WRITERS MOSAIC

What We Leave We Carry

Sherwin Acebuche

Sherwin Acebuche: My name is Sherwin Acebuche, and I was born in the Philippines. I actually live in Manchester now, for over 15 years, I think, but I've moved around the UK quite a bit.

[Music]

It's really weird with Filipinos because they tend to bunch things together. Most of them have got a Spanish surname as well. Also, they don't have middle names. Their middle names are your mother's maiden name. So Sherwin is—I asked my mum where she found the name from, and she was like, 'Oh, yeah, it was just a retail store', or something like that, that she saw it and thought, *oh, that's a really nice name, so I'll use that*. So my surname is Acebuche. It's actually a species of an olive tree, a Spanish olive tree. But my granddad's last name is Tubongbanua, which

is very Filipino. Tubongbanua means ‘grown from the town’. So my name is actually Sherwin Tubongbanua Acebuche. It's quite funny because when I say it to my friends, they just laugh. It's a mouthful. Our language is Tagalog. So the island that I was born on, the language that they use is Ilonggo, which is like a Creole language with Malay and Spanish words in them. Then in order for you to understand the people from other islands, you need to switch to a national language, which is Tagalog.

I was born in an island called Negros. The city is called Bacolod City. And then that's pretty much where the Don Papa Rum came from on the island because the whole place, the whole island, is pretty much known for its sugar and sugarcane. Because I was a really naughty kid, I was brought to the province, we call it, and it's essentially a small town, and I was living with my grandma. I remember the place being surrounded by coconut trees, coffee trees. We didn't really have any electricity, so you could see the night, the Milky Way, in the evening. It's pretty much a small shack made from nipa, which is this palm that grows on the banks of the river where the mangroves are. So if you imagine a little shack made from bamboo, and the roof is made from nipa, which is, I guess, the equivalent is a hay roof, a thatched roof, in the UK, that's the sort of living situation that we have. And we didn't really have—we didn't have water. We had a well, so it's very basic. And you had to fetch your water from a well every morning or in the afternoon, and the running water, you had to

buy from someone who's got a tap. So my grandma and my cousin, who was—both of us were actually left with my grandma because my mum had to leave and work as a nanny in Egypt, and my auntie had to leave her child, Judy May, my cousin, so she could work in Japan. I was always surrounded by my aunties and my uncles, but I grew up with a bunch of women and a bunch of cousins, so it felt like even though I was left there by my mother, because my biological father died when I was two years old and left us with all this debt, that's what that's why she had to leave the country and actually find a job somewhere else, I never felt alone because I was surrounded by people. But it's when you go and socialise as a family, as a family unit, that's when you feel like, *oh my God, where's my mother?* It felt like a big family, but yeah, sometimes you do feel alone, and you do miss your mother.

I went to a Chinese school, I think during kindergarten. It was a school in a city, obviously, it's concrete buildings. And then you get transported to a province which is very basic. The school is made with tin roof and concrete, and it was tiny. But yeah, I continued my schooling there until I was, I think, high school. And then my mother met my stepdad in Egypt. I think they met at a party, and I think my stepdad pursued her; she wasn't interested. And then they decided to move from Egypt to go—and my dad, my stepdad, got a job in Stafford, I think. So they moved to Stafford, yeah, in the UK. And then my mum was like—I didn't even know that my mum was married to my stepdad. I was furious when I found out. And I didn't really

want to leave for the UK, but I was told that I should have a better life here. So I moved here. I was, I think, 14, 15 years old.

What I thought of the UK was that vampires lived here. I was told those people were pale because there are castles there, and there are vampires that live here and that in the evening, they'd come out, and yeah, that's what I thought of the UK. I—because obviously, you didn't have internet back then, or the sort of Western culture that we would see with things like American TVs and American cinema, and although you get taught English, you don't really use it in school. I think it's a lot more common using English now in the cities, but in small provinces, you don't really use it. So I was told that there was a queen, Queen Elizabeth. And I didn't even know there was a monarchy or anything like that. I was just told that there were loads of vampires living in castles. They [my mum and stepdad] came here first, yes, yeah. And then I followed them when they bought a house in Banbury, near Oxford.

The Philippines has over 7,100 islands. And each island pretty much have got their own culture, they've got their own languages, most islands have got their own languages. This was the first time that I've travelled to the capital city, which is Manila, and it was the first time that I went on a plane. And I remember getting on a plane from Manila. I mean, getting to Manila alone was a big culture shock because

you're moving from a small village, essentially, with water buffaloes and rice fields and sugar cane and all that greenery, and then you're moving into a massive metropolis and then faced with all these bright lights, money. And although I was only there for a couple of days, and then I got on a plane from Manila to Gatwick, and I remember being sat on the plane, and they've given me my food, and that was the first time I saw a cling film. And I didn't know what this—I didn't know how to open my aeroplane food. And I was looking at this thing, I was like, *what is this? What is this plastic? Why is it stretchy?* And then I landed, and it was in July, and I think it was like 27 degrees, but I felt so cold. It was like, I mean, I guess it's something like what we have now, I guess 18 degrees, but yeah, I felt really cold. The heat in the Philippines is quite humid, but obviously, coming here, you've still got the freshness, that moisture in the air, which if you go to somewhere in Southeast Asia, it's just really dry. And I remember getting in a car and seeing just a completely different world. And yeah, just shock. But then you land here, and you're like, *oh God, I'm just on my own now*.

It's my mum and my stepdad. We didn't really talk, we didn't really speak, my stepdad. We just said 'hello'. It was really awkward. He's Irish. He was born in Cork. I guess that's—Irish people and the Filipinos have got similar Catholic upbringings, I guess, so there's things and, I guess, attitude towards certain stuff that Filipinos and Irish people tend to agree on, and obviously, the family values and stuff like that. So

obviously, my dad understood—my stepdad understood that I was, again, needed by my mother here. But I actually came with my mum's friend's husband, but we only met in Manila, and we actually sat in different parts of the plane. I remember just landing, but we landed together—obviously, it was the same plane—and then she came to pick him up, and we had a little bit of a chat, and that was it; we never saw each other again. But I felt like you know although he was with me traveling, we didn't really see each other.

I got to Bambury, and obviously, in the Philippines, a house is a separate unit, so I didn't understand what a terrace house was. I was like, 'Do you own all this, this row of houses?' And then I remember going into the terrace house, and I didn't understand why the houses were stuck together. And then my dad, my stepdad, opened the door, and I was like, 'So this bit is ours, and it's three floors. Right, okay, who owns—who lives in the next one?' So I didn't understand the concept of terrace houses. So my first night, I think I just cried. Although I was exhausted, I remember I was just really jet lagged, and I tried to go to sleep, but I couldn't. I was missing home. Yeah, I think I just kept waking up. And then the next day, obviously, was just really weird being in a foreign country. I just, yeah, I just remembered feeling so alone. Although I had my mother there, I just felt so alone.

[Music]

And yeah, then I found out there's no vampires, there were no castles. There were castles, but there were no vampires in them.

[Music]

My mum was working in a Thai restaurant, and I was surrounded by Thai people. They really welcomed me. I remember having Thai food for the first time, and I remember the owner asking me if I like hot food. I thought hot as in hot or warm, right, not chilli hot. And I remember my tongue burned so much that—because I didn't—obviously, I was still trying to understand what the context of hot and spicy food was. But I think those three months, it enabled me to, I guess, open up and come out of my shell a little bit. When school started, then I was able to then, I guess, present myself as this—I was able to talk to other people. And when I started school, I remember I met three other kids that were starting at the same time. A couple, yeah, twin brothers, Mo and Joe, US, American. Their dad was working in, I think, in Kraft, I don't know what it is called now, it's Mondelez now. There's a factory in Banbury. And then a Nigerian guy called [missing name], who started. So four of us, pretty much, we were introduced, and we just hung out together, so then I didn't feel as alone. And it was really hard to, I guess, integrate with the British kids. The Asian, South Asians ones was like, 'Ah, you and me, you've got—you and me are

both brown, so we should hang out together.' It's always trying to look for your community. My mother would, when Asians come into, Southeast Asians especially, would come into the restaurant, she would always try and figure out if they were Filipino or not. It's always trying to look for community.

At A Levels, I remember at end of year party, we were separated into three different coaches: the blue coach, the red coach, or the orange coach. The blue coach was the cool kids, the ones that were popular; the red coach was the alright kids; and then the orange coach was the uncool ones. So obviously, we were the uncool ones, and we were put in the orange coach. And I remember being, obviously, being put in that coach, but actually, we had a great time because there were the oddballs there.

I went to Newcastle. So I wanted to get as far as north as I could because as much as I wanted to, I was like, *I'm not ready for London*. So I applied all the way to Aberdeen, to Edinburgh, and ended up in Newcastle. And I remember getting in there, getting there for the first time, and I couldn't understand what they were saying, and it took a few months for me to understand the Geordie accent. I went into the first year doing biology of plants and animals and then switched into applied biology with a specification in biotechnology, so things like genetic manipulation and stuff like that. After I finished my GCSE, my dad got a contract to

work in Malaysia, in Kuala Lumpur, so I was left here, after two and a half years of being here, I was left here all by myself. And I was staying with my mum's German friend, so I was renting a room in her house. So I had to go through A-levels all by myself, and while holding a job in a Thai restaurant, and then another job, weekdays at a furniture shop. So yeah, so every—obviously, all that, I guess, during A Levels, I was pleased to leave all that behind because then going to university means, actually, everyone's in the same situation, everyone's been left by their parents. So I didn't really have a choice in it. So I was told, 'You're staying here, and we're going to Malaysia.' And I was, yeah, I was really angry. But then, what could you do? You felt like you were ripped from your life in the Philippines, and then suddenly, you're here in Malaysia. And I think what made me angry as well was that I think I was going through my A Levels, and you obviously had the support of your parents, and your parents would do your washing, your cooking, or whatever, and I felt like I didn't really have that. I was trying to balance, I guess, having to work, so then I could—I mean, my parents were sending me money, but obviously, that was to pay for food and for the room, but if you want to socialise, obviously, you want to have your own money. And I wanted to be independent, but yeah, it felt pretty hard being left all by yourself. But the good thing, I guess, that I found from it was that every time there was a school holiday, I would go to where they were, so then I was able to experience Malaysian culture. I would live there for three months with them during summer holidays. So I guess it made it better, but I remember just missing

them. There's this intrinsic attitude that we have with Filipinos that we don't give up, right, because giving up means you failed, and you don't want to be a failure to your family. So when I came here, I fully embraced the fact that I was already here and that I was in Banbury already, and I just rolled with the punches, I guess.

I was able to go home, I guess, every two years and see my grandma and my cousin, so it was more like a holiday, but I accepted the fact that I'm already in the UK. So you just accept that you live in the UK. This is where you are. You're just going to have to build a life here. But then again, I had support from my auntie, my mum's friend, [missing name]. So every time that if I can't go to Malaysia or whatever, I'd stay with her in Banbury. She's got two kids, Alex and Yvette. They were teenagers. And obviously, I was in my 19, 18 years old, and as much as you want to socialise, and—but you felt like, I guess—I was still—whenever I go back to Banbury, I'd work in a Thai restaurant, and they welcome me, and they welcome me as a family, and that felt like a family unit as well. But yeah, you accept the fact that you're here and that you're staying here and this is where you live from now on.

I can't go back to the Philippines now, not to live. I guess I could retire there, but I don't even know. But I feel like myself and Tim [my partner], for example, whenever we go to places, and they'd always say, 'You're British.' And I'm like, 'Okay, why is that?' 'Because you talk funny.' Right, so I guess it's the accent. I don't know where

it—my accent is quite a mongrel accent, I guess. But the culture, the British culture, the way of life in the UK, my friends here and what I built here, I just felt that, yeah, I feel that, yeah, just that I'm 50% British 50% Filipino. And whenever you go abroad, you feel that you're—especially in Europe, you feel 100% British, and when you're in the Philippines, you feel 100% Filipino. I don't know, it's really weird. My mum is in the Philippines now, but they moved around. So obviously, after Malaysia, then they moved to Indonesia, and then they moved to Greece, after Greece, then they moved to Australia, and after Australia, they moved to Nauru. And now, they've retired in the Philippines. So they've always moved around. Oh, and they lived in Panama as well. So they moved around, and I guess I couldn't really go with them because it was just a disruptive way of living. And they were going where my dad would have a job, have a contract. So my dad always said to me that, 'All I wanted to do when I was when I was young—' all he wanted to do was to was sit, watching the sun, watching the sunset, with a bottle of San Miguel and just drink, just chill. And then he had that, and he got bored, so he's now doing some jobs in Nauru again, completing some work there. I guess the town that they've retired to, they've got a really nice house with a pool and everything, but as much as it's a really nice house with a pool and everything, you're just bored. There's stuff to do. And you, I guess, think to yourself, *well, life is not just about*—as much as you wanted to retire and have this peaceful life, life is not just about that.

[Music]

So I finished my degree in Newcastle, and then I stayed in Newcastle for a year, trying to figure out what I wanted to do.

[Music]

So then I just hung around, worked in a bar. And then I found out, I was like, *okay, this is quite an enjoyable environment, industry, and I want to be part of this.*

[Music]

So now, we've got a micro distillery, focusing on Southeast Asian inspired spirits. And that's myself and my partner, we built that back in 2018. And yeah, so we own a brand called Tarsier, which is a tiny primate, based, well, mainly found in Southeast Asia. They're about the size of a hand, maybe the size of a thumb. There's about 5,000 left in the world. They're such an icon in the Philippines, so they're on the money, they're on the t-shirts. And outside of Southeast Asia, you don't really hear about them, so we wanted to raise awareness of their situation; they're endangered now. And we wanted to also shine a spotlight on Southeast Asian culture and heritage, and that's, I guess, that's what we are as a brand.

Yeah, so my partner is Tim. We've been together for about 15 years, met in Manchester. And then I, obviously, not convinced, but I tricked them into opening this business with me [laughs]. And yeah, over the course of three years, we just developed the brand ourselves. What's great about having this business is that where the gin goes, we go. So obviously, it's Southeast Asian inspired, mainly Filipino, I guess, so we work with an importer there, and we send the product over there. And yeah, I get to go home, get to spend time with my mum and dad, but not as much because, obviously, you've got the demands of running a business here, and then when you when you're away from the business, especially as a small, lean business, you need to come back and deal with things here but also globally, so we travel to different parts. I'm actually going to Toronto next month. But yeah, you get to go home, and the company pays for that, so you know it's good, I guess, from that point of view.

[Music]

It's really weird when I first moved here because I would dream in Tagalog, no, in Ilonggo, with English subtitles; now, it's English. It also depends on the scene of where I am and who's involved in my dream. So—but here in the UK, because obviously, I'm surrounded by my friends, and I dream about stuff that happens

here, but when I'm in the Philippines, I dream in Ilonggo and in English, so I guess it depends on the environment. Even when I'm, I guess, even when I'm back in the Philippines, it's easier for me to talk in English when I'm in Manila. So my Tagalog is poor, but I can talk to people fluently in Ilonggo. So when I see Filipinos here in the UK, I try and speak to them in Tagalog, but sometimes I struggle in putting a sentence together. I've got to think first of what to say and formulate it in my head of what the sentence structure would be when I talk to them. But when I'm talking in English, it just flows easily, and the same way with Ilonggo. I've been here over 30 years now. So yeah, I don't think I can—as much as, obviously, as much as I love being—so everyone's got a dream of retiring somewhere, but I don't know whether I'd live—especially in the island. People always ask, 'Why are you here? Why are you here when you can have white sand and palm trees?' It's great to be there for a holiday, but I'd get absolutely, yeah, I'd be bored if I just sit there and watch a sunset. It's nice for a two-week holiday, but I want to go to gigs, I want to go to Glastonbury, I want to go and socialise with mates in the pub, and I want to have a barbecue in the summer, and I want to stay up until 10 o'clock when the sun is—when we've got sunsets here in the UK. There, in the Philippines, at five o'clock, six o'clock, it's dark. I love late summers. I hate the cold. That's the only thing that, yeah, especially when it's grey in Manchester, and it's cold. You wish, *oh, I wish I was somewhere else*, but the reality is that I don't think I could live there.

[Music]

Yeah, growing up as a kid, kids are mean, so you get called all sorts when you're a kid. Especially in a town where—Banbury is a tiny—it's a town, it's not as tiny as most towns, but you go to schools, and you get picked on, and you get all sorts of slurs. And there's the C word, the Chinese slur, and you get called that, get shouted at, but then you go, 'Actually, I'm not Chinese, I'm from the Philippines.' And you go, 'You need to improve your geography.' So you have a comeback a little bit, and my auntie actually taught me that. And you just go, 'I'm not offended because you don't know what you're saying.' But obviously, there's, yeah, you get that. And you do get—you actually now the—not the racism, but I guess it's the slur I get mostly from ethnic people because South Asians would just think of us or black people would just think of us as Chinese, right. And I think white people are a little bit more sensitive to that. But I remember about six months ago, and there was an Irish guy who—I think it was also the time that I was checking into a hotel in London, and he was there at a pub. So it's a pub with rooms and upstairs, and I was checking in, and there was Irish guy who was like, who said to me, it was like, 'Oh, so where'd you come from?' I was like, 'Manchester.' And he was like, 'No, where'd you really come from?' And I felt like saying—I said to him, I actually challenged him and said, 'Look, do you mean where's my heritage?' He's like, 'No, where'd you come from?' And that was the time that the, I think, one of the Queen's friend or something that was on

a—I think that just happened two weeks ago before that incident. So then I challenged him on it, and he got really offended. And it was quite funny because the person that was checking me in was Eastern European. She said to me, 'I understand what you're saying.' And she was backing me, but obviously, the Irish guy just thought that bad of me to challenge him. You do still get those kind of comments but more as a kid rather than now. But that's why we're doing what we're doing, because I want to be able to represent, and I want to be able to—this is what I said to Filipino bartenders whenever I speak to them, it's like, 'I want you to think that I'm doing what I'm doing to represent within the space that I'm working in. There are people that represent in the food space; I want to represent in the drink space.' So then I want them to think that you're not just a servant, you're not just someone who's working in a cruise ship or in a bar in the UAE, you've got a brand that you could be proud of and you could represent. And what I want to do with our business is to shine a spotlight on the influence that we've had within the drinks industry. And it's recently we found out that without the Filipinos, the tiki cocktail culture would have not existed. And without the Filipinos, the tequila agave spirit would not have been made. So what I wanted to do is for Filipinos and Asians, Southeast Asians, to think we matter, and that's why, yeah, we're doing what we're doing.

I'm a proud British Filipino. You don't have to be British; you don't have to be 100% Filipino. I guess it's the same—similar to my accent. It's a mongrel accent, I guess. It's a combination of both cultures. And that's what makes this country so special is that we've got—this country, immigrants built this. And you look at the NHS, and there's a lot of Filipino nurses and doctors that work there. Look at the plethora of drinks and flavours and food that we have now in the UK. When I was growing up, I hated being Filipino because you get picked on as a kid. And the older that you get, the more you embrace that part of your culture, your heritage, but it doesn't mean that you're not British because you're also Filipino. It doesn't have to be a battle; two things can coexist, but also, people should celebrate that. There's so much division within the politics that we have in the world that people need to understand that, I guess, it's not our choice to be here, and we came here because of circumstances, but we've embraced being here and that we should celebrate that diversity rather than use that to divide us.

A recording of this interview can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk