Don't DeNiro! Don't DeNiro! Don't DeNiro! (*clapclap*)

Are you with us? (*clapclap*)---Or against us? (*clapclap*)  
Don't DeNiro! Don't DeNiro! Don't DeNiro! (*clapclap*)  
Are you with us? (*clapclap*)---Or against us? (*clapclap*)  
Don't DeNiro! Don't DeNiro! Don't DeNiro! (*clapclap*)

I told you earlier that we are shaped by our own culture, and understanding that can help us when reporting on other cultures. That understanding can come from not just contemplating our personal history and experiences, but writing about them. Interestingly, as writers we sometimes forget that we can discover or refine our identity by doing what we do best, which is to write about what we know.

With that in mind, I want conclude by reading a personal essay that I wrote during a two-day period in St. Petersburg, Florida, as part of a race-reporting seminar. We were assigned to write a personal essay about a specific moment or series of moments when we realized that race had become an integral part of our lives. Like so many journalists, writing about myself was not easy, this process of disclosing personal feelings and putting those thoughts on paper was foreign to a hard-news, investigative reporter. But the exercise turned out to be not so much therapeutic as insightful. Surprisingly, the story coursing through my brain leaped from memory banks to fingertips to computer keyboard, and kept me writing in snatches of time over a 48-hour period. What emerged was a story about myself, but I think we all have similar stories within our hearts. This is called "The Boy Who Crowed Like a Rooster."

### *The Boy Who Crowed Like a Rooster*

*Er-erer-ererr.*

*Er-erer-ererr.*

This was my language lesson. My twice-weekly mantra. A rooster's crow in a schoolhouse attic.

*Er-erer-ererr.*

*Er-erer-ererr.*

It was my pledge of allegiance. My God Bless America. My purple mountained majesties above the fruited plain.

*Er-erer-ererr.*

*Er-erer-ererr.*

I was eight years old. Maybe nine. A black-haired, brown-skinned boy from the Philippines. Living in a small midwestern town outside a military base where my father worked as a staff sergeant.

He had been a guerrilla in World War II, an expert at eluding Japanese soldiers in the blessedly rugged mountains of his homeland. He had joined the Philippine

Scouts, making forty pesos a month, fighting alongside American soldiers who made more money and were paid in U.S. dollars. After the war, he had become an American soldier himself. A Filipino GI-Joe stationed in Manila, clothed in stateside khaki. By then, he had married a *Pinay*, or young Filipina, who came from his hometown province and who first spied him as she hung wash in the courtyard of her master's home. There, she worked as a servant for a prosperous American, who also had a Filipino houseboy and a Filipino maid and a Filipino chauffeur.

I was my parents' only son, born in Clark Field Air Base because my father was in the military. But since we didn't live in military housing, I was taken home to the local district of *Pampanga Angeles* outside the security gates. I was a Filipino boy brought into the world in an American hospital. In what Americans called a foreign land. In what my family called its native country.

When we left the Philippines, we took a sea journey, stopped over in Okinawa and stayed in California before our family finally landed in Kansas, somewhere in the middle of a vast, new country. For a not-quite American boy living in what he called his adopted country, it felt very much like a foreign land.

Still I don't recall being particularly miserable as an immigrant stranger.

The winters were cold, but I was entertained by the lush blanket of snow which armed me with white, heat-seeking missiles to hurl at my sister. The ocean was a thousand miles away, but I was mesmerized by the Missouri River as I sat in the springtime with my family on the banks of the flowing waters. The flattened highways bored me to sleep, but I was riding in a new, green station wagon that my father said we could never afford in the old country. The American diet of meat and potatoes dulled my appetite, but I was replenished by Filipino dishes made from the vegetables, the *umpalaya* and *ceyote*, grown in our own patch of garden.

I was not without family. Not without small pleasures. Not without a friend.

His name was Billy, and he lived in the upstairs portion of the house our families shared on Kiowa Street. We would use thick, wooden sticks as rifles to play army and plant plastic soldiers on ant hills to carry on our miniature wars. We would pitch back-and-forth in the alley while learning a sport called baseball. And there was the day Billy rolled up his sleeves and placed his freckled, white skin next to mine and said, "You see, I told you we were different."

Confused for a moment, I wondered if he had unveiled some deep mystery of my childhood. I was baffled. Then worried. So what, Billy, I wanted to yell. So what?

But before I did, he laughed and laughed. And so did I.

Then, one day at school, there was a playground argument with no Billy around, although I was surrounded by kids with the same freckled, pale skin as Billy's. The

fight began over a large rubber ball used in four-square when a boy snatched the ball away from an unsuspecting girl. She immediately started crying, so I grabbed the ball back. Startled, the boy tried to pull it away while I hugged the ball close to my chest. He started yelling at me, clawing at my arms. I closed my eyes and held on tighter. With eyes shut, I could hear everyone yelling at me, including the little girl. And only the end-of-recess bell rescued me.

After school that day, I was walking home when I spotted my newly-made enemy. I made a dash for Kiowa Street as the boy, joined by his older brother, ran after me shouting. I heard the older boy's yell as I made my front door. It was a word I had never heard before but in the days ahead would hear again. And again.

"*Kamikaze. Kamikaze,*" the chant began. "*Kamikaze of Kiowa Street.*"

Some variations used less alliteration and relied more on crudity, more on simple cruelty. "Jap-boy. Jap-boy," they hissed at me. "Jap-boy," echoed from the playground.

I gave up trying to tell the other kids I was not Japanese or that my father had fought against them in the war. Most had never heard of the Philippines. None had heard of my father.

At home, I hesitated telling my parents about the taunting. I was afraid of what they would do. Instead, I approached my father one day to ask him about this strange word. *Kamikaze*. Though puzzled, he never asked me why but merely showed me a photograph from an encyclopedia and described the suicidal warriors with the rising sun headband plunging their planes into American ships, spiraling themselves into the sea.

I was mystified.

Jap-boy? *Kamikaze*? Jap-boy? *Kamikaze from Kiowa Street*? How could that possibly be me?

I suppose that's when my troubles began in school. Or perhaps that's when I merely bookmark the painful memories.

Was it that same week? Or that same month? I don't know. All I remember is reading a simple story aloud one day in front of the class. When it came to the part about a familiar pest, the cockroach, I read on. Only I pronounced the word as my father always did: *coke-rotch*.

"What did you say?" asked my teacher amid my classmates' laughter. "Would you say that word again?"

"*Coke-rotch,*" I repeated to more laughter. By the time the teacher had corrected me, I had fled to my desk. Later, when I arrived home and told my mother what had happened, she was mortified and comforted me. But late into the night, I could still

hear my parents talking about it. They spoke in English and then shifted into *Tagalog*, a language we children were still trying to learn.

On another occasion, my teacher asked what we wanted when we grew up. When it came to my turn, I said in a shy voice that I wanted to meet the president.

My teacher smiled and stood beside me proudly. "Isn't that wonderful?" she told the class. "Victor would like to *be* the president one day."

While I snapped my head around and looked up in horror, the teacher continued in her best civic-minded way. "And since Victor was born in the Philippines, of course, he would have to be president of that country," she said. "Does anyone know why?"

There was not a civic-informed student in the classroom so the teacher answered her own question. "Because he was *not* born here," she said sweetly as I lowered my head. Devastated, I sat down. With her remarks, the teacher had certainly established my non-Japanese credentials, but it mattered little. I had been reminded that I *was* different from everyone else in the classroom. And that was all that mattered to me.

When I told my parents this story, they wanted to talk to the teacher. But I begged them not to interfere and was relieved when they finally agreed. I also was quietly thankful that I had never told them of the playground clashes with other children. I was just determined to make it through the day, the month, the school year.

Then came the crowing of the rooster.

*Er-erer-ererr.*

*Er-erer-ererr.*

The crowing was my vocal exercise for a speech therapy class. In what was a surprise to me, I had a foreign accent. School officials made that pronouncement and told me I had trouble saying the "r" sound, which apparently came out sounding like an "l." It was a speech impediment, they said. To me, I just thought I sounded like my parents.

So, off I would go twice weekly to the sweltering, stale-aired attic of the school building. On those designated days, the speech therapist would pluck me from class-- along with the boy with a lisp, the girl who could barely speak, the kid with a bad stutter. The therapist was a nice enough woman, and when she instructed me, she tried to sound encouraging. Think like a bird, she told me. You can even pretend to flap your wings if you want. Remember, she added, you need to do this to talk better.

And so I did what she told me. I crowed, and I crowed.

*Er-erer-ererr. Er-erer-ererr.*

*Er-erer-ererr. Er-erer-ererr.*

Over and over. In between flash cards. In between the exercises where I rolled my tongue around my mouth. In between the silly songs I sang with lyrics full of "r" words. I crowed and crowed. Sometimes, I even flapped my arms in boredom.

I thought I was humiliating myself in the privacy of the hideaway loft. But it wasn't long before the news hit the playground. The *Kamikaze of Kiova Street* was no more. I had become *The Boy Who Crowed Like a Rooster*.

I don't remember how long the speech classes lasted. Or when the taunts ended. Or when I lost my accent. All I know is that my parents stopped trying to teach their children *Tagalog* and, instead, stressed English words and American phrases. I saw my father stop himself when he was about to yell at the black bug that sometimes scurried across the kitchen floor--and then needlessly apologize to his children for mispronouncing a word he never even said. More and more, I saw signs of the old homeland fade away and a new homeland take its place.

Some years later, after leaving elementary school, I stood with my family as my mother and sisters and I were sworn in as naturalized citizens. There is a photograph of us standing outside the military courtroom where we took the oath of allegiance. We are bundled in the wintry wind, our smiles locked in place. We are happy because we are official at last. And I am the brown-skinned, black-haired boy in the foreground. The newly-minted American secure in his newly-adopted land.

It is a picturesque scene. And in the background, you could almost hear the strains of patriotic music or the faint sound of the national anthem. As for me, I hear an anthem of a different sort, and it is one that still resonates through me. Never silent, never ending.

Er-erer-ererr.

Er-erer-ererr.

Mahalo, and aloha.