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Living as a Filipino in America

Filipino’s feelings towards living in the United States can be described in one word, confusion. Filipinos tend to have mixed feelings towards the United States as some love living here, and at the same time they have tons of negative comments to say about living in the United States. For the Filipino, the usual notion is that Filipino immigrants leave the Philippines for a better life filled with prosperity, and the United States is the spot where this can happen. But are there expectations of America set to high, or even fulfilled? Through my interview with a Filipino immigrant, my mother Angie Morales, the book “Pinoy Capital”, by Benito M. Vergara Jr., Filipino immigrants expectations and feelings towards the United States differ greatly between each Filipino immigrant, but the thought that the United States will bring you prosperity is the same with all Filipino Immigrants.

For many Filipino’s, immigration into the United States has been portrayed as a possibility for a better future and life. According to E. San Juan, Jr., “an estimated three thousand Filipinos leave the country everyday”.(San Juan Jr. 6) In an interview with Wally Curameng in Vergara’s book, “Pinoy Capital”, Vergara says “life in the United States came to take on an alternate existence for Curameng, as a place beyond his reach and yet so close at the same time.” (Vergara 47) The possibility of going to the United States alone is a powerful image when given to a Filipino immigrant. It means you have the opportunity and the possibility for a better life, and a good future. For Immigrants like Vergara’s interviewee, Curameng, “the possibility of moving to America has given structure to immigrants’ expectations”. In Cuameng’s younger years, he thought the United States was “very clean” and “all people are nice”, but he later encountered some racial discrimination in the US Army and a couple of low-skilled jobs made Curameng “realize how naïve his preconceptions were.” (Vergara 48)

Not all Filipino immigrants’ experiences and opinions about the United States are the same however. For my interview with my mother Angie Morales, her experiences in the United States have been mostly positive. Angie’s reasons for going to the United States differed from Cuameng’s in that Angie came to the United States to be with her future husband, Virgil. When I asked Angie what were some of her first impressions of the United States, she said “it’s clean…and cold” commenting on the Daly City weather. Her jobs were all successful jobs, and were only out of work to raise her kids. Angie even preferred living in the United States, saying “I actually prefer living here because I have a family of my own.” Family was the biggest reason for Angie’s joy and happiness for living in the United States, and might have been the deciding factor for her success in the United States.

It’s hard not to argue that the United States is not a materialistic country. I could go in depth about how the United States uses more oil, more electricity and more materials than any other country but won’t. What I will talk about is Filipino immigrants materialism gained from going to the United States. “The association of immigration and materialism is well entrenched in discourse among Filipinos”. (Vergara 49) Kiko Novero, an interviewee in “Pinoy Capital”, has had parents left two years prior to him leaving the Philippines. In those two years, Novero’s parents would send him and his family money to support them. Also the Parents would send over material goods, like shoes. “In the Philippines, it was such a big deal…and when you wear them in the Philippines, gosh, you’re so different.” This difference increased his popularity with his classmates and made Novero look more forward to his inevitable departure to the United States. The thought that when he gets to the United States, he will have access to everything you ever wanted came to his mind. This isn’t new however, in that many immigrants come here for material success. My interviewee Angie said “[in the Philippines] I ride a bus, here (the United States) I drive my own car.” This is sort of a symbol of what Filipino immigrants see from what they gain from going to the United States, their own goods that they didn’t have in the Philippines.

Throughout Vergara’s interviews, interviewee’s would talk about cultural differences without Vergara prompting a response. Even more interesting was that many of the interviewees would use the differences of the newer generation and older generation of Filipinos as an example of how America is different from the Philippines. This shows that Filipino immigrants portray the “Filipino Americans” as what embodies America. “Cultural differences between immigrant and native-born, particularly when seen in relation to language, constitute the kernel of the immigrant predicament: to maintain a complicated balance between Filipino and American identities.” (Vergara 61) In a country filled with thousands of other ethnicities and cultures, it is difficult to maintain your own culture without it getting mixed into this giant soup we call America. This is what Filipino immigrants see happening with the “young filipino’s”. Navarro said “They “acquire all the bad habits of the Americans…the environment takes over, and then peer pressure in very strong, and then the desire to belong in very strong.”” (Vergara 63) By bad habits, Navarro is referring to things not practiced in the Philippines but practiced in the United States. Things like related to anti-abstinence like safe sex. The pressure of fitting in, Navarro says, is strong because to fit in means to belong to something.

The most important issue brought up by Vergara’s interviews between Filipinos and “Filipino Americans” had to do with language. Some can understand Tagolog, some can’t understand it at all, like myself. In one of his interviews with Alice Bulos, co founder of the Filipino American Woman’s Network, said “Our Filipino Americans here, maybe their parents were really so afraid that one would say you were not American, you are not like this, and then they refuse to let them speak Tagalog, they don’t want to speak Tagalog.” (Vergara 65) For one who is living in America, many immigrants thought that they should teach their children exclusively English so they can become more Americanized and fit in

Their will never be a shortage of Filipino immigrants trying to leave the Philippines any time soon. For some immigrants, the United States is a symbol for a better life and a better future. For almost all immigrants, a better life is one of the main reasons for coming to America, but for some, their expectations about the United States are more fantasy than fact. Also peer pressure, and the thought of having to fit in effects Filipinos decisions. Filipinos attitude towards the United States can differ between each and every Filipino Immigrant depending on their experiences here and the choices they have made while living in the United States. The thought that the United States is the gateway for a better life will not change anytime soon.

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