ORGANIC AND MULTICULTURAL WAYS OF READING BULOSAN

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Abstract
This essay argues that students in introductory classes read America Is in the Heart more perceptively than most professional “multicultural” critics. Students’ indifference to the book’s genre, for example, allows them to see clearly the meaning and value of its Part One, and to read the closing paragraph not as a postmodern refusal of closure but as a step on the way toward reconciling “America” with the work of “becoming Filipino.” Such engagement with the book is an example of “organic” reading.

Keywords
Genre, organic reader, professional reader, closure, “becoming Filipino.”

About the Author
John Streamas is an associate professor in Critical Culture, Gender, and Race Studies at Washington State University. He researches and writes on race and temporality. He also writes stories and poems, plays and essays. His play The Serving Class was staged in a short-play festival at the University of Idaho.
I teach courses in Asian American literature and “multicultural” literature—I encase “multicultural” in quotation marks only because, whereas I define multiculturalism as the necessary attention paid to particularities of social differences, the university treats it as its grudging obligation to pretend to enjoy the fact that not all of us are white. To recognize the varieties of achievement in literature by writers of color, I teach few texts more than two or three times. There are two exceptions: Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange* and Carlos Bulosan’s *America Is in the Heart*. Students find Yamashita’s book, for all its postmodern trickeries, accessible and funny despite, or maybe because of, its grim apocalyptic setting. It reminds them of many recent apocalyptic movies, only the main characters are not white. I could contrast these two books by claiming that Yamashita looks to a possible future while Bulosan looks at a lived, if otherwise unrecorded, past. But the verb in the clause that is Bulosan’s title is present tense, even if that present is indefinite and ambient. Also, to the extent that it is an immigrant and activist story, its main character clings to hopes that are at least nominally future-oriented. I assign Yamashita’s book at the end of a semester, but I assign Bulosan’s at the beginning, as both fiction and memoir, history lesson and cautionary parable, and of course as a brilliant piece of writing. Bulosan’s narrative is equally valuable for its details of prewar Filipino rural life and prewar Filipino immigrant life, but also for its general lessons in social relations and class justice. Further, as I will argue below, it is well suited to the peculiarities of today’s undergraduate student readers. Here I will provide not a critical analysis of the book but observations on teaching it in introductory courses in “multicultural” and Asian American literature. My main observation is that many Filipino American students read the book through a lens I will call “organic,” borrowing from Gramsci’s idea of the “organic intellectual.”  

Bulosan has been called, after all, “an ‘organic intellectual’ of the Filipino masses” (San Juan, “Internationalizing” 138). Most critics and scholars, however, read it through a lens of professional “multiculturalism,” by which it becomes an almost generic narrative of struggles of immigration and assimilation.

Conventionally, the three great subjects of Asian American narrative literature are immigration, labor, and assimilation, and those subjects may be read through various lenses such as nation, gender, sexuality, and class. This is equally true of all Asian American narrative genres. Meanwhile, few grievances are as common to teachers of undergraduate literature courses as the complaint that students, indifferent to differences in genre, call all books novels. We have surely heard students label even volumes of poetry “novels.” Our grievances are not proportional to the issue. Few of our students will enroll in upper-level literature classes, much less become professors of literature. If generic differences matter, it is less for formal reasons than because the metaphors that animate fictive worlds differ importantly from the lived experiences those metaphors illuminate. Yet a few books blur the difference and usefully, subversively reinforce students’ blurring. *America Is in the Heart* is one such book. It makes literary scholars sound just like introductory
undergraduates. Thus Rachel C. Lee casually refers to it as a novel (17), Nerissa S. Balce calls it an autobiography (43), Sau-ling Cynthia Wong describes it as “a prototypical Asian American text” and “an extended mobility narrative” (136), Marilyn C. Alquizola and Lane Ryo Hirabayashi call it a “classic memoir” as well as “a masterpiece of labor history” (Introduction), and its publisher the University of Washington Press catalogues it, on the back cover of my battered 1970s copy, as social history. Significantly, in its Spring 2014 reissue as an inaugural text of the Press’s Classics of Asian American Literature series, the phrase “A Personal History” appears on the cover, just below the title, as if it were Bulosan’s subtitle. E. San Juan, Jr., who is surely the most insightful of Bulosan’s professional readers, shrewdly calls it “the first example of a new genre—a popular-front allegory that articulates class, race, nation (ethnicity), and gender in a protean configuration” (Introduction 12). In this reading, America Is in the Heart passes through and merges various kinds of narrative toward a larger project of “becoming Filipino” (Introduction 12-13). Whereas a bildungsroman—which is the label some scholars apply to the book—tells the story of a young person’s education into adulthood and maturity, Bulosan tells the story of an education into nationhood and justice. An introductory student might need to know that the bildungsroman she is reading is a work of fiction, that its protagonist is a fictive construction whose newfound truths may be particularized and atomized; but that same student may be excused for calling Bulosan’s book a novel, for narratives of an emergence into nationhood and class consciousness contain truths large enough to accommodate constituent parts that may be entirely fictional, partly fictional, or entirely historical. In a nation and culture governed by Social Darwinism and myths of self-made men, narratives such as Bulosan’s are rare. While the particularities of the character Carlos’s lived experiences are important enough to serve as evidence for the achievement of “becoming Filipino,” and while undergraduates may be inclined to read these experiences as real and historical, still that realization of an emergence into national consciousness does not depend on perception of a difference between fictive and factual details. What matters in the end is not only that America is in the heart but also that being Filipino is in the body and imagination. Students who know nothing of Filipino history and almost nothing of Filipino American history still sense that some kind of consciousness is stirring by the end of the book, whether or not they can identify that consciousness as national.

I have been at Washington State University since 2001, and have taught at least one introductory literature course each year. Given our location in rural southeastern Washington, almost three hundred miles from the coast and Seattle, we have a surprisingly sizable number of Filipino American students. To be sure, even with intense recruiting campaigns, scarcely more than one-seventh of WSU students are students of color, and yet the numerous small farming villages in the vast region are so monochromatic that many first-year white students express surprise over the campus’s “diversity” and incredulity when I tell them that I have
never lived in such a white place. Culturally, southeastern Washington has more in common with Idaho than with Seattle and the coast. Most of our Asian American students, and almost all of our Filipino American students, come from the Seattle area. The Filipino American Students Association (FASA) is one of the larger and better established of “multicultural” student groups here, and most years its leaders actively organize events aimed to teach the community’s history. Better than most other such groups, FASA has undertaken not only fund-raising cultural events but also educational programs and activism. A few years ago, several FASA leaders volunteered for disaster relief in New Orleans, after Hurricane Katrina, then participated in WSU programs cosponsored by the group BMMAD (Black Men Making a Difference) in which they told us what they saw and how they helped. FASA remains organized and active, but in recent years it has lost much of its activist and historical focus. Still, this only makes our Filipino American students similar to most other students of color, who come to campus knowing surprisingly little of their communities’ histories. Many students of color discover an interest in their histories only after first learning them in ethnic studies classes. I mention this not to praise our work but to scold the neoliberal reform-obsessed K-12 curriculum for failing to teach those histories.

The literature classroom is an excellent place to learn the histories. This is not because a novel teaches a history lesson but because, at least in the ethnic studies literature classroom, that novel may best be read when it is placed in its social and historical context. Students coming for a first time to America Is in the Heart recognize in Carlos not a superhero but a farmer’s son, an underpaid (sometimes unpaid) itinerant laborer, a self-educated writer hungry for more books to read. He seems to be a misfit in a conventional American literature class in which students learn to define protagonists as heroes and saviors or at least special in some way—as exceptional and not common. Even 1960s countercultural “antiheroes” are mere variations of heroes. Why create a book if its principal actor is merely common? So asks the myth of the Great Man, the Self-Made Man, that characterizes the American cultural landscape—and the landscape is, as the myth announces, masculine. Underdogs may prevail, but by beating the odds they merely take the places of idols. If assimilation is a dominant theme of the literatures of writers of color, it is largely because the assimilated protagonist assumes characteristics of the Great White Man. The American literary canon has made no place for protagonists who are perceived as whiners and perpetual victims, and so if conservative-dominant U.S. culture perceives people of color as whining victims who “play the race card,” then its heroes must be either white or assimilated men of color. To some extent, even scholars of color subscribe to the myth; for how else can we explain the fact that few Asian American literary critics position America Is in the Heart among proletarian books of the 1930s and 1940s? Recently I picked up, in an antique store fifteen miles north of WSU, in a small, nearly all-white town, several issues of the 1930s proletarian literary magazine The Anvil and was
struck by the fact that, while Bulosan did not appear, several of its contributors were writers of color, most notably Langston Hughes. If San Juan's characterization of Bulosan's book—that it is a "popular-front allegory"—is even remotely true, then we should expect more Asian American literary critics to read it for its affinities to books by writers such as Mike Gold, Jack Conroy, Tess Slesinger, Meridel Leseur, and Alexander Saxton. After all, Bulosan himself engaged in labor organizing and cultural activities: “He served as editor of The New Tide in 1934; this bimonthly workers’ magazine brought Bulosan into contact with progressive writers such as Richard Wright, William Saroyan, William Carlos Williams, and Louis Adamic” (San Juan, Introduction 6). Before and during the years of the Great Depression, the U.S. experienced upheavals in class consciousness, and one site of upheaval was the relationship between working-class people of color, especially immigrants, and union organizing. In the late 1990s, researching the Depression-era organizing activities of Japanese American Communist Karl Yoneda, I saw, in the stacks of the Labor Archives and Research Center of San Francisco State University, boxes of Chinese- and Japanese-language newspapers, posters, and pamphlets, and was told that none of these materials had been translated into English and studied. I can only imagine that much Filipino immigrant organizing by laborers such as Bulosan went unrecorded or unstudied. At any rate, Bulosan’s work must be given its historical due, and the literature classroom may serve as the best, or even only, place for it.

But to read America Is in the Heart as mainly an immigrant narrative is to miss the book’s first part, which comprises nearly thirty percent of its pages. Here too San Juan is one of few critics to notice the significance of Part One, which is set in the Philippines: “Indeed, what most readers of America have ignored by virtue of dogmatism or inertia is the whole of Part I, in particular the resourcefulness, perseverance, and courage of the peasantry, which could not be fitted into an implicit Asian American canonical paradigm” (Introduction 14-15). All the violence enacted upon Carlos’s body in the western United States merely extends the state violence enacted upon the Philippines for almost half a century even as Bulosan wrote. And just as it is white Americans who assail Carlos’s body, it is the white American state that assails the Philippines, though Spain and Japan engaged in assailing too. If America Is in the Heart is a narrative of itinerant immigrant labor in the United States, it is also a narrative of absentee landlords driving Filipino workers into exile. Most of my Filipino American students feel close ties to the Philippines, whether or not they often visit family there, and the significance of the book’s first part is not lost to them, even if they still feel closer identifications with its subsequent parts. They know the history of colonization, and they have seen film documentaries about contemporary issues such as the exploitation and violence against overseas domestic workers; and, better than most other Asian American students, they know the historical ties between past and present problems. They may not know the lexicon of political economies, but David Harvey’s notice of
neoliberalism’s reach into the Philippines would surely ring true to them. Here Harvey describes neoliberal restructuring of subordinated national economies:

> It is only when the internal power structure has been reduced to a hollow shell and when internal institutional arrangements are in total chaos, either because of collapse (as in the ex-Soviet Union and central Europe), or because of civil wars (as in Mozambique, Senegal, or Nicaragua), or because of degenerative weakness (as in the Philippines), that we see external powers freely orchestrating neoliberal restructurings. (117)

While Harvey may be underestimating the complicities of a comprador class, surely what he calls a “degenerative weakness” is induced in the Philippines by Western state and economic powers. A few of my students have even suggested that Part One of *America Is in the Heart* identifies a cause, while the rest of the book identifies an effect. Such an analysis is simple, and yet it recognizes important aspects of the book that most professional Asian American literary critics miss. This too is part of the history lesson associated with a reading of the book.

Here I wish briefly to develop my point about students’ “organic” reading of Bulosan. Most “multicultural” literature courses—even those that, housed primarily in ethnic studies, claim to reject modalities of periodization and formalism—still create their own genres based on simple readings of the histories of peoples of color. Thus Asian American Studies too easily reduces its histories and fictions, as I have already noted, to generic stories of immigration, labor, and assimilation, the models for which are narratives of East Asian Americans. Ethnic studies creates its own modalities of periodization and formalism that are just as reductive, if not quite as conservative, as those of old-fashioned Western-canon-based literary study. “Multicultural” readings of, say, Toni Morrison are almost as predictable as old Eurocentric readings of Milton and Dante. Writers themselves can subvert this way of reading—certainly Bulosan does—but students can, even if unwittingly, help them. Thus when my students not only do not know but, more important, do not care about the generic category of *America Is in the Heart*, they complete Bulosan’s subversion. Stripped of its professional “multicultural” tropes, the book comes alive for them as a record of lived experience, even if not all details of that experience are Bulosan’s own. Stuart Hall clarifies Gramsci’s idea of the “organic intellectual” by identifying two components of intellectual work, the second of which is “the responsibility of transmitting . . . ideas, that knowledge, through the intellectual function, to those who do not belong, professionally, in the intellectual class” (268). To fulfill their own role in the dialectical function of this work, those who are not professional intellectuals can actively receive and engage that knowledge. Students receptive to Bulosan’s book as both fiction and history may therefore be its best “organic” readers. Hall insists that his argument is not anti-theory, and I must stress that my observation of “organic” reading is
neither anti-intellectual nor anti-literature. I would claim only that, just as history is the antidote to essentialism, “organic” reading is the antidote to professional “multiculturalism.” Read “organically,” America Is in the Heart teaches history even to those receptive students who call it a novel.

I wish to discuss another aspect of the book’s value to the “multicultural” literature class. I have mentioned Carlos’s self-educating, his appetite for reading. Drawing on Dolores Feria’s work, San Juan relates Bulosan’s devouring of texts from diverse sources such as Neruda, James Farrell, Nazim Hikmet, Steinbeck, Marx, Whitman, Agnes Smedley, and Lillian Hellman (Introduction 6). This hunger for reading and learning starts not in the U.S. but with family in the Philippines. In the book’s second chapter, Bulosan writes, “My father and mother, who could not read or write, were willing to sacrifice anything and everything to put my brother Macario through high school” (14). When Carlos first leaves home, for a small mountain town, he finds himself working in a library, “fortunate . . . to be close to books” (71). And long before leaving for America, he learns his mission as a writer:

I was determined to leave that environment and all its crushing forces, and if I were successful in escaping unscathed, I would go back someday to understand what it meant to be born of the peasantry. I would go back because I was a part of it, because I could not really escape from it no matter where I went or what became of me. I would go back to give significance to all that was starved and thwarted in my life. (62)

Students today may be notorious for reading little that is more challenging than blogs and tweets, and yet students of color seem particularly sensitive to characters who, through almost constant oppressions, seek out books to read and opportunities to write.

I ask students of “multicultural” literature to notice that education is a common theme of many books by writers of color. In my most recent class I assigned Sherman Alexie’s novel The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian and Octavia Butler’s novel Kindred. Alexie’s protagonist Junior risks alienation from his reservation community and racist contempt from new white classmates to attend an all-white high school for the better (and better funded) education of the suburbs. Late in the novel, Junior considers the deaths of people close to him, asking, “How much loss were we supposed to endure?” and answering, “I needed books,” and then, “I wanted books” (171). His mother too is a heavy reader, but poverty thwarts her dreams; his best friend Rowdy reads slowly but persistently; and his sister wants to write romances (11, 23-23, 37). But Junior knows they are all held back by poverty, which “doesn’t give you strength or teach you lessons about perseverance. No, poverty only teaches you how to be poor” (13). Butler’s protagonist Dana violates the conventions of time travel, and risks her life, by teaching her slave ancestors to read. When she tells her white companion Kevin that she has started teaching the
slave Nigel to read, she acknowledges the danger but also a possibility that Nigel may someday be able to write his own pass to the free North (Butler 101). Later, she confronts the slave Sarah’s disbelief in narratives of freed slaves by saying, “I’ve seen books written by slaves who’ve run away and lived in the North,” though she also understands and sympathizes with “the frightened powerless woman who had already lost all she could stand to lose, and who knew as little about the freedom of the North as she knew about the hereafter” (Butler 145). In a previous semester I assigned the first essay in Zapata’s Disciple, Puerto Rican poet Martín Espada’s collection of autobiographical writings. Espada explains that he writes poems “on behalf of those without an opportunity to be heard”:

The poems seek to release a voice caught in the collective throat. Here, I am influenced by a long Latin American tradition: Pablo Neruda, Ernesto Cardenal, Clemente Soto Vélez, Claribel Alegría. Eduardo Galeano has written, “I write for those who cannot read me.” (8)

This is not to say that literacy itself liberates anyone from poverty, racism, and colonization. It is only to acknowledge that a condition of poverty, racism, and colonization is illiteracy. Giving himself the gift of literacy, Carlos might understandably use his writing to escape the “crushing forces” of peasant life, to lead his family and community out of that life, and to teach an otherwise indifferent world that such a life exists. A disproportionate percentage of WSU’s students of color are first-generation college students, and regardless of their own skills, they feel at least a part of the urgency expressed in these books. Filipino American students from Seattle who have never seen their ancestors’ homeland still sense the urgency in Carlos’s mission. To be sure, some of our students of color also share the disbelief and suspicion of Butler’s Sarah, refusing, for example, to accept that climate change threatens the planet’s future. But this only adds to the urgency of education. America Is in the Heart, like the other books, teaches that, while education alone may not produce social justice, a lack of education is an almost certain inducement to injustice.

In the first week of my 300-level course called Racism and Global Inequality, I asked students to recall whether their high school history and social studies classes related US history and culture to the histories and cultures of other nations. Few students recalled that their high schools made any connections; the history and culture of the US were taught apart, separately. American exceptionalism need not be on the agenda when it is such a by-product of long-standing curricular practice that it becomes unexceptional. Still, when I asked students also to discuss their high school experiences, it was white students who claimed that their schools, even those small ones in rural, almost all-white towns, provided generally comfortable, good places for learning. Students of color overwhelmingly remembered their high schools as forbidding places in which they learned little or nothing of their
own histories. The differences in memories split almost cleanly along racial lines. For even the most recalcitrant students of color, then, texts and lessons that share the historical and cultural perspectives of their communities provide reassurance of the rightness of their place on the college campus. Their high schools might implicitly have denied them a place, but here they belong. Here they read books that remind them of the struggles of their parents or their grandparents, maybe even of their own struggles. These reminders, rather than discourage them, only support them with lessons in their meaning and significance.

Few books remind students as well as *America Is in the Heart*. I would venture to say that, for Filipino American students in my literature classes, the book’s closing paragraph poses little of the problem that it poses for critics who see a confusing, assimilationist, and postmodern refusal of closure. For they are reminded of the importance of the book’s opening section. As for the closing paragraph’s expression of an apparently undying faith in America, they note the paragraph immediately preceding it, in which Carlos recalls the promise he made before leaving home, a promise to write for all the people laboring in debt bondage. He looks out the window of a bus to Portland:

> I wanted to shout good-bye to the Filipino pea pickers in the fields who stopped working when the bus came into view. How many times in the past had I done just that? They looked toward the highway and raised their hands. One of them, who looked like my brother Amado, took off his hat. The wind played in his hair. There was a sweet fragrance in the air. (Bulosan 326)

America is for Carlos what the North is for Butler’s slaves and the white high school is for Alexie’s protagonist: a destination in which reading and writing may be developed so that their benefits may transfer to both the poor back home and the poor who venture away. Students of color sense this. As I have already suggested, most Asian American literary scholars, schooled in the postmodern formalisms of a literary education and the identity politics of an ethnic studies education, read Bulosan less perceptively than those Filipino American undergraduates who read “organically.”
Notes


2. Curiously, the press’s early 2014 online catalogue gives the book the subject listings “Asian American Studies” and “literature,” but shows the phrase “A Personal History” just below the title, as if it were a subtitle. Also, the press’s later description, appearing just before the book’s reissue in the Classics of Asian American Literature series, refers to it as an autobiography and quotes a review from the *Saturday Review of Literature* that labels it an autobiography.

3. San Juan is not alone in contextualizing Bulosan within the Popular Front. A recent call for a paper for a session of the 2014 American Studies Association conference, posted by Erin Royston, is headed “Seeking Paper on Carey McWilliams, Carlos Bulosan, or Another Key Figure in California Popular Front” (https://networks.h-net.org/node/2602/discussions/7197/cfp-seeking-paper-carey-mcwilliams-carlos-bulosan-or-another-key).

4. In 2007 Josephine Fowler published *Japanese and Chinese Immigrant Activists: Organizing in American and International Communist Movements, 1919-1933* (Rutgers UP), an important study of Asian American immigrant labor activity that seems to have drawn heavily upon the Labor Archives and Research Center at San Francisco State University.

5. Others among my colleagues notice this perception in our students. Stephen Bischoff, a recent PhD in our American Studies program, a longtime mentor to FASA, and now Associate Director of Multicultural Student Services, agrees that students relate to these early scenes in Bulosan’s book, adding that he tells them “that many of the experiences are still relevant today.”
Works Cited


Bischoff, Stephen. Personal e-mail. 21 Jan. 2014.


