

Forum Kritika: Reflections on Carlos Bulosan and
Becoming Filipino

WRITERS AND EXILE: CARLOS BULOSAN AND DOLORES STEPHENS FERIA

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Abstract

This paper explores the links between two writers in exile – Carlos Bulosan, a Filipino migrant in the United States, and Dolores Stephens Feria, an American migrant in the Philippines. Its aim is to gather more insight into the “condition of exile” as a framework for understanding writers and literary traditions. For the author, being the daughter of Dolores, this is both a personal and academic exploration.

Keywords

Dee Feria, Morante, literary exile, marginality, Barbed Wire

About the Author

Monica Feria is a Manila-based journalist; at present the editor of the Global Pinoy section (on leave) of the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* which chronicles the modern-day Filipino migrant experience. A human rights activist and former political detainee, she has a bachelor's degree in Philosophy from the University of the Philippines in Diliman and is currently completing a thesis on gender and migration for a Master's degree in Women and Development Studies, also at UP. She is the daughter of Dolores Stephens and Rodrigo T. Feria.

Introduction: Rediscovering Bulosan

Carlos Bulosan was a name I grew up with. He was a friend of my parents, who were somehow involved in his radical and literary circle when they were students in Los Angeles in the late 1930s and early 1940s. My father, Rodrigo T. Feria, was a migrant Filipino himself, landing on the West Coast in his late teens in 1929, just a couple of years before Bulosan himself disembarked in America. My mother, Dolores Stephens—a white American—met my father in a college class. As the story goes, it was Bulosan who orchestrated their marriage in 1941—both a romantic and political event in those days of interracial marriage prohibitions—arranging for a car to whisk them across the border to New Mexico, getting lawyers to prepare their legal defense should they be stopped, alerting sympathetic Hollywood media, and hosting a small reception for the newlyweds at a favorite hangout of “Pinoy”—the term used to refer to Filipino migrants on the West Coast who braved back-breaking work and the harsh discrimination of those days.

After the war in 1946, my father returned with my mother to the Philippines where they took up jobs as teachers and raised a family.

When news of Bulosan’s death in 1956 reached Manila, my mother put together a book on Bulosan, weaving a portrait of the Pinoy writer through a compilation of his letters to some of his friends—including some to my father and herself. The book, published in 1960, took its title from one of Bulosan’s poems, *Sound of Falling Light: Letters in Exile*. I was too young to appreciate it at that time, much less grasp the impact and significance of Bulosan in their lives.

It was only much later, as the family moved through a period of displacement and revolt, that I gradually matched the name with the person and the writer that is now recognized as one of the most powerful voices for Filipino writers in exile in America. And it was really only after my mother’s death in 1992—looking through her trove of letters, notes and an unpublished manuscript—did I realize that more than a personal family connection or even comradeship in the Pinoy struggle in America was involved in their relationship with Bulosan. There was a special literary kinship as well. Particularly in my mother’s works, it appeared Bulosan, long after his death, was her constant literary companion and dialogue partner, mainly on the condition of writers in exile.

As a writer myself, it is this latter connection that has raised many questions in my mind and set me off on this quest to better understand the condition of exile. I have begun rereading both Bulosan and my mother in new light.

Growing up, it had not occurred to me that my parents, both literature teachers, were “exiles” or that “home” for them, my two sisters, and myself was anywhere other than our middle class bungalow in one of the faculty areas of the University of the Philippines (UP) campus in Diliman, a suburb of Metro Manila. It did not strike me that my father, who seemed proud to be recognized as a US-educated professor, was anywhere near the sorry migrant farm workers portrayed in Bulosan’s novel,

America is in the Heart. Our reminders of my father's "stateside" years came every Sunday when he would take over the kitchen and prepare an American feast: stuffed chicken, candied sweet potatoes and green beans or peas on the side, and of course his signature dish: apple pie. Outside of this, I don't recall him talking much about his seventeen years in California. My mother did not seem out of place in our neighborhood, where there was a smattering of foreign professors. In our household, differences in race, nationality or gender did not come up in dinner conversations. Coffee sessions on the porch—often with visiting colleagues and students—revolved mostly around books and issues; the rising tide of student activism on campus was well noted.

That home was shattered overnight on September 22, 1972, when then President Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law in the Philippines. At midnight, soldiers ringed our house, one of several targeted homes of UP teachers associated with the radical movement. The family was able to slip out through the backyard and watched from a neighbor's window as soldiers forced open the doors. At dawn, my mother went into hiding with some of her students and colleagues, joining the revolutionary underground. A week later, my eldest sister and I, together with some friends and neighbors, were detained for a couple of days and questioned on the whereabouts of my mother. I stopped school. My father, who taught at a private university in Manila, was fired in line with a presidential decree that ordered all agencies and institutions to get rid of subversives and all other "notoriously undesirable." But he stayed behind and tried to support us by baking pies in a small off-campus apartment where we had fled. He told me, "don't worry kid; I've worked the kitchens in the US before. We will survive."

It was only then that he began to tell me stories of his years as a Pinoy in the US—how he learned to bake as a houseboy in an American household, later making the rounds of restaurants as a dishwasher, a kitchen helper and eventually a pastry chef. There had been days, he remembered, when he went to sleep hungry. He recalled how he would make it a point to be one of the last to leave the restaurant back door, gathering as much leftovers and food scraps to bring back to his boarding house, which he shared with other Pinoys—stories he had never really shared before.

He had returned "home" with a graduate degree and a war-time stint in the US Navy, leaving the humiliations of Pinoy life behind. Now, doors were again being slammed in his face—in his native land. Remembering his association with Bulosan seemed to give him renewed strength. One of the books he had brought with him as we moved to different apartments was *Chorus for America: Six Filipino Poets* (1942), a collection of poems edited by Bulosan. In one letter, Bulosan broke the news that he would be included as one of the six, stressing that the publication was the "first of its kind to appear in the world," a flag of achievement after a long struggle.

When the war is over, perhaps you shall find something in it, when you do remember that at we have some rights (for instance, the writing and publication of *Chorus for America*) yet we think casually about the freedom of writing. There were centuries when writing was a crime punishable by death. There were times when intelligence was a serious crime. So, Rudy, in our exuberance, remember how we became privileged to think and speak and write. (Bulosan 204)¹

My father eventually began writing again. In between his pie and pastry orders, he picked up on his research on the Aeta tribes of Zambales and wrote stories about indigenous traditions. (He eventually retired to his hometown in Cabangan, Zambales and passed away in 1978.)

For my part, I went out and found a job as a newspaper reporter. Also, I began to read Bulosan.

To some extent, I, too, bore the mark of the outsider. I understood there were certain reportorial beats from which I could be barred as a “security risk.” I was arrested again in 1979 and spent about a month in detention. After that, I joined a foreign press agency in Manila. (After the revolt that swept the dictator Marcos out of power in 1986, the tide would again change and the subversive link became something I would wear as a kind of badge of honor.)

Meanwhile, my mother had been arrested after two years underground. She spent two years in prison then returned to teaching in 1976. The family regrouped but we never returned to the old house. Not only had it been reassigned to another UP employee, members of the family itself had moved on: My two sisters were married; I was sharing a flat with a colleague closer to my office in Manila; my father had returned to the province; our dog had long died. Our neighbors’ lives and households had changed as well. My mother was assigned a small apartment in another area on campus.

When I think of “home” now, the visual flashback that is pressed in my memory is that parted portion of our backyard hedge, with its broken branches and trampled leaves, where we hurriedly escaped in the darkness, lugging with us my parents’ “subversive” books. I guess I had sensed then that I would never return.

On my Sunday visits to my mother in her new faculty apartment, I would ask her to tell me more stories about Bulosan. As a white American married to a Pinoy, her relationship with Pinoys had different nuances.

When I was 11, my mother took me to California for a little over a year. I was in the seventh grade. One weekend trip I remember was a visit to a beautiful house in Hollywood where we had coffee with a woman named Dorothy Babb. My mother later told me Dorothy was a former girlfriend of Bulosan. I know they talked about those Pinoy days and of other American women who had relationships with migrant Pinoys but I can’t recall much of the conversation.

Later, I understood that outside of the dance-hall girls that were often featured

in Pinoy stories, it took a certain kind of white American woman—intellectuals and activists like my mother and Dorothy—to take up a relationship with a member of a discriminated minority group. At that time, mixed-race married couples could be arrested; white women could be stripped of their citizenship. They, too, suffered the Pinoy experience. My mother always felt it was a special type of discrimination that was reserved for women like them—akin to those reserved for traitors.

When she boarded that boat with my father for the Philippines at the end of the war, she was in fact going into exile.

It has dawned on me that understanding Bulosan and the condition of exile was not only a key to understanding my parents, but also myself as I faced on my own generation's exilic challenges.

This is therefore a personal as well as an academic exploration of the condition of exile as a framework for understanding writers and literary traditions. The approach had been suggested by my mother herself, known among her friends and colleagues as Dee.

In this article, I summarize Dee's portrait of Bulosan as a writer in exile, then use her framework to put together a portrait of Dee herself, based on her writings and my own personal knowledge. From this comparative review, I hope to gain more insights into literary exile.

The Condition of Literary Exile: Some Alternative Questions

In an essay written in the early '60s entitled "Filipino Writers in Exile," Dee argued against the prevailing idea that there was no defining constant in the Filipino literary tradition. She disagreed with those who attributed the lack of such a tradition to the country's multilingual divisions—Spanish, English, and Pilipino writers—which mirrored the country's fractured colonial history. Dee saw a constant element and this, she said, was "the condition of exile" ("Filipino Writers" 179-189).

"Our literature has always been a consequence of exile," she asserted (180).

Exile connotes a displacement, usually a state of forced absence from one's native land. This brings to mind Filipino writers of the revolutionary era against colonial Spain such as Jose Rizal and Marcelo H. Del Pilar, who eluded persecution and arrest by escaping to Europe. The term has also come to refer to writers in self-exile such as Jose Garcia Villa, who settled in New York; Carlos Bulosan in the US West Coast, and others who voluntarily left the country.

Dee's list of writers in exile encompasses not only those who relocated to another country—by political force or force of circumstance—but also those who never left, or those who periodically left and returned: writers like Amado Hernandez, who was imprisoned, and Nick Joaquin, whose preferred milieu apparently dates before the American conquest. Dee does this by expanding the definition of "exile" to include not only geographical or external exiles but also internal exiles under an

idea of “psychic” displacement. This, she explained, occurs when a writer rejects a historic paradox upon which the order of society, its norms and values, are based.

She made a distinction between exile and “alienation” in the Western sense of the word:

(Exile) is something far more specific than the sense of estrangement one finds in Sherwood Anderson’s grotesques, or in Conrad’s cosmic orphans. It implies a historic superstructure that is uniquely Philippine, an impetus for flight and revolt which can only occur in a society in which the basic cultural components have been periodically altered by brute force. The writer, unlike the average man, is not inflicted with what Nick Joaquin calls historic amnesia, and he finds himself suspended between two orders—natural and historic. That he can neither accept the one nor generate the other imposes a chronic state of psychic exile on him even if the expatriate choice never confronts him at all. (“Filipino Writers” 180)

She restated her thesis towards the end of the article, after pointing out the condition of exile in the lives and works of Bulosan, Villa and Joaquin:

Alienation has its roots in a sense of cosmic displacement and is much more generalized... (Exile) is a rebellion against a specific cultural heritage which is generally accepted as true but is rejected by the writer as false, its untruth being rooted in the historic paradox of that which is alien to the whole cultural inclination being imposed by brute force. At a certain stage in history, historic amnesia sets in for the community norm and the value system is reversed so that the false becomes true. The writer becomes entrapped within the contradiction. (186)

As examples, she cited Villa’s re-embrace of a pre-Christian God-image and Bulosan’s quest to return to “some less distorted and cruel cultural order before the Spaniards introduced the concept of private property” (186). And while Joaquin defends the fact of Spain in the Philippines, she noted his heroines secretly carry ancient talismans in Catholic processions, challenging stereotypes of a collective Filipino identity based on ecclesiastical morality (188). Dee saw the substantial fact of exile also in the works of Francisco Balagtas, Claro M. Recto, Manuel Arguilla, Petronilo Daroy, Ricaredo Demetillo, Bienvenido Santos, Alejandrino Hufana, Jose Lansang Jr., Virginia Moreno and Epifanio San Juan, among others. She also included the priest Jose Burgos, a Spaniard, who is believed to have authored the anti-friar text *La Loba Negra* and was executed with two other priests suspected of plotting a rebellion.

In an article posted in *Kritika Kultura* (2008), Cyan Abad-Jugo used Dee’s definition of literary exile and argued that in her own generation, writer Jose

Dalisay should be included in the list (57-79). Her discussion of the negotiated exilic spaces of Dalisay's characters—some abroad, some remaining or returning to the Philippines—further illuminated the condition.

My own thesis is that Dee should be on the list as well. And the fact that she was racially Caucasian but adopted the Philippines as her home (a counterpoint to Bulosan, a Filipino who adopted America as his home) could add even more insights into the condition of exile.

In her early essay, Dee added a cautionary note for reviewers and academics that leaves room for reflection:

The final irony about a literary tradition which has been nourished by a chronic condition of exile is this: the writer flees from his own cultural locus, which he has judged as false and without genuine historic sanctions, only to discover that it is this very same cultural locus from which he fled which will continue to judge him and which the outside world will accept as a point of reference. ("Filipino Writers" 187)

From what point of reference or "cultural locus" then should we read "Filipino" writers?

Should we read Bulosan, for example, as a Filipino writer within the American literary tradition or as an American writer mirroring his adopted country's migrant heritage? Would Dee, whose books and essays mirror the Philippine experience, be considered an expatriate writer in the Philippine literary tradition or a Filipino writer reflecting the country's own multicultural and racial history?

One approach here would be to simply accept a duality or multiplicity of perspectives on writers in exile—an appeal to complexity—based on a writer's sense of nationality, racial identity and cultural heritage.

Yet Dee's proposal to use the condition of literary exile itself as the reference point seems compelling. Although it can be argued that these two approaches are not necessarily opposing, her framework would require, following her caveat to researchers, setting aside historical concepts such as nationality, race and cultural heritage, which the writer rejected as false, and from which he or she fled.

Her removal of the purely geographical or physical connotation of exile is crucial. The question, therefore, is not from *where* the writer fled but '*from what?*'

This suggests that researchers could begin by looking into the "historical paradox" that provided the impetus for flight: What is it that the writer cannot forget or accept? What specific cultural component, altered by brute force, is the root of the exile's unease?

The question of where the writer fled also need not have geographical or physical boundaries. This is underscored by the observation that exiles often find that similar "untruths" are perpetuated in other countries. The question is *what* they fled to.

And if the writer in exile's refusal to forget and move on is what traps him in a chronic state of psychic exile, how can the writer return "home?"

These are the some of the alternative guide questions implied in Dee's framework which this review will pursue.

The "America" in Bulosan's Heart

In Dee's view, no Filipino writer represented the condition of exile as specifically as Bulosan.

He was born in Binalonan town in the province of Pangasinan, north of Manila, on November 24, 1914. In some sources, Bulosan writes his birth year as 1913 and vital records in his hometown are no longer available to settle the matter (Morantte 32). The latter would have made him closer to the legal working age of 18 when he migrated to the United States in July 31 (Morantte 50). Dee believes the former, writing he was sixteen (going on seventeen) when he disembarked in Seattle.

She described Bulosan as "cursed" to have been born with "an extraordinary imagination and a tremendous passion for life" ("Filipino Writers" 181). His precocity, she concluded, made it difficult for him to "anesthetize himself against the cruelty and cheerful piety of rural poverty" in his obscure hometown: "He was rather early impressed with the fact that a religious and economic caste system existed in the barrio, which had little to do with either intelligence or creativity, and that to have peace or respect, one had to accede to it" (181).

Bulosan was a voracious reader and wrote poetry in his high school classes. But he failed to return for this third year in secondary school. He boarded a ship for America. He later wrote about those "starving years" in his book *America is in the Heart* as "a bitter, passionate attempt to find roots somewhere, to come to terms with the historic truth versus the contemporary lies on which he was being tested and graded in school" (181).

"At this stage in his development," analyzed Dee, Bulosan was "positive that justice, equality and beauty were things with physical locations. And if they did not exist in his world, all that was necessary was a Grail-like quest to find them elsewhere" (181).

"It had never occurred to Bulosan that the kind of entrapment from which he had just fled could possibly be duplicated on a much larger, uglier scale elsewhere," she wrote (182). He arrived less than two years after the stock market crash of 1929. The American Depression was in full swing.

Bulosan would soon discover the racial caste system—a particularly crude kind that accosted him in those early migrant days with brown-bastard slurs on street corners and signs that said "No Filipinos and Dogs Allowed" (182).

Yet, added Dee, he also saw "Filipinos daily preying on their own countrymen in that world of filthy bunkhouses and hostile streets (183)." He, too, had learned some double dealing tricks. And he feared America had destroyed him as well.

"[Bulosan] now knew that the America he once envisioned in that forsaken barrio in Pangasinan was not a place or a thing. It was a vision, a faith," wrote Dee (183).

Meanwhile, his health had deteriorated. Diagnosed with tuberculosis, he entered the charity ward of the Los Angeles General Hospital. Ironically, continued Dee, "it was here in the climate of physical pain that Bulosan discovered the other America, that there were those who shared the same vision that had sent him into exile and who could be as tender as the racists had been brutal. There were friends who brought books and writing materials to him daily" (183). They carbon-copied his poems and sent them to publications.

"In this intellectual climate, Bulosan came alive again as he viewed the cogent possibility that as a writer, he might change the world and make the condition of exile no longer necessary for people like himself (183)." He participated in the propaganda battle to fight discriminatory legislation and promote Filipino union organizing. He also led a small group of literate expatriates and presided over spirited discussions on conditions in America and in the Philippines.

He had a vicarious community as well. In another article included in *Red Pencil, Blue Pencil*, "Bulosan's Power, Bulosan's People" (1990), she said "his notable company with which he preferred to identify himself included poets like Nicolas Guillen, Pablo Neruda and Nazim Hikmet; he embraced fellow novelists like Clara Wetherwicks, William Saroyan, playwright Lillian Hellman and proletarian writers like Agnes Smedley (192)."

Yet Bulosan, Dee noted, had a fragile emotional temperament. It was to his poet-friends and romantic partners that he often confided his doubts and chronic personal anguish. After one girl stood him up, he wrote to Dee's husband, a struggling literature student then: "Dear Feria . . . I know deep down in my heart that I am an exile in America . . . Every moment of time is a million years of hope . . . I do not ask for love. No. I ask only for a small measure of happiness. Love would only make it the harder for little guys like us (Bulosan 199)."2

When the Pacific war broke out, Bulosan suddenly found his writings in demand. Those were his "euphoric days," wrote Dee. In a note to Dee in May 1942, he said:

Of all the American women married to Pinoys, I think you understand me best; and you knew me when I had nothing. Remember how I used to sit in your apartment waiting for something to eat? Those were the days, Dee! I am glad the tragedy is over now, or nearly so. (Bulosan 203) But it was not to be so. Bulosan's fame would be short-lived. He was involved in a plagiarism controversy. When *America is in the Heart* was released in Manila, he got bad reviews. He was getting flack about his heavy drinking and his links with communists. Again, a romantic partner had disappeared, leaving him lonely and heartbroken. He often talked of going home to the Philippines but as Dee notes, one of his favorite books was Thomas Wolfe's *You Can't Go Home Again*. Then

he was having disagreements with his fellow union organizers, related Dee ("Bulosan's Power" 184-186).

Again, he seemed entrapped in a contradiction. Where else could he flee?

Dee cites a passage in a note Bulosan had written to a union comrade in 1954 as one signpost to where or to what he had fled to—his typewriter. She quoted Bulosan:

It does not matter whether I will be on the payroll of this union or not, but I will keep on exposing mistakes against the Filipino people and it does not matter also who makes the mistakes. I may not be 'effective anymore' as you have said in one of our conversations, but I still have the power of my mind and a little something attached to my name...I can always have a little newspaper or a newsletter to expose those things ("Bulosan's Power" 195).

Dee also found significant an affidavit Bulosan had executed in 1952, explaining why he agreed to edit the ILWU Yearbook. She quoted the sixth reason, which she believed constituted "Bulosan's last will and testament."

I believe that the unconditional unity of all workers is our only weapon against the evil designs of imperialist butchers and other profiteers of death and suffering to plunge humanity into a new world war ("Bulosan's Power" 195).

These two quotations, she said, were "testament to the fact that in his head, unlike in life, Bulosan had never compromised. He had kept the faith" (195). As a way of explaining this "faith," Dee recalled the people power revolt that ended the Marcos regime. Oppressors can be toppled in four days, she said, adding that "it all begins somewhere in the head."

Dee figured Bulosan wrote his last major work, first released in Manila in a tabloid version titled *Power of the People*, between 1949 and 1951, shortly before he entered the hospital again. She preferred the book's original title, *The Cry and the Dedication*, and described it as "the most intensely personal of all of Bulosan's writings," reflecting in all his characters the different frequencies of his own temperament ("Bulosan's Power" 193).

By mid-1954, Bulosan was in and out of the hospital. He was at times remorseful but still defiant: "Let me have my world and all its terrors..." he said in one letter confessing his heartbreak and disappointment ("Bulosan's Power" 194). Bulosan was "totally alone when he suffered his last lung hemorrhage" in 1956, wrote Dee ("Filipino Writers 186).

The “Philippines” in Dee’s Heart

Dee was born on September 2, 1918 in Marcellus, Washington, then a small railroad depot, and grew up in the town of Los Gatos, California. Early on, she, too, perceived an economic and religious caste system in her white Anglo-Saxon Protestant enclave. “We lived on the other side of the tracks,” she said.³ Her father was a postman who walked the route; her mother had little schooling and kept her social life within the confines of their Church and her weaving club. Dee learned to sew and play the piano. She was the church organist; her paternal grandfather was the pastor. She related that it occurred to her like an epiphany one Sunday morning that her family’s social and religious beliefs went against her own creative and intellectual bent. She turned her faith to poetry. She wanted to live a free-thinking and passionate life—the poetic life.

Among the files Dee left behind, in a folder labelled “juvenilia,” was a clipping from the 1936 Journal of the Los Gatos Union High School that carried an essay by 17-year-old Dee titled “Blue Print Mind” wherein she decried the standardization apparent in American society: “that everlasting conformity of man to mass conventions, mass thinking and mass morals” and the discrimination imposed on those who dared to question them. Countered the adolescent Dee: “It is to the minorities of society who have dared to defy and rise above the great conventional majority that history’s stirring epochs of progress belong. The Socrateses, the Galileos, the Columbuses and the Lincolns of the human race, with their struggling minorities, have made society what it is today.”

Her essay had won the Ruth Comfort Mitchell prize of her day and with it a scholarship to college. There she would meet other struggling poets, among them a Filipino migrant student, Rodrigo Feria.

Dee had become part of a young intellectual circle that denounced discrimination against Filipinos and other non-white races. But she would discover that there was a backlash. Rumors of her association with “men of color” reached her parents, who called her back from Los Angeles and transferred her to nearby San Jose State College, where she graduated in 1941.

Three days before graduation, she secretly married my father. She then fled with him to the inner alleyways and dingy hostels of Temple and Figueroa Streets, where a migrant subculture provided some cover. Bulosan and other Pinoys often converged in their apartment. In discussions, she could tell Bulosan was recognized and respected as a leader among them. She admired his poetry and recognized in him a kindred spirit in the poetic life. She also sometimes witnessed his melancholic side.

Her parents were aghast. They agreed to meet her Filipino husband only once—on the dock in San Francisco just before the couple departed for the Philippines.

Like Bulosan, she boarded a ship to another country with great hopes. She had already been recruited to teach at the UP and was ushered straight from the pier

to a classroom in the old Padre Faura campus, still partly bombed out. She was shocked by the extent of the damage Manila had suffered. But that day, she later wrote in her introductory article to *Red Pencil, Blue Pencil* was the beginning of her “long love affair with the Filipino student” (“Islands in Limbo” 13-22). Dee taught English and Comparative Literature for over 30 years at the UP, and also spent some years (1947-1954) teaching at Silliman University in the Visayas.

In time, she would discover that the hierarchies and discrimination she escaped from were replicated in other forms in the Philippines as well. For one, she was not the officer’s club-going kind of American in the Philippines. Upon arrival, she and my father found themselves welcomed into a shanty near the railroad tracks of Sampaloc district in Manila. They settled down to a life of “civilized poverty” allowed by the salaries of teachers in the Philippines. Having escaped her hard-shell Protestant background, she would discover an entrenched conservative Catholic and authoritarian ethos among many Filipinos that ran against her liberal views on justice, free expression, and equality. Many Filipinos, she noted, also discriminated against minority communities: the Chinese, Muslim-Filipinos, indigenous people. While she herself may have benefited from being white American, associated with power and privilege, she also learned its limitations—its class and gender twist. For example, American wives were expected to adapt to the culture of their Filipino husbands but it did not work the other way around. When company was invited home, it was best to wait until they left before my father helped with the dishes, lest he be castigated for being under the *saya* (henpecked).

As for political discrimination, the McCarthy witch-hunts were replicated in the Philippine Congress against anyone tainted “red.” Then came the declaration of martial law in 1972.

Like the exile in her essay, she was trapped in a contradiction—unable to accept the cultural stereotypes and norms from which she had escaped yet unable to generate the new. The Philippines Dee had imagined was also but a vision and a faith.

Eventually she sought refuge in a university subculture of Marxist and literary radicals. She found kindred company in the feminist movement. She associated with a vicarious community as well, lining her bookshelves with the writings of Doris Lessing, Nadine Gordimer, Nelson Mandela, Han Su Yin, Simone de Beauvoir, Pablo Neruda, among others.

She, too, felt she must struggle to change the world and make the condition of exile no longer necessary for people like herself. When martial law was declared, she joined colleagues and students in the communist underground. As mentioned earlier, she was captured in 1974 along with other rebel writers and imprisoned for two years.

The brutalities of prison life wore her down. The need for subterfuge made it difficult to maintain her poetic commitment to integrity. She was also stung by the hierarchy among her own communist comrades, the dual tactics, the filtered

information and secrets they kept even among themselves. She hungered for trust and compassion. It appalled her that cadres were encouraged to apply for amnesty in order to get out, a form of dual tactics. Prison life, she feared, had broken her as well. Eventually she herself signed an amnesty paper, which guaranteed reemployment. But she agonized: How could she face her students (*Barbed Wire* 292)?

When she finally walked out of prison, she reflected: “I had passed through another doorway into another untried world.”

She had meticulously kept a prison diary. The late Petronilo Daroy, in an introduction to her prison memoirs, *Project Seahawk: The Barbed Wire Journal* (published posthumously in 1993), had noted that keeping the prison diary had virtually become Dee’s “reason for being” (12). He quoted her retelling how she had made a major resolve to jot down her daily thoughts “no matter what the cost”—even if it meant “learning to be more cunning.” Upon release, fearful that her things would be examined at the gate, Dee hid her diary in the “only way anatomically possible” (12).

Wrote Daroy: “The prospect of being able to attest to the horrors of Marcos rule, of being able to record the human condition in the detention centers somehow alleviated the dread of being tortured and punished and put in solitary confinement. Writing had become a historical and moral—even genetic—responsibility” (12).

After her retirement, she relocated to the mountain city of Baguio, renting a small apartment on Leonila Hill where she finally unrolled the little rolls of paper and wrote up her prison journal.

Looking back, she wrote: It took almost two years (in prison) “to discover what should have been obvious: freedom, regardless of the political spectrum, is an inner state, a process which strips one’s vulnerable ego of all unnecessary icons, including all those so meticulously enshrined by the machinery of state, church, university and even the Party” (*Barbed Wire* 305).

Needless to say, her journal was scathing to members of both the military and the communist party leadership in prison. It was the “crimson establishment” itself with their own means-and-ends tactics that “breached the hole in the dike that was once their unsullied convictions,” she lamented (*Barbed Wire* 278).

After she died in 1992, close family members proceeded to her small apartment on Leonila Hill, where they found neatly bundled with string and placed on a basket on the floor, a new essay and two manuscripts: the *Barbed Wire Journal* and an apparently revised version of the novel she had started in 1968.

She had, after all, also kept the faith.

Reimagining a Point of Reference

From what do writers flee?

In Dee’s retelling, both she and Bulosan escaped from a religious and economic

caste system which they found went against their intellectual and creative bent.

Despite their differing cultural settings, both recognized the same paradox—the assertion that adhering to a society’s values and norms, which they deemed false and unjust, was the way to gain peace and respect (“Filipino Writers” 181).

It might be mentioned that one of Bulosan’s close Pinoy friends, P.C. Morante, disputed the image that Bulosan was “starving” in his rural town in Pangasinan. In his book, *Remembering Carlos Bulosan*, Morante said the Bulosans initially owned about five hectares of land and had a big wooden house with a balcony. Although they later came into hard times, they were able to send two of the boys to college in Manila, while Bulosan went to a nearby city for high school. By Philippine standards this would make them “relatively well off,” said Morante.

It could also be mentioned as well that Dee’s brother, Ken, had also disagreed that their family was “so poor,” as Dee had retold.⁴

But Morante agrees with Dee that the young Bulosan had a creative imagination and “poetic insight” (36). Early on, Bulosan was aware of his inclination to write stories.

As Dee pointed out, what mattered was that Bulosan’s sensibilities allowed him to perceive the paradox—generally understood as a proposition that is seemingly absurd or contradictory but commonly accepted as true.⁵

As her high school essay showed, young Dee had sensed the same historical paradox in another small town setting in another part of the world.

Welcome to the “real world,” many would just say.

But poetry, as in the ancient haiku, is defined by a “flash of intuitive insight.”⁶ And for both Bulosan and Dee, the awakening was personal and savage:

Wrote Bulosan, “There came a day in my childhood, in the beginning of my conscious life, that swung like a drawn sword and struck me full upon the face and sent me bleeding into the world of lies” (Evangelista 39).

Dee related that the insight came to her during her adolescence “like a shattering certitude” one Sunday morning that their religious and social beliefs were “a hoax” led to her retreat into several years of silence.⁷

Leaving home was not a traumatic uprooting. On the contrary, both Bulosan and Dee retell it like a liberating experience. It was “like coming home,” wrote Bulosan of his first sight of American shores (Morante 51). Dee dove eagerly into the college poetry league, winning prizes.

If the two budding writers had any initial doubts about their early insights, or believed they had escaped their hometown constraints, they were in for another rude awakening. Confirmation of the paradox and its pervasiveness across geographic boundaries would be felt in the consequences of veering away from accepted conventions. For Bulosan, Morante believes it came when he witnessed the police rounding up six Filipinos in an apartment compound in Lompoc where he had stayed with his brother, Dionisio (58). Also, until he moved to America, Bulosan had not known the pain of hunger, said Morante. “[Bulosan] learned it in

Lompoc . . . in Los Angeles . . . He learned it in many places he visited in California” (54).

Initially there was ambivalence and fear. “He began to be afraid of the society in which he lived . . . and of himself, fearing he might become just another Pinoy,” continued Morante (59). Bulosan’s rebellion came when he decided to align himself with the Pinoy and participate in labor movement struggles. His passion and commitment assuaged some of his fears.

For Dee, the confirmation may have come when she was forcibly removed from college in Los Angeles because of her rumored romance with a Filipino. Her first act of outright rebellion was probably when she eloped.

Although the “historic superstructure” may have been uniquely Philippine for Bulosan (“Filipino Writers” 180), or in Dee’s case uniquely American, both of them had poetic insights into the same paradox. They fled cultural conventions which spelled the death of their intellectual and creative processes. That these conventions were imposed by brute force would be confirmed by their experiences of discrimination and violence. If the impulse for flight were taken as the point of reference, Bulosan and Dee shared the same roots.

The writer in exile’s paradox of escape, entrapment and struggle was likewise a similar and a continuing process for both of them.

Exile: To the Margins

To where, or to what do literary exiles flee?

Clearly, geographical or physical relocation did not prove an escape for either Dee or Bulosan. Both suffered discrimination for crossing the lines of “acceptability” in society. But they would also both discover that there was not one “America,” or one “Philippines” for that matter. Both countries contained pockets of brutality and pockets of sympathy.

Discrimination was not the cause of their exclusion; it was the expression of it. Discrimination delineated and maintained the boundary lines of the dominant society. They were, in effect, relegated to the margins.

It is open to discussion whether marginalization is a form of forced or voluntary exile.

When Dee fled underground to evade arrest in 1972, she reported another insight: what had taken place was not the triumph of the fascist state but the upsurge of a new consciousness. “At that moment, one’s own experience ceases to be some kind of a punishment and becomes, instead, a privilege, part of the unquenchable flame sweeping through the Southeast Asian scene . . .” (*Red Pencil* 288).

But the margins, they would discover, was not unified terrain. They shared the fringes with hoodlums and prostitutes, political rebels of different stripes, as well as cultural and gender exiles such as gays and bohemians. They would also discover that some of the marginalized rebel organizations, while offering sanctuary and

purpose, had their own power hierarchies, norms and stereotypes as well.

Some Pinoys sought paths to the center through assimilation, adapting to dominant traits, gaining recognition through achievements within sanctioned religious, economic and cultural stereotypes in America.

In this sense, marginalization can also be seen as a choice. Among writers in exile, Dee makes a distinction between those who “surrendered” or “compromised” and those who “kept the faith” (“Bulosan’s Power” 195). In her unpublished manuscript, Dee talks of “defectors” and “catalysts.”

The dangers of marginality are discussed quite lengthily in Dee’s unpublished manuscript, *Chain of Fire*. (A Pinoy writer named Felix Rivas is a character that appears throughout her novel. A character in Bulosan’s last novel is also named Felix Rivas)

In Dee’s manuscript, one discussion is set in a bookshop in San Francisco, where two American men married to Filipino women exchange notes. The year is 1968 and the two men watch as thousands of “flower power” protesters march down the winding streets. “[The hippie marchers] are a vast collection of all the marginals on the West Coast,” one character comments, adding: “And you know where the marginal state gets you in these times.”

The marginals, the two agree, are walking a dangerous “minefield,” with genocide being its most extreme but not unusual expression. They discuss the carnage in Vietnam, the slaughter of millions in Indonesia, the assassination of Malcolm X. They also don’t discount the carnage in socialist orders. China had exploded its first atomic bomb, they note, “revolutionary tactics assent to genocide of a sort but it’s called by other names . . .”

It is hard to predict when a mine will explode. One of the characters recalled how minesweepers had cleared the way for his ship’s docking in Manila immediately after Liberation. “But we knew those mines were all laid by the Japanese . . . we knew who to blame,” he said. Recalling the suddenness of slaughter of political dissidents in Indonesia by their own gestapu (“gestapo”), he confessed he was now less sure who to blame: “What came to light were rigid value-mines and taboo-mines that exploded all of a sudden in an orgy of summary executions.”

“Yes, for most of those mines had been there undetected for years...maybe centuries,” the other character agrees.

Discussing their unease in either America or the Philippines, one character tells the other: “Don’t imagine for a minute that we will ever be other than marginals even here. I suspect you and I were born marginals . . . It wouldn’t have mattered where.”

Alluding to Dee’s distinction between alienation and exile, one of the characters above adds, “But one also has to see the difference between ‘defectors’ and ‘catalysts’ in marginal ghettos.”

In this discussion, Dee stressed the threat of genocide inherent in the margins. She underscored the urgency of confronting the historical paradox that led to

the condition of marginality—the condition of exile. In her various essays and in Bulosan's poetry, there is a dark foreboding of things to come.

Faith Keepers: The Cry and the Dedication

Caught between their consciousness of a ruling order inimical to their survival as writers and their awareness of the dangers of the margins, how can the exiles come “home?”

If exile is viewed this way—instead of as a movement from a geographical or cultural place of birth to an adopted place of exile—then it becomes apparent how the literary exile can come “home:” he or she must expose the lie.

If one reverts to a traditional idea of “home” as a personal refuge where one can enjoy comfort and acceptance (Abad-Jugo 77), it may be noted that writers in exile like Dee and Bulosan succeeded in finding shelter with family and sympathetic friends in their adopted homes. But under Dee's framework, this does not guarantee their safety or hasten the task of regaining the freedom of their intellectual and creative processes. In fact, Dee would also point out that the traditional ideal of home and family likewise reflects the same historical paradox. The patriarchal family stereotype, one's adherence to which is the road to respectability in many societies, masks cruel and unjust power structures that subjugate women and children (*The Long Stag Party* 1-2).

Conventional “wisdom” often attributes the writer in exile's disquiet to their oversensitive nature, branding them eccentrics, if not lunatics.

Countered Bulosan: Cast into a world of lies, “what would you do?”

Would you take the stand and say:
 ‘I have not seen anything at all.
 I have not heard anything at all.
 I was asleep when it happened
 I was not here when it happened...
 I have not done anything there is nothing I can do...
 WHAT WOULD YOU? WHAT WOULD YOU DO? (qtd. in Evangelista
 73)

And both realized what they had to do: Write.

Only one hope sustained Bulosan during his lonely and painful battles in America, wrote Dee: “the thought that one day he would write a powerful book which would tell the world what had been done to him and to the Pinoy” (“Filipino Writers” 183).

As Daroy had noted in his introduction to Dee's prison memoirs, keeping a diary virtually became her “reason for being,” (*Barbed Wire* 12).

Dee and Bulosan were no doubt subversives. Susan Evangelista, in her anthology,

Carlos Bulosan and his Poetry, quotes Bulosan:

Hate, greed, selfishness—these are not human nature. These are the weapons of destruction evolved by generations of experimenters in the service of ruling groups, be it a tribe, a clan, a prince, a king, a democracy. These destructive elements have finally become so subtle, so intricate, so deeply rooted in men's minds...that many people sincerely, though ignorantly, believe them to be the guiding forces of nature (qtd. in Evangelista 40).

Dee had trained her guns on the “highly centralized educational system which has delegated itself the power to neutralize intelligence with built-in hidden persuaders, like peer ratings, permits, tenure, bonuses, bribery, fellowships, excommunication in various forms, imprisonment, brutality, tear gas and selective genocide, all in the name of standardization and progress” (*Red Pencil* 301).

In their writings, both Dee and Bulosan prayed it was still possible to stop the march to nuclear catastrophe in the name of “the national self interest.” Both writers urged the restoration of a society based on freedom and compassion. The “America” in Bulosan’s heart and the ‘Philippines in Dee’s heart were, after all, the same.

In their view, they were not hopeless dreamers; nor were they “rootless.” Like any diasporic community, they had a history, traditions and a long list of martyrs.

“If you want to know what we are, look at our men/ Searching in the dark pages of history for the lost word/ The key to the mystery of living peace/ . . . We are the living dream of dead men. We are the living spirit of free men,” wrote Bulosan (qtd. in Evangelista 80).

Dee constructed a history chart on the wall of her study (which she titled “History as Authentic Theater”) where she pasted notable events of each great epoch with different colored dots indicating a line of poets, teachers, women and what she called epochal “destroyers” (8000 BC to 1992). Connecting the dots for the poets and other writers in exile, the bloodletting and martyrdom make one wince.

In her unpublished manuscript, Dee described the poet as “an inner sensibility; Poetry as “an acute sense of an irreversible mission.”

A defining constant among writers in exile is suggested in Dee’s conclusion that Bulosan, despite loneliness and vacillations, had in the end “kept the faith.”

Clearly, she does not link this “faith” to political or ideological structures but rather, as she wrote in her prison journal, to the “the sweep of the structures of the imagination” (*Barbed Wire* 305).

Regardless of political spectrum, freedom, she had concluded, was an “inner state, a process” that stripped one’s imagination of all “unnecessary icons.” She discovered that the paradox of exile, seemingly a perpetual cycle of entrapment and struggle, also contained the seeds of liberation. For it was in the most constraining of circumstances, she noted, that one “instinctively affirms freedom—the freedom

that must be" (305).

Once she had grasped this, she wrote, a strange "transfer of compassion" took place. She sorrowed for the mainstream of human beings "who have been perpetually jailed most of their lives and never so much as suspected it" (306).

"At least, we knew that we were in prison, unlike those outside the barbed wire who imagine imprisonment exists only in prison." (306).

In this sense, freedom—the poet's homeland, so to speak—was an ever-present choice. As a vision as well as a faith, it remained to be reclaimed, as the title of Bulosan's first novel suggested, "in the heart."

"To die for an idea, was it better than to live without any?" Dee quoted Hassim, a character in Bulosan's last novel, as saying, stressing that revolutions and great transformations begin in one's imagination.

Dee collected the poems of her favorite poets in exile and tucked them into a folder marked "The literature of refusal." She used some of them as section breakers in *Red Pencil*, *Blue Pencil*, labelling them "Marginal Notes."

"As others had discovered, the power of the imaginative mind to generate a material force is as valid inside or outside the squalid cement of a cell block," wrote Dee in the epilogue of her prison journal, affirming her faith in the writer's charge (*Barbed Wire* 325).

It becomes clearer why Dee preferred Bulosan's original title to his last manuscript, *The Cry and the Dedication*, instead of the tabloid edition *Power of the People*. The original title seems the closest encapsulation of Dee's idea of the condition of exile as a defining constant in the literary tradition—one that attests not only to how the power holders have tried to crush the exiles, but also how writers in exile—those that have kept the faith—continue to dedicate their lives to keeping the flame of the homeland alive.

In her own cry and dedication, Dee dedicated her *Barbed Wire Journal*, published posthumously in 1993, to all the "military hostages" who said a firm "No!" to the Marcos dictatorship and also, "[F]or all others who have become refugees in their own country, from South Africa to Argentina to China, who have become part of an international culture of barbed wire in our time and in languages that require no translator."

Notes

1. The page number from the original edition of *Sound of Falling Light*. After the cover page, the pages begin with 186 and end with 277. Page 204: CB to Rodrigo Feria, 22 June 1942
2. CB to Rodrigo Feria, 27 April 1942
3. As told to me.
4. As told to me during a visit to Ken Stephen's home in California in 1989. He has since passed away.
5. "Paradox." Dictionary.com Unabridged. Random House, Inc. 19 June 2014. Web.
6. "Haiku." *Poetry Soup*. PoetrySoup, n.d. Web.
7. As related to me by Dee. A similar story appears in her unpublished manuscript.

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