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October 7th, 2009 KELLY CLARKE | Special Section Stories

Ronault “Polo” Catalani

Tags:



You really should read: *Counter Culture*

When civil-rights lawyer “Polo” Catalani looks at Portland, chances are he sees a totally different city than you do—filled with aunties and immigrant outsiders, rituals and repression. The “Asian Muslim island boy” has tried to illuminate that Portland through his columns in the *Asian Reporter*, his work with the city’s Office of Human Rights and, most recently, his fascinatingly raw, often funny book *Counter Culture*, which uses the restaurants and cafes of the Rose City as a starting point to explore an immigrant’s view of the city. *3 pm (Border Crossings panel) and 4 pm Sunday, Oct. 11. McMenamins Stage.*

What’s your personal writing ritual?

Rise while Portland sleeps, while spirits of this old and vigorous place still move us newcomers. Boil water, French-press David Kobos’ best Sumatran, stir in way too much sweetened condensed milk. And write.

What are your favorite themes to write about (or that you’re most guilty of rehashing)?

Blending our mainstream’s enormous brick, mortar and money with new Portland’s enormous social and cultural capital.

What authors made you want to pick up a pen in the first place, and why?

I did not write or read until my 40s. I picked up a pen after picking books for jumbo jets across our Pacific. Novelists inspiring me: Duong Thu Huong (*Memories of a Pure Spring*); Indonesia’s equal to Russia’s Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: Pramoedya Ananta Toer (author of the Buru quintet of novels, smuggled out sentence by sentence from Buru Island prison); Haruki Murakami (master of urban weird).

Fight Club time: If you could fight one author (or critic), who would it be and why?

I know we don’t clobber girls, but so long as *WW* makes it OK and sets up the cage match, beating real bad both Amy Tan and Lisa See would make me feel a lot better. *Oh tentu*. For sure. Here’s the funny part: My anger and envy are out of their adaptive success (as Darwin would call it; brown boys call it betrayal)—out of their casting of our mas, aunties and daughters as long-suffering, quietly crying women. Of our men as irrelevant. American armies

Friday, April 25

any keyword



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Lewis & Clark college, Agne...

FRIDAY, APRIL 25

7:00 PM



Empire High
Funhouse Lounge

7:00 PM



John Stowell and Kendra Shank
O’Connor’s Vault

7:00 PM



Lamb Bo Ssam Dinner
Good Keuken Kitchen

7:30 PM



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and air forces are fueled on it, on this adaptive (girly) place in that best-selling narrative. The envy part: I want to sell books, interview in magazines, do big gigs, like these sisters do.

Dream project:

Setting the record (the American mainstream narrative above) straight by writing our father's and uncles' and their women's stories. Plenty of tears in pain and joy, but not a crybaby among them. We worry about Portland Hmong elder shaman Shoua Lee Cha getting ill and old, and us losing his generation's story of America's awful miscalculations in his Lao/Viet highlands—misunderstandings killed millions, refugeeed a million, about 30,000 of them to Portland.

Pessimistic question: Will you keep writing even after people stop reading?

Among Old Worlders, poets and painters are recipients of great grace. *Alhamdulillah*. From God. This vocabulary is not inside everybody. Owning this is a privilege, and putting together into public form our community's story is our duty. Lucky for traditional types, none of this depends on publishers or even readers (since paintings are painted and stories are spoken)... more to the point, your pessimistic point: In our Old World metaphysics, you don't have a storyteller without a story listener, a writer without a reader. That compulsion many of us talk about as artists, to ruminate and struggle and produce, has equivalence in others' needs for narrative, for existential meaning. A handy symmetry, *tidak?* (No?)

Cautiously optimistic question: Obama? Discuss.

There's not a schooled brown boy in any room who doesn't shudder at the whole Barak thing. Any of us in college when dating ethnic guys became cool, know that trouble is just around the corner. That inevitable corner. The whole breathless TV newsgirl scene during Senator Obama's presidential campaign was scary for its predictability. America's got these big needs that get projected onto public people. Hollywood handles a lot of this. Unfortunately politicians want a bite of it too. The problem is the certainty of our fantasies falling way short. Like us bad brown boys not proving up all that adolescent idealization. Not even close. After those blondes risked it all, taking us to meet their unhappy dads. There's an extra-extra shade of betrayal when we fail. About six weeks. President Obama will likewise disappoint. He and his handlers and us adoring consumers will have only us to blame for it. For it all. The optimistic bit of it is that we all grow up a little for our misestimations.

Share one thing you've had to change in your everyday life thanks to our current recession.

Our shrinking economy makes our shared room smaller, much smaller. Because my work (as an activist lawyer, and now as City Hall's New Portlander Programs guy) is about giving voice to our newcomer families, I approach everyday much more mindfully. These smaller times have made many Americans more agitated by more immigrants. But inside the same moment, our contracting shared space also makes intimacy more possible. We're likely to bump into our shared humanity. So, in our edgy public space, with my every public face, I urge our common cause by explaining and explaining again how Portland needs newcomer optimism as much as we need Oregon's material plenty. An urgent need to trade immigrant social and cultural capital for America banks so well.

Please paste a short paragraph from a story you're currently working on:

"Families move. We always have. Since memory began.

Humans move like Humpback whales move. Like arctic caribou, like Chapman Elementary's chimney swifts move. It's imprinted in cetacea ribs big as a school bus, in birdie bones light as a feather.

When whale families move, hushed OSU scientists follow every breath blowing just above our cold Pacific's waves. Caribou migrating have inspired America's kindest conservationists to



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chill the world's biggest oilmen. Every September, hundreds of families on cozy blankets cheer Chapman Elementary's swifts. Thousands and thousands spew out of that school's tall stack, chattering a mix of English and Spanish, eager to get down to sunnier Mexico. Bigger bugs too."

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