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December 3rd, 2008 KELLY CLARKE | Books

Counter Culture Ronault L.S. Catalani

The immigrant life, with a side of toast.

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IMAGE: Nim Xuto

The bookshelves at Powell's are packed with tales of outsiders. But rarely does a book convey such a sense of otherness and, at once, familiarity as Portland lawyer and *Asian Reporter* columnist Ronault L.S. "Polo" Catalani's new collection of essays, *Counter Culture* (Asian Reporter Publications, 106 pages, \$12).

Penned by a man who describes himself as a "Spanish-speaking Asian Muslim island boy," the book contains a scatted series of what he calls "immigrant stories" set in some of the most well known of Portland's cafes and lunch counters. These are the common places that, for Polo at least, hide histories unseen by the general populace. A Denver omelette at Milwaukie's Bomber Restaurant, a diner located in the shadow of a massive World War II bomber, prompts memories of Catalani's family's flight from Indonesia, and the terror he felt as a boy when a well-meaning Presbyterian sponsor showed him this very plane as a child. A stroll past Chinatown dim sum palace Fong Chong leads to the giddy search for a sacrificial duck destined for a ceremony to bless Southwest Portland's MAX tracks.

Written in a raw style peppered with Indo and Spanish slang that often seems more like an oral history than literature, the tales are occasionally clunky, but always personal. That's *Counter Culture's* strength. It examines the sometimes painful and other times belly-laugh-funny seams where ethnicities converge, stories of the big aunties and wise uncles who ought to already be well-known names around town but aren't, racist coworkers, and cringe-worthy moments where being yourself just doesn't seem to work in this country.

Portland is still a white city—according to the 2005 census, it's over 75 percent Caucasian. And although Portland boasts of its progressive ideals, it is still a town where the immigrant experience is more often dinner at pho restaurants and food carts than a personal memory. Perhaps that's why Catalani's stories, taking place at everyday spots like Peet's Coffee, Mary's Club and even the Lloyd Center neighborhood Applebee's, turn the tables on the reader. Catalani's experience of these places, and the parallels he draws between them and eateries in Vietnam, Indonesia and other countries, makes them seem new and foreign—and sometimes marvelous.

Catalani's stories often begin with an account of Portland's weather, its oppressive foggy mornings or solemn rainstorms, sometimes acting as a blunt metaphor for his feeling of disconnect from the city at large and from the people who inhabit it. "This work is not bent on integration. It is not assimilative," he writes in the author's note at the end of his book. "It has

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instead explored and unapologetically articulated the world of ethno-cultural differences.” And yet, by highlighting those differences, the author ends up building a strong bridge for his readers—Asian or otherwise. Each one of us weighed down by the weather and lost in our own world. Each wanting desperately to be judged as nothing more than ourselves—and each still waiting for a refill on that cup of coffee.

READ: The *Counter Culture* book launch and “talking story” party takes place at the Center for Intercultural Organizing, 700 N Killingsworth St., 287-4117. 6-9 pm Friday, Dec 5. Free.

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