
Asian American Art Oral History Project

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Mary Grace Bertulfo Interview

Serena Offord
DePaul University

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Interviewer: Serena Offord
Artist: Mary Grace Bertulfo
Over the Phone Interview, Chicago
Date: May 9, 2019

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 203: Asian American Arts & culture during the 2019 Spring Quarter as a part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor of Art, Media, & Design.



Picture provided by M.G. Bertulfo

Bio: Mary Grace lives and writes at the intersection of nature, culture, and spirituality. She has written professionally for television and children's education in such venues as CBS, Pearson Education Asia, and Schlessinger and for conservation magazines such as *Sierra* and *Chicago Wilderness*. Her award-winning fiction has appeared in *Growing Up Filipino II*, *Our Own Voice*, and *The Oak Parker* and her essays have appeared in various anthologies. She is a co-owner of Calypso Moon Studio, a working arts studio, in the Oak Park Arts District. Mary Grace is a member of the international N.V.M. and Narita Gonzalez Writers Group, the Historical Novel Society, New Moon Mondays, and the Acorn novelist workshop. She has served on the board of the Oak Park Arts District and was a local network rep for the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. In 2017, she founded Banyan, an Asian American Writers Collective whose mission is to promote the visibility of Asian American Writers in Chicagoland and to uplift community spirit through the arts. (<http://www.mgbertulfo.com/>)

Serena Offord: Hi!

Mary Grace Bertulfo: Hi! How are you?

SO: I'm good, how are you?

MB: I'm good.

SO: Your name is Mary Grace, right?

MB: Yeah, my friends call me M.G.

SO: M.G! Okay, I'm Serena it's nice to meet you!

MB: Hi Serena, it's nice to meet you.

SO: Okay, I have a draft of questions that I want to ask you. There's probably like ten or fifteen if that's okay with you.

MB: Sure!

SO: Okay, could you tell me a little about yourself? If you don't mind me asking your birthdate or where did you grow up and where did you go to school?

MB: Sure! Actually, first could I ask you a couple questions?

SO: Sure!

MB: Could you tell me a little bit about the class you're taking with Laura and why you are taking it and more about this project you're doing?

SO: Yes! The class is Asian American Contemporary art, so basically, we have an oral history project and Laura gave us a list of artists that she knew or knew of and we all got to choose from a list and I thought your description was really interesting, so I wanted to interview you for this project!

MB: Oh my gosh thank you!

SO: Yeah! So yeah, in our class we read her book *Queering Contemporary Asian American Art*, and then we look at different types of Asian art and different forms of Asian art, and that's a little bit of what we focus on in class!

MB: And what is your curiosity about Asian art, like personally?

SO: Well, my mom is Indonesian so we go to Indonesia every two years, and I thought it would be really cool to experience and learn about art from other cultures because I'm more familiar with Indonesian art, so I just thought it would be interesting to take this class and also I need an art requirement and also I thought, "I'm Asian!" so maybe I'll take this one.

MB: A passion and a practical!

SO: Yes! *laughing*

MB: Okay, great, thanks.

Serena: So, could you tell me a little bit about yourself, like where did you go to school and where did you grow up?

MB: I'm almost a stereotype of Filipino America.

SO: Oh really, how so? *laughing*

MB: My mom came to this country and because she's a nurse, a nurse from the Philippines, and so she immigrated to the United States in 1969 because the United States needed nurses, there was a nursing shortage. I think they needed nurses and doctors, and my father was in the Philippines also and he went through elaborate, crazy tests and then joined the Navy, because I didn't realize the tests were elaborate, the stereotype is the Navy dad and the nurse mom. My mom's a nurse and my dad's a Navy man and that is how we immigrated to this country and then I was born on a U.S. Naval base, and my mom's name is Milagros which means miracle and my dad's name is Perfecto which is perfection.

SO: That's amazing!

MB: Yeah, it's a lot to live up to you know? *laughing*

SO: Yeah, oh my gosh! *laughing* So, I saw in your emails you always end off with Salamat, but Salamat in Indonesian means "congratulations" and so I thought "oh maybe she's

Indonesian!” but then my mom told me “no, that’s Filipino for thanks I think!” So, I kind of assumed that you were Filipina, but I wasn’t totally sure. So anyway, that is really cool, that is really interesting.

MB: Oh thanks! I mean I could tell detailed stories, but the broad-brush strokes are that’s how my parents immigrated here, I was born in Virginia on the east coast, spent part of my childhood in Detroit in like Motor City in the time when Motown was huge.

SO: *gasping* that’s amazing!

MB: The car industry was booming; my dad was on the Ford Motor Line which doesn’t get written about so that’s something to write about. My mom worked for the VA and her brother and sister were there and then they loved California because California.

SO: Oh, my mom loves California, I think all Asians love California, I think that’s uh-

MB: Right! As close as you can get to Asia but not be there. *laughing*

SO: Exactly! They love it, my mom loves, I don’t know she has such a fascination.

MB: Yeah so then they moved to California for the weather and my mom had cousins there, so most of my childhood was growing up in Los Angeles.

SO: Oh, that’s cool. So, when did you move to Chicago?

MB: In 1997, so I was born in 1970 and we moved to Chicago in ’97.

SO: Oh, wow that’s so interesting. So, did your whole family to Chicago or did you just move?

MB: Well, I moved and then my brother moved from California to try something new and he lived with us for about a year after college and helped us with our then, 3-year-old boy. And then two years ago, our middle sister came and moved here also. So, we are all three siblings are within 8 blocks of each other.

SO: Oh my gosh. *laughing*

MB: Yeah.

SO: So, you guys are a close family?

MB: We’re very close.

SO: Oh, that’s so awesome! Ok so, when and how and why did you first get involved with the Asian American Writers collective?

MB: You mean Banyan?

SO: Oh, yes, I mean Banyan, I wasn't sure because on the sheet it said Asian American Writers collective, but is that what you call it, Banyan?

MB: Yeah, Banyan. So we named our collective Banyan, because there are many different Asian writers in our group, Asian and Asian-American writers in our group. We were trying to come up with a symbol that kind of spoke to different Asian countries. There's a balet tree in the Philippines and a banyan tree in India and banyan trees are all across Asia. So that's why we chose a banyan tree as a symbol for the Banyan Asian American Writers Collective. So, the 2016 presidential election happened, and I think it was just, let's see, I don't want to cuss- *laughing*

SO: No, say whatever you want it's fine! *laughing*

MB: No, no, no, no, just for prosperity, I'll keep it clean.

SO: Okay! *laughing*

MB: It was a tremendous shock and disappointment. You know? Because I think that when Barack Obama became president, I think a lot of us thought America had overcome, I mean not completely overcome, but that we turned a corner that pluralism was actually the fabric of American life, that we learned some lessons from history, that we could, you know, start to heal and that Barack was maybe the start of that, and Michelle.

Serena: Oh my gosh, love her!

MB: I think I love her more than Barack! *laughing*

Serena: Same!

MB: And I think, with the elections, the process of the elections, everything that candidate Trump said just seemed, far-fetched. Accusing Mexican people of being rapists, I mean just, I remember thinking I just don't think this is possible in this day in age, for someone like that to get elected. So, when he was elected and then the swastikas started going up and in college dorm rooms, swastikas were put into somebody's carpet. And just hearing the stories about women of color at bus stops being harassed and people running around in black face, and then seeing things online like, "Well now we can say what we've been feeling all along! And how we really feel because we've been so suppressed!" It's like—now I'm going to cuss – really? What the fuck! Like what the fuck?

SO: *laughing* I had the same feelings and I understand.

MB: Yeah many of us!

SO: Yeah, I remember when he won the presidential election, I was crying. I went to a very suburban, white high school so everyone was just like cheering him on and I was like crying and had to leave school. I was like "this is disgusting." It was so disturbing, and it made me really sad that our country, I thought was progressing, but we really weren't. It really made me upset.

MB: Yeah so, I say for me, it was personally disappointing. I am a part of an inter-racial marriage. My husband is Jewish and looks white, and our son is biracial and so we look at ourselves as a bridge family and so I know a lot of Caucasian- Americans who don't think like that. You know? But to see the contingent of Caucasian-Americans that still does or hasn't had enough exposure or whatever the reasons are, but spiritually it's about their hatred, right?

SO: Right.

MB: So, you asked me why Banyan, right? So, the seeds of hatred were starting to really be watered and even like in Chicago. So, in my neighborhood there was an African-American young man walking to work, to 7-Eleven, the morning after the election and this other young man who was Caucasian, in a car, got out and spit on him.

SO: What!?

MB: And he went to work and then a bunch of us women, we were gathering at a diner to kind of console each other about the election results. One of my friends came in and her husband had gone to the 7-Eleven, and the young man was crying because he had been spit on, he had just been targeted like that because of the election, like the reaction was immediate. And I remember it was just so heartbreaking and I thought, "What can I do?" so I asked for the guy's name or what 7-Eleven he had worked at and I went and got the prettiest flowers I could find and I brought them to him and I said "You know what? Because something so hateful happened to you by a stranger, I wanted you to know that a stranger can also be kind." And like, I gave him the flowers and he's African-American and I'm Asian-American, there was a Caucasian woman there, an African-American grandmother and her grandkid and we all started crying because we were like, "This is the America we know." And the young man was like, "I really needed that, thank you so much, and *this* is America, we all need each other." And so, that was the context where the idea for Banyan grew. So, I have to give a nod to, there is this magazine called Riksha, which I am sure is on your list somewhere. Nicole Sumida, Alex Yu, and Chris Ike, and Ed Eusebio, those four are powerhouses. They had Riksha, like I want to say 15 or 20 years ago, and then because of what was happening in the country, they revived it. So, I became friends with Nicole at that time, and right here in this studio space – I'm going to like to turn the phone, so you could see the back room of my studio. *shows Serena the workspace through FaceTime*

SO: Oh wow!

MB: I'm going to actually take you to the front room too, so you could see my studio partners work.

shows the artwork

SO: Very spacious!

MB: Yeah, and I guess I wanted to show you that because it's really super important to have safe spaces in which to create.

SO: Yeah! It's so nice.

MB: So we got together with Nicole, who's a powerhouse and she's like, "we all have to do something M.G., we all have to do something!" And I'm like "Yes, we do!" and I had blurted out that I had always been thinking of having an Asian American Writers Collective and wouldn't that be cool, and then Nicole was like "You should do it. You should do it. You should do it." *laughing*

SO: That's amazing.

MB: I was like but I don't know, I don't even know what I'd do, and then there were two other writers there at the time, Jane Hseu and Samina Hadi-Tabassum might've been there and Karen Su was on our radar too, actually at that meeting or at the next one, and they were like "If you do it M.G., we'll help, let's do it!" It was a catalyst moment, right, where I think Nicole was at the meeting for 15 or 20 minutes and said, "You have a good idea, run with it, go with it." Like the sheer force of her conviction sort of sparked ours. You know? And made this nebulous dream a grass roots reality.

SO: Yeah. That's so amazing. I'm so proud that you did that, and I don't even know you, but I feel so proud that you did that.

MB: Aw, thank you.

SO: Yeah, of course!

MB: I think that you respond to the times that you are in, right?

SO: Yeah, right.

MB: And there's a difference with being reactionary and responsive and I wanted to have a response, a grounded response. Reactionary is like something happens politically and you just don't really think about the consequences and you don't meditate, and you don't ground yourself spiritually and you just react out of your anger or out of your hatred and that is what is prevalent in our country right now. So, for me, Banyan is very spiritually whole, we try to be spiritually grounded even though you might not see it in our brochures. It's like there's a reason Martin Luther King was so powerful, you know? There's a reason why nuns and liberation theologians are so powerful, it's because they're grounded in something other than hatred.

SO: Right, right. And I believe that too, that's really wonderful that you created this because Nicole told you to just do it, and that's amazing.

MB: And well, it was an interesting nexus point because Samina was just launching her book of poetry, called "Muslim Melancholia" and she, like many many artists who write from the heart don't think about marketing as the first thing. And I own my own small business, and I had to think about marketing, plus I think it's really fun!

SO: Yes, marketing is really fun.

MB: It's fun! I believe for the community, and if you think of it as, instead of marketing and branding and you think of it as "What's your dream and mission? And how do you build community, right?" So, that's how I translate it. Samina had this great book, I had an idea for a collective, Nicole had the determination, Jane and Karen were like "Yes, let's do it!" and then so we did, and so our first project was to launch Samina's book and that's what we did. We booked a venue, we booked a time, we brought food. There was something like 75 people who showed up.

SO: That's awesome.

MB: Yeah, and we decided to take an intergenerational approach, so we had like kids' activities and we had a band, my son played harp because he is a composer and harpist.

SO: Woah, that's amazing what the heck! I want to know how to play harp. *laughing* My mom made me play piano.

MB: Yeah! Do you actually want to know how to play harp because I can get you in touch with people?

SO: Oh my gosh, I don't even think I can afford a harp but that's amazing, thank you!
laughing

MB: Yeah, whether it's you go to watch, and we had to build up and buy used harps and save money the whole family would have to save money. But, yeah so Ari, my son, played harp. And then we had, I want to say, six of us that read little pieces that lead up to Samina's, so all of us brought our family and friends and audience and that was a way of cross-promoting right? And also building community. And we brought food, and I want to tell you *pause* the venue was a bit skeptical that this wouldn't have an audience. And the town that I'm in, it's very literary but I don't think they're used to seeing Asian-Americans. We believe ours was the first Asian-American writers reading in that capacity in the town. So initially when we were planning, I was like let's have music, let's have activities as well as the readings. The people we were organizing with were like "sure, I guess but you know, that's kind of ambitious", not within Banyan but in the institution, right? So, when they came to take pictures and help, they were supportive, but I don't think they really believe it was going to happen. The community came out and then I mean, Christmas time the next year, M. Evelina Galang, who Dr. Kina knows very well, who's currently on the board of VONA (Voices of our Nations Arts Foundation), it's dedicated to bringing people of color's voices out onto the national stage, you know like writers and anyway M. Evelina Galang is on the board of that and I think she's also the director of creative writing at University of Florida, but she had a book that she was launching about Filipina comfort woman, the lolas she interviewed. Mind you, it's Christmas time and we're trying to promote her book, which was about how these women were abused and raped by the Japanese government and the Japanese military men during World War II. And they were seeking reparations, and we really believe in Evelina and believe in her book, *Lolas' House*, and she's one of my mentors and I really wanted to support her. Like, she's given so much to the community. How could you not want to support the lolas and want to support her, right?

M. EVELINA GALANG
LOLAS'HOUSE
 FILIPINO WOMEN LIVING WITH WAR

Banyan: Asian American Writers Collective and Riksha Magazine are honored to present a Women's Justice & Empowerment gathering featuring M. Evelina Galang, who will read from her new book, *Lolás' House: Filipino Women Living with War*.

Join Us

Saturday, December 9 - 2 PM

The Bookable **riksha** **BANYAN**

Picture provided by M.G. Bertulfo

SO: Right.

MB: But, it's around Christmas time while we were doing this and we had like 75 people show up, for you know, a really hard topic. So, I think there's a hunger.

SO: Wow. So, did she read pieces out of her book at this event?

MB: Yeah, so we thought very carefully about how we were going to structure that event, and also again I've known Evelina for a while, so I knew I could do things with her that I might not be able to do other authors. First, the seating was arranged in a circle so that it was already community orientated. We did mark the audience for 15-16 years old and up because of the topic and we had a separate room for kids then she had a trailer for her book with pictures of her trips to the Philippines interviewing the women and then a clip of them dancing. Like you know, them as people because I think with stories you can always focus on the victimization that you're trying to draw attention to. But you also have to remember that's not the totality of who they are. Right?

SO: Yeah exactly.

MB: So, I think that was part of her message. So, she had a trailer for the book that we played, we had to read samples but actually before we had her read, she has this section in her book where someone had handed her a rose, I think a friend of hers handed her a rose because the transcriptions are difficult, you know? Like, everyone was crying from reading a lot of stories

and when her friend handed her the flower, the rose, she asked what it was for and the friend told her it's a filter. It's a filter because you have to remember, beauty still exists even when the hard things happen.

SO: Wow. That's amazing that there are people out there that remember the good things even in a bad situation.

MB: Yeah, so what I wanted to do was to bring in rose petals. So, I bought a dozen roses and I used to work as florist so I knew how to deconstruct them and then take the petals out. We had Nicole's two girls there for the opening and they, like flower girls, they sort of passed out the petals and we recounted that story of the flower to remember, it's a filter of beauty, so that you can remember that the world is not always cruel. And then the kids went out, Evelina read three or four selections maybe, and then there was a Question and Answer session. It was very simple, it was somber, and it was beautiful.



Picture provided by M.G. Bertulfo

MB: Oh! But also, to open up actually I forgot before the roses, I did an invocation in Tagalog which is the main dialect of the Philippines. Just speaking to the lolas and telling them that we were honoring their stories, you know? Cause for many of us, it is our belief that they still hear us. And Evalina promised she would bring out their stories and she's making good on her promises.

SO: Wow, that is so beautiful, I'm glad that you guys did it so thoughtfully and that it was really well-done and well-put together and that is just really beautiful that you guys did that.

MB: Aw thanks! And Evelina is a lovely speaker.

SO: She sounds lovely.

MB: Yeah.

SO: May I move on to a different question?

MB: Sure.

SO: So, I kind of already asked you this question, what is the meaning of the writer's collective –

MB: Can I add to that? There's a second part to that!

SO: Yes of course, you can add as much as you want!

MB: So, I'm a parent and many of us who started Banyan are parents. Part of the everyday intimacy behind it is that our kids have come up through elementary school, middle school, and high school in District 97. You know in the Midwest they don't really see themselves reflected in the curriculum. Not in the books that are chosen, not in the textbooks. We're not completely invisible but we are mostly invisible. And then it was the kind of thing like if you have Asian students, our kids would be separated from each other, in the name of diversity. There would be like only four Asians, and the school would spread them out! *laughing* But then the Asian students get like isolated.

SO: I totally know that feeling. Until this class, I didn't know majority of Asian-American history at all. I only really knew about the Japanese internment camps, like that was the only thing my teachers in U.S. history taught me about Asian-American history. And other stuff that I know, I had to research on my own or learn it from this class because a lot of this art that we look at have to deal with that and use their parents' stories or like use their own stories to portray in their art.

MB: Yeah, no like that's why we wanted Banyan to be intergenerational, so like you could like get involved. But we're coming at it like seeing our kids come up through a very big school district with caring teachers, but you know, a lot of invisibility. And that's despite us having a separate parent group that was trying to promote Asian-American visibility in schools. So, it all

kind of came together and it was like oh, well we can create what we need you know? For our kids, and for the kids as a majority.

SO: That's really nice that you did that for your guys' kids, I wish there was something like that in my community when I was growing up, because I am also mixed race. My dad is Caucasian, and my mom is Indonesian, so I always felt like I was too Asian to hang out with the white kids or too white to hang out with the Asian kids. *laughing* But yeah, that's really awesome. Even taking this class I've been trying to get more into my culture and getting to know more Asian-American people and just trying to educate myself about it because it feels that no one educates about Asian-Americans at all.

MB: Yeah. Well, I admire that you've been taking it upon yourself.

SO: Thank you, I've been trying. When we go to Indonesia, we do the cultural things and all of that, but she doesn't really talk about. She always wanted to come to America. I am glad that you are doing that. I am sure your son Ari is very appreciative of that and that's going to be really good for him in the long run, I think. What do you love most about the workshops and do you feel like people are more productive during them?

MB: Well, the practical thing is that I love that I am not running them *laughs*. Jane Hseu and Isabel Garcia-Gonzales are fantastic, and I feel like I get a chance to learn from two very smart women. I love that it feels like a safe space. I am in a lot of other groups and you always want to join a group that is going to be supportive of you. But in these workshops, I feel like I don't have to explain that part of me that has immigrant parents, that grew up eating rice, that grew up searching for our history. It is sort of taken as a shorthand because a lot of us have a similar experience or at least understanding. So, when it comes up in your writing or if you write in multiple languages, which I do, it is not weird. I don't feel like I am writing for the "mainstream" dominant culture, to translate myself into that culture is impossible. It is nice to be in a space where that isn't a fight, or not a fight but like a struggle.

SO: I feel like that's a good space for you to be in because you say you enjoy writing a different language. You don't have to alter it for someone else, it is really just for yourself and for other people to understand and support you.

MB: There are enough of us and there are enough Filipinos specifically in the group. If I write a story that references heavily, Tagalog or some cultural thing. Someone can call me on whether I got it right or maybe it wasn't the same for them. So that adds to the richness in a way, that in other groups might not happen.

SO: What is one of your favorite pieces you have written for the collective, and do you often get inspired by the writers that you meet?

MB: I am working on a novel right now; it has to be my favorite. Let me think of the exercise... Isabel brings ones that tend to be very evocative. I think the exercise was something like imagine your character and they have a dresser, and in the dresser, there are all these drawers. What's inside the drawer? Describe the things in the drawer. Have your character use some of them in

the scene. We have a rule in the workshop, where Jane and Isabel will bring in exercises, but we can use them however we want. In fact, if we do two or three exercises, and you're still working on the first one and it sparks something for you. You can continue to write on that one. You just use it however you want. So, I tend to come in, because I am immersed in the world of my novel right now, I tend to use those exercises to help me flesh things out for the novel.

SO: What is your novel entail? If you don't mind me asking. I don't know if that's a good question to ask.

MB: No! It's a great question. So, it's a fictional character named Liso and I am retelling the story of Magellan's invasion of the Philippines. From the point of the view of a 16th century woman shaman. There are many different types of Shaman, that is just sort of a general category. Liso is the tenacious girl, full of curiosity, sometimes stubborn to a fault. You know that story, curiosity killed the cat? Her curiosity gets her in trouble sometimes. So, she's called to become a shaman. You follow her calling, her rise to power, she becomes one of the elders in the village. At the height of her power, that's when Magellan invades. She and her sisterhood rebel against the invasion and also rebel against their chieftain who's trying to have business dealings with Magellan. She is brought to trial.

SO: So, this is fictional story then?

MB: Yes.

SO: Okay, very cool. That's really cool. Are you near the end? Are you in between?

MB: I am on the third draft. Hoping to be done as soon as possible.

SO: Are you going to do a book launch?

MB: Yeah!

SO: I would love to come to that. If that's anywhere near me, so cool.

MB: I have your email; these things take a while but I will put you on the list.

SO: I want to experience one. By the way you're describing them, they sound so amazing. So, I want to go to one. Moving on to the next question, do you ever address Asian or Asian-American identity themes in your artwork? If so please give an example.

MB: I think I center Asian/Asian-American characters, but they aren't necessarily dealing with their identity. So, my themes tend to be, I tend to write about nature, drawing from Filipino culture. That intersection between nature, culture, and spirituality. If you look at my author website that is the first line of my bio. I write about nature, culture, and spirituality. So, like I wrote for conservation magazines. Conservation in America is largely Caucasian. That's one way to describe it. Another way to describe it is indigenous people have always revered nature. You don't have to have conservation if we weren't colonized and living the way we were living.

There are multiple ways to look at this like an environmental justice piece. So, I don't think I write specifically about identity, but I try to center my characters in Asian or Asian- American culture.

SO: That's really cool, there needs to be more Asian, Asian-American characters I think in novels and writing. I think a lot of people that would like that. I think we need characters that aren't so stereotypically centered on Asian culture because a lot of us are American. Just the idea of oriental and all of this. We looked at all these different plays of "yellow face" and stuff like that and seeing how these characters are being played as "yellow face". I don't understand how people can't be taken aback by it. They are like why is a model minority necessarily bad, like I can't even explain. My mom is always like you should be grateful you have a roof over your head, why are you so caught up with all of this racism and discrimination?

MB: Sometimes it's a generational thing. The things my parents say and stuff they have faced I have different stories in my family of my uncle's driveway. White kids would drive by and throw beer cans at his head, telling him to go home... He's like, "I *am* home." I can sort of see from the older or first generation if they faced violence. They made it easier for us in some ways, us the second generation.

SO: What types of exhibition opportunities have changed or stayed the same for you over the years? So, exhibition as in your collective.

MB: Well Banyan is only a couple of years old. SO that question might be more pertinent 10 years from now. But what I will say is our credibility over the years has gone up. That's a tricky thing as a community organizer, sometimes people's attitudes are not what you expect them to be. What I am thinking of is the under expectation. Well the expectation that there will not be much interest in what we have to say. I think that was the overall message, it was never an advert thing, it was very condescending and patronizing. What we would get is messages from different established people in the institution, "Well you know when we normally do these readings, don't expect that much because we normally get like twenty people". I have gone to readings for a long time. Sometimes you will go to a bookstore and three people will show up because it is raining. The author comes out there with all of her books and it's like three people have shown up. I understand, the town I live in is a very literary town and even when I have talked to editors in New York they have said if you get a crowd of 20 it's great. But let me set the stage for you, if you haven't been to a book launch before, right? So actually, Women and Children First and other places are very community-oriented because the community cares about the bookstore, they care about the authors, they care about the topic. In this town where I live, people are used to a literary event. People are used to wine, cheese, grapes, brie. Very educated people, very kind, very thoughtful, very engaged. But we were proposing to bring the lolas, bring the grandmas, bring the babies, and everybody in between. We are going to have a big fucking party! We are going launch Samina's book and we are going to have a fucking party. That was the vibe, right? So that's what we did. People who have done other literary events in the same venue, they were like, "Who gave you this money? How did you get this food?" We were like, "*We* cooked the food! *We* brought the food!" So, it had more of a community feel and brought community food. So, the community came out. It's not that we don't eat cheese and wine because we do. It's like when bring you Pansit. Samina brought Samosas, and so how has it

changed? I think that we did it our way and it succeeded. The next time we did an event there was no questioning our methodology. I would say, "We are going to have music, we are going to have kid's events, we need tables, we need to book the room a week in advance to do a tech run through to make sure it goes smoothly." I would ask for everything I could ask for and there was no question anymore. The venue would just say, "Give MG what she needs." So, I feel like we have cut our teeth and they get that our strategy works. So, the next few events have been great. Also, in a largely white dominant culture that appreciates multiculturalism, we bring added value to their programming. Everybody wins, the audience, the community, the author, the venue patrons, and the venue wins. We want them to be fun events. We were told over and over again, because we didn't do it in a traditional way, that it wasn't a regular reading. In fact, when my family was there my brother brought his babies. He says, "You know it's kind of like a comedy club where you could drop in and drop out, but you could have your baby there." We built our performances based on the fact that people would be moving in and out of the space. Then we had a Question and Answer session. The very first event we did, it was so quiet, we were like, "Are there any questions?" *laughs* It was so quiet. I thought, "There has got to be questions." This little kid piped up and had asked one of the authors what inspired him or something? That was great. The kid's question opened up the community dialog.

SO: My last question, what are you currently working on? You already told me you were working on a novel! Thank you so much for talking and being so responsive with me. I thought it was going to be so hard, but you made it so easy and I am so happy to have met you over the phone but hopefully I can meet you soon. It was really nice talking to you and I am very thankful for this.

MB: I am very honored for this. When I looked at your email, I went what?! I think they got the wrong person, what is this! Thank you Serena, thank you for contacting me! Do you want to be put on the Banyan list?

SO: That would be awesome, I would really enjoy that. Maybe I can bring my mom and we can have a community party! We need more Indonesian-Americans in the community, I think!

MB: How is the Indonesian-American community in Chicago?

SO: We all know each other and there is probably 100 in Illinois. We will have Indonesian parties and we kind of go off. There is lots of food, when I was younger my mom would do traditional Indonesian music. We would wear traditional Indonesian clothing. It was a fun time; we don't do them anymore. My mom constantly makes Indonesian food. There is not a ginormous community, I feel like the Filipino community is much larger. When I would go to my friend's Filipino parties they would have millions of people there.

MB: That's because our families are big too!

End.