

Forum Kritika: Reflections on Carlos Bulosan and
Becoming Filipino

BEYOND THE INNOCENCE OF GLOBALIZATION: THE ABIDING NECESSITY OF CARLOS BULOSAN'S ANTI- IMPERIALIST IMAGINATION

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Abstract

This essay analyzes Carlos Bulosan's writing in terms of the way he works to develop an aesthetic that comprehends and cognitively maps the repetitive dynamics of US and global colonial capitalism. More precisely, the essay examines how Bulosan's aesthetic practice both grapples with the question of how an individual and collective consciousness can grasp the systemic processes that condition experience and also how it fosters that consciousness in the way it represents the relationships among experience, the larger class and colonial dynamics that produce that experience, and the ideological processes that intervene in our comprehension of those dynamics. In developing an aesthetic that aligns ideology and experience and grasps the dynamics of the global colonial system, Bulosan's fiction, this essay argues, generates a narrative of class struggle and a consciousness that grasps the national dimension of the Filipino working-class, comprehending the need for national liberation.

The essay explores the way Bulosan's political narratives work through and confront ideological tensions between a facile internationalism and a more concrete national liberation politics in his fiction by deploying, at times, an innocent narrator whose idealistic values and approach to the world are challenged through that character's experiences of racial and economic injustice, violence, exploitation, and deprivation. This technique allows Bulosan to articulate a utopian worldview, that is, an ideal sense of what a world framed on principles of justice would entail, and also to address the political and economic realities that betray that ideal and thus

require repair and transformation through collective political struggle. Typically, in constructing plots that move through innocence to experience, Bulosan works to create an aesthetic that aligns representation and the lived experience of Filipinos in the United States and the Philippines in ways that highlight the national dimensions of Filipino life and foster a national consciousness, challenging a premature or under-theorized internationalism or universalism.

Keywords

class consciousness, Filipino literature,, internationalism, nationalism, utopianism, working-class literature

About the author

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TO POINT OUT THAT THE PHILIPPINES WAS A US COLONY from 1898 to 1946 is simply to articulate a basic historical fact. To suggest that, until they were removed in 1991 in response to popular protest, the presence of US military bases in the Philippines indexed the maintenance of US colonial domination well beyond the Philippines' official "independence" from the US in 1946 requires a more subtle analysis of the global political economy to detect the continuing US imperialist practices lurking behind the Wizard-of-Oz-like curtain of the discourse of a benevolent globalization supposedly intent on spreading democracy. Making this discourse analysis even more urgent is the recent April 2014 signing of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement by both nations which allows the US to renew its military presence (which many argue never really left) for ten years. While US Ambassador Philip Goldberg sees the pact as signaling "a commitment to democratic governance and international law" and "a respect for Philippines sovereignty," Filipino activist Gary Labao of Bagong Alyansang Makabayan, a coalition of progressive political organizations committed to national liberation and democracy in the Philippines, criticizes the pact, arguing that "the presence of US military in the Asia-Pacific region is not beneficial to the sociopolitical and economic development of Asian countries" ("US Grows Military Presence in the Philippines"). Labao's view reads the discourse of democracy and international law Goldberg invokes as simply masking a repetition or re-ritualization of the same old practices of US colonial domination, urging us to interrogate these discourses to determine whether they accurately represent the reality of global political and economic relationships and truly promise a path to genuine democracy and liberation.

Indeed, it should be noted that this agreement was brokered in the larger context of the Obama administration's efforts to fast-track the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a trade agreement that would establish a "free-trade" zone to stretch from the US to Chile to Japan and cover forty percent of the global economy and which the Philippine government is considering to join. This agreement itself constitutes something of a repetition of imperialist practice as well, as critics of the "partnership" see it as yet another global installment of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), referring to it, in fact, as "NAFTA on steroids" ("A Corporate Trojan Horse"). Yet when US President Bill Clinton signed the NAFTA treaty in 1993, he hailed it at the time as a decision that would "permit us to create an economic order in the world that will promote more growth, more equality, better preservation of the environment and a greater possibility of world peace" ("NAFTA at 20"). The reality that has played out over the last twenty years, however, has been the opposite. The treaty has functioned as what director of Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch Lori Wallach terms, along with other such agreements as the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a "corporate Christmas tree" ("NAFTA at 20") that resulted in the loss of hundreds of thousands of jobs in the US while generating more poverty in Mexico, displacing over 1.5 million farmers, and forcing millions of Mexican

citizens to migrate to the US in search of work (“NAFTA at 20”). According to Wallach, the Trans-Pacific Partnership promises more of the same, focusing less on trade than on giving more powers to corporations by limiting food safety and environmental standards, financial regulation, and energy and climate policy and by allowing more job offshoring to lower-wage countries (“A Corporate Trojan Horse”). What I want to highlight here in opening this essay invoking the renewed US military presence in the Philippines as well as the US government’s efforts to fast-track the Trans-Pacific Partnership is that when we take a telescoped view here what we see is the systematic persistence of colonizing practices masked in the promises of spreading democracy and prosperity and achieving equality on a global scale.

The question arises, given this repetition compulsion of neocolonial capitalism, as to how and when the intensifying experience of exploitation, inequality, and immiseration produced by these practices will give rise to a popular consciousness that comprehends the political economic dynamics of imperialism—in the present and historically—as the cause of these experiences of injustice and oppression rather than comprehending them as the promise of curing them through the instauration of genuine democracy and political and economic equality. The contemporary instances I have outlined here and this question I raise provide a fertile context in which to explore and underscore the continuing relevance of Carlos Bulosan’s fiction and the anti-imperialist imagination his writings figure. In this essay, I will analyze Bulosan’s writing in terms of the way he works to develop an aesthetic that comprehends and cognitively maps the repetitive dynamics of US and global colonial capitalism. More precisely, I will analyze both how his aesthetic practice grapples with the question of how an individual and collective consciousness can grasp the systemic processes that condition experience and also how it fosters that consciousness in the way it represents the relationships among experience, the larger class and colonial dynamics that produce that experience, and the ideological processes that intervene in our comprehension of those dynamics. In developing an aesthetic that aligns ideology and experience and grasps the dynamics of the global colonial system, Bulosan’s fiction, I will suggest, generates a narrative of class struggle and a class consciousness that grasp the national dimension of the Filipino working-class, comprehending the need for national liberation.

In March 1946, in the wake of World War II as the rhetoric and repression of the Cold War heightened and US imperialism picked up in the Philippines where the Japanese left off, we see Bulosan grappling with the persistence and continuities of imperialist aggression in the Philippines even as the US promises liberation. In this moment, Bulosan writes to a compatriot in exile, “There are things for us to do in America in the name of our country, of course, though the word ‘country’ has become obsolete” (*The Sound of Falling Light* 119). The national consciousness that Bulosan here simultaneously expresses and negates he goes on to describe as a “feeling” which “is just the last residue of a nationalistic philosophy which we have

acquired from our ancestors . . . but now the fight is for certain democratic principles, certain universal principles that belong to all mankind" (*The Sound of Falling Light* 119). This vacillation between a national and international consciousness epitomizes the literary process, indeed struggle, defining Bulosan's career, namely his imaginative effort to develop an aesthetic that roots democratic ideals in a concrete comprehension of the material realities that obstruct their realization so that he can imagine an effective narrative of liberation. It is in this sense that his writing challenges the ideological assertions and promises of democracy masking imperialist aggression. At this point, writing within a Marxist discourse of socialist liberation, Bulosan's statements register the ambivalence of a US left discourse at once animated by the concept of imperialism but also informed by the haunting prophecy of Marx and Engels of the imminent decline of nationalism and the nation-state, made anachronistic by the internationalization of the economy. Bulosan wants to transcend nationalism, even in the face of the US colonization of the Philippines and internal colonization of Filipinos in the United States, while at the same time, he cannot avoid the language of nation and the concept of nation as a political agency, suggesting that indeed the word "country" and the concept of "nation" still have a useful and in fact unavoidable and necessary currency in his political vocabulary and that this hopeful universalism is premature.

The tension here in Bulosan's attempt to formulate an effective political praxis for colonized and internally colonized Filipinos in the US with respect to their homeland reflects the dual and contradictory impulses informing the internationally-oriented socialist consciousness of the Third World author: the fantasy of a decolonized world characterized by genuine social, economic, and racial justice counterbalanced by the reality of the colonial situations facing Third World writers that not only inevitably informs their cultural and material praxis, but also shapes their consciousness in ways that refuse repression, demanding address just as history does. Bulosan's predicament is symptomatic of internally colonized writers in the US who finally deconstruct the illusion of a "post"-colonialism in their negotiations between Marx and Engels' recognition that "united action, of the leading civilized countries at least, is one of the first conditions of the emancipation of the proletariat" but that "the struggle of the proletariat with the bourgeoisie is at first a national struggle" (102, 93). Bulosan, in encountering the national dimensions of the Filipino working-class historical identity and situation, finally arrives at a firmer, a surer, and an indubitably more effective and historical comprehension of working-class identity and consciousness, providing a more promising basis for an internationalist politics that also more perspicuously grasps the meaning of Marx and Engels. If we look beyond their oft-invoked statement that "the working men have no country" and read on, we find them clarifying: "Since the proletariat must first of all acquire political supremacy, must rise to be the leading class of the nation, must constitute itself *the* nation, it is, so far, itself national, though not in the bourgeois sense of the word" (102). Although the working class

in its state of dispossession might not have a nation, what the language of Marx and Engels suggests is that the working class effectively needs to decolonize the nation and *become* the nation, that is, give the national subject a working-class political content. This passage argues against a facile internationalism that ignores the national dimensions of working-class experience, suggesting that fostering a national consciousness in working-class terms is a necessary process in the narrative of working-class cultural and political struggle.

It is precisely such a political narrative Bulosan works through in confronting these political tensions in his fiction by deploying, at times, an innocent narrator whose idealistic values and approach to the world are challenged through that character's experiences of racial and economic injustice, violence, exploitation, and deprivation. This technique allows Bulosan to articulate a utopian worldview, that is, an ideal sense of what a world framed on principles of justice would entail, and also to address the political and economic realities that betray that ideal and thus require repair and transformation through collective political struggle. Typically, in constructing plots that move through innocence to experience, Bulosan works to create an aesthetic that aligns representation and the lived experience of Filipinos in the United States and the Philippines in ways that highlight the national dimensions of Filipino life and foster a national consciousness, challenging this facile internationalism or universalism.

In his short story "Passage into Life," for example, Bulosan uses a variant of this technique of the innocent narrator in a series of vignettes in which the young protagonist Allos endures such experiences as the shame of class degradation, family violence and dissolution, and the deaths of his parents which result from poverty. Through the use of this innocent narrator, Bulosan is able to highlight the general dynamics of how ideology works to accommodate people to exploitive conditions. For example, one scene features Allos standing outside of a store craving a single piece of candy. The proprietor offers Allos the candy in exchange for mopping his floor. When Allos finishes the task, however, the man then asks him to cut the grass in the yard and then finally to haul water from the well and fill all the drinking containers in the store. At last, Bulosan writes, "The man found a mouldy candy in a corner and handed it to the boy. Allos grabbed the candy and ran out. But he was so hungry and tired that the candy made him ill" (*If You Want to Know What We Are* 29). Bulosan concludes the scene, writing, "He had forgotten to thank the man for being so kind and generous" (29). Consistent with other scenes in the story, Bulosan shows us a child whose life is characterized by abuse, violence, and deprivation such that, enduring these conditions as a state of normalcy, he innocently experiences, both intellectually and emotionally, the store owner's abusive exploitation of him as an act of kindness.

More important to explore here, however, is the value system through which Allos has been taught to interpret and, indeed, feel and emotionally experience the world, or the ideology into which he has effectively been interpellated, as Bulosan's point

in the story, we will see, is not that Allos's response is immediate and self-generated out of his "natural" subjectivity but rather that Allos's innocence is conditioned and mediated by the dominant ideology that perpetuates class inequality. Applying here Louis Althusser's concept of ideology as "a 'representation' of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (162), we can see how the ideological value system through which Allos comprehends and judges—and indeed *feels*—the world misrecognizes exploitation as kindness and also how that particular imagination, through what Bulosan represents as its gross misalignment with the real conditions of existence, thus accommodates the peasant psyche to exploitive conditions. Indeed, Bulosan represents throughout the story how this class ideology informs Allos's psychology as we see him experience shame and self-blame on an individual basis in his interactions with the exploiting class instead of recognizing the inhumanity of that class and the injustice of the class system as a whole. For example, in one scene Allos brings a basket of goat meat to the landlord's house, only to be disparaged as a "poor peasant" and informed condescendingly that the family does not eat goat meat. The scene concludes as Bulosan writes, "Allos went to the door, weak with shame. He ran out of the yard dragging the basket behind him and shouting to the world that he would never go back to that house again" (27). He similarly experiences this class shame in another scene in which he seeks financial help from a wealthy uncle to seek proper health care for his dying father. As the uncle dismisses him and flips him a dime, Bulosan writes that "Allos fell, away from his only hope and into the dark well of his shame" (36). Again, what is important to highlight is Bulosan's representation of the incommensurability of Allos's ideologically-conditioned responses to and comprehensions of his world with the real conditions that Bulosan represents.

It is well worth noting here how Bulosan treats the affective dimensions of the human experience as also ideologically conditioned. As Sarah Ahmed argues, "Emotions are intentional in the sense that they are 'about' something: they involve a direction or orientation towards an object . . . The 'aboutness' of emotions means they involve a stance on the world, or a way of apprehending the world" (7). In short, emotions are ideologies, or are ideologically informed. Allos's experience of shame, for example, which is a deeply emotional and even bodily experience, is conditioned by the class system and by an internalization of class values. Indeed, a socialist imagination can perhaps easily entertain a scenario in which one would feel shame precisely because one experiences wealth amidst the poverty of others. The importance of pointing out Bulosan's representation of the class dimension of Allos's affective relations with his world is to highlight exactly the work Bulosan's aesthetic project must accomplish both in shaping a consciousness *and* an emotional sensibility that apprehends the world in terms that correspond with working-class concepts of justice and human relations. Indeed, as Leon Trotsky notes, "the new man cannot be formed without a new lyrical poetry. But to create it, the poet himself must feel the world in a new way" (199). While we are exploring

Bulosan's fiction and not his poetry, we see nonetheless and can take the point that aesthetic practice is in part about fostering a mode of sensuously apprehending the world in addition to shaping modes of vision and intellectual apprehension.

The story, thus, effectively demystifies the dominant class ideology, exposing how it interpellates the peasantry, informing their subjectivities with beliefs, values, and even giving shape to feelings and sensibilities that forestall the development of a genuine class consciousness by obscuring an accurate comprehension and *sensing* of the real conditions of existence, those of the system of class exploitation. Indeed, what the story effectively achieves through its representation of Allos's innocence, characterized by a narrow individual focus, is an enlargement of consciousness from the narrowly individual and experiential to the collective and systemic such that Bulosan brings the reader beyond Allos's innocence to a comprehension that poverty, despair, or death because of overwork, malnutrition, or inadequate health care are not idiosyncratic individual experiences for which individuals are themselves at fault but collective experiences generated systemically by global colonial capitalism.

Bulosan achieves this enlargement of consciousness, this end of ideological innocence, so to speak, through a method of repetition and elaboration throughout the story. For example, an early scene in the story features Allos, without comprehension, watching his friend Narciso jump into a river and drown. While the scene is puzzling and opaque, as we do not know exactly what motivated Narciso's action, in a later scene we see Allos engage in a similar action that perhaps elaborates and fills in the omissions in the earlier scene. In this later scene, Allos is frustrated when he learns that his sister has little prospect of marriage because her family is poor. Bulosan writes,

And Allos, knowing it to be a fact indeed, rushed out of the house wondering why there were poor people. He picked up a stone in the yard and threw it with all his might at a hen that was scratching near the fence. And then he ran furiously down the street crying to himself that when he grew up he would become rich, but when he reached the river he did not know where to get the money.

Allos plunged into the water hoping that he would die. But several farmers came to his rescue and took him home. When his mother asked him why he did it, Allos looked at her with tears in his eyes. (34)

Thus, the story invites us to connect this scene with that in which Narciso drowns and to understand the emotional economic logic of despair that motivates such behavior. We see here the sense of helplessness and frustration that are made manifest in violence toward the less powerless (the hen) and toward himself. In coupling these scenes such that the later scene illuminates the obscurity of the earlier one, Bulosan effectively leads us as readers from innocence to experience as

we come to see the behavior or the emotional response as conditioned by the poverty and economic inequality generated by the global colonial system. As readers, we see that the actions of Narciso and Allos are best understood from a collective and systemic point of view rather than from an individual and idiosyncratic one. To be clear, in this story the characters do not themselves achieve an understanding of their individual experience as conditioned by the structures of the global colonial class system. Rather, in this story, Bulosan's aesthetic brings the reader through an experience of repetition, the condensed and rapid nature of which frames and reveals the contours of the misalignment of the ideological apparatus through which they apprehend the world with their real conditions of existence. Indeed, the way Bulosan writes the story highlights the inconsistencies between the way Allos feels and makes sense of the world and the world itself. What Allos sees as kindness, for example, we can see as cruelty and injustice because of the way Bulosan represents the contradiction between the conditions he represents and Allos's comprehension and sensation of them. Thus, it is the reader here who moves from political innocence to a more sophisticated ideological consciousness of the world, one that aligns more effectively with the real conditions of existence and thus enables one to grasp one's political interests more astutely. The question in some sense still remains, outside of Bulosan's aesthetic, as to what enables an individual and a collective to achieve class consciousness, to demystify ideologies that misalign one's imagination of one's experience with the real condition of one's existence. The repetition of experiences is itself not enough. An aesthetic experience, Bulosan suggests, that frames that repetition for us such that we understand our experience in systemic rather than individual terms, is one way to achieve this political end and move history.

This same narrative dynamic of moving from innocence to experience informs *America Is in the Heart* in a central way as well as perhaps also provides insight into how one might experience history in such a way as to achieve an ideological perspective that sensuously grasps and aligns with historical reality. In the first part of the novel, Bulosan represents the tragic history of his—or his protagonist's—family and of the dispossessed peasantry overall as entwined with and resulting from the larger historical and economic processes of United States colonialism, absentee landlordism, and industrialization. These events are narrated through the childhood consciousness of Allos, who does not fully comprehend the significance and causality of the developments he witnesses, which include peasant revolts, mass migrations from the country to the city, family dislocations, increased poverty, and the breakdown of traditions along generational lines because of the imposition of United States cultural norms in the schools. The young Allos understands these larger operations of capitalism and imperialism only in terms of the effect they have on his family's welfare. Yet at times in these early moments, the voice of the more mature Allos, speaking from a post-immigration perspective, intrudes to reflect on the importance of these events in shaping his consciousness and on his

later view of those events as an experienced man of heightened political and class consciousness. Again, this narrative strategy is symptomatic of the work as a whole, which is structured as a pattern of constant return and re-evaluation—in both space and time—in which each return yields a heightened race and class consciousness.

The following scene from *America Is in the Heart*, in 1941 when Allos travels to San Diego shortly after the passage of a law proscribing the marriage of Filipinos and whites, exemplifies this narrative dynamic. Bulosan writes,

I was still unaware of the vast social implications of the discrimination against Filipinos, and my ignorance had innocently brought me to the attention of white Americans. In San Diego, where I tried to get a job, I was beaten upon several occasions by restaurant and hotel proprietors. I put the blame on certain Filipinos who behaved badly in America, who had instigated hate and discontent among their friends and followers. This misconception was generated by a confused personal reaction to dynamic social forces, but my hunger for the truth had inevitably led me to take an historical attitude. I was to understand and interpret this chaos from a collective point of view, because it was pervasive and universal. (144)

We see once more the evolution of Bulosan's narrator from a position where he blames other individual Filipinos for the violence he suffers to one where he understands that suffering to be a result of the dominant US racial ideologies and institutionalized values that motivate the racist violence against Filipinos as a collective group. Through these experiences and his shift to a collective perspective that enables him to understand those experiences as structurally and historically conditioned, Bulosan's narrator challenges the dominant US imagination of his relationship to the real conditions of his existence, an imagination that, once again, Bulosan shows, ill-comprehends the real conditions grounding the Filipino experience in the US. Thus, in looking both at "Passage into Life" and this brief moment from *America Is in the Heart*, we can see the strategy of Bulosan's aesthetic to be one of exposing those representations of our relationships to the real conditions of our existence which falsify or abstract those relationships and of developing a literary imagination that aligns more faithfully with the specificity of Filipino lived experience, particularly in its national dimensions as an experience of internal colonization.

He accomplishes this aesthetic objective, I have been suggesting, by puncturing the balloon of innocence which divorces individual experience from collective history and the larger social and institutional structures that condition that experience. He repeatedly dramatizes the confrontation of ideals and expectations with the reality of life in the United States for Filipinos, undermining the illusions of American democratic ideology by measuring them against the reality of the

Filipino lived experience of racial labor exploitation, of internal colonization, in ways that highlight the specific national dimensions of Filipino collective life in the United States. His story “Be American” elaborates and underscores this formal strategy as innocence and experience quite literally meet head on. The story features a more seasoned Filipino immigrant, already inculcated in the culture and routines of labor migrancy and exploitation and well-aware of the racism, legal exclusions and political disenfranchisement Filipinos suffer, telling the story of the initiation of his idealistic and expectant cousin Consorcio into the life the US offers Filipino immigrants. As we see in the story’s opening, this particular narrative configuration enables Bulosan at once to invoke the typical immigrant success story called up by Consorcio’s innocent optimism and to de-form that story through the experienced voice of the cousin. Bulosan writes,

It was not Consorcio’s fault. My cousin was an illiterate peasant from the vast plains of Luzon. When he came off the boat in San Francisco, he could neither read nor write English or Ilocano, our dialect. I met him when he arrived, and right away he had bright ideas in his head.
(53)

With the first sentence here—“It was not Consorcio’s fault”—the story outlines and undermines the dominant American individualist ethos that one sinks or swims in the United States system on the basis of one’s merits and efforts. We are alerted to the fact that whatever Consorcio’s fate might be in this story, it will not be a result of his own efforts. In fact, the narrator’s tone betrays a knowingness, a wisdom born of experience, that Consorcio’s “bright ideas” will not come to fruition in the way he hopes. In this sense, Bulosan de-fetishizes in the story the individualist ethos that informs the typical— and mythical—immigrant success story which is, indeed, America’s foremost cultural commodity that it markets domestically and exports globally.

He achieves this de-fetishizing effect in the story by insistently narrating Consorcio’s experiences with institutionalized racism and exploitation in a way that enables him, again, to highlight both the typicality or collective nature of Consorcio’s experience and the contradiction between the representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to the real conditions of life for Filipinos in the US and those real conditions Consorcio experiences. As Consorcio meets his cousin he expresses his desire to be American. His cousin tells him that he will have to be patient and that he first should look for a job. Throughout the story Consorcio’s optimism wanes as his life of menial labor, poverty, and isolation wear on him and he realizes as well that citizenship is not even legally available to Filipinos as this time. As his cousin checks in on him periodically as his own migrations allow, he sees that Consorcio’s prior idealism about changing the law has eroded and that Consorcio simply wonders why his cousin never told him that Filipinos could not

become American citizens. The cousin replies, “Well, I could have told you. But I wanted you to learn” (57). By writing the story such that the cousin does not from the start tell Consorcio the truth about the false promises of American democracy, Bulosan charts the typical Filipino immigrant story, registering its difference from the ideologically packaged archetypal immigrant success story. Unlike in “Passage into Life” in which the enlargement of consciousness occurs in reader and not the character himself, in “Be American” this process takes place in the main character himself as he engages the ideological apparatus itself, the legal structure that overtly and starkly prohibits the actualization of his desire; that is, he forthrightly encounters ideology in arguably its most legible form—the law—and is able to discern the contradiction between US culture’s ideals and promises of democracy and freedom and the negative reality of those ideals’ institutional implementation. Consorcio sees the ideological system that materially conditions his experience of oppression and exclusion in a systematic way that impacts the Filipino experience specifically and collectively. We see also that the positioning of the cousin who does not warn Consorcio but wants him to learn for himself through experience suggests that for Bulosan the material experience is still crucial to developing a proper and effective ideological consciousness and to demystifying the ideologies that misalign with lived experience.

Additionally he is also able to record the stubborn resistance of Consorcio’s ideological innocence even in the face of repeated experiences of racial and economic injustice, which testifies to the power of ideology to condition our imagination of our real conditions of existence despite our contradictory experiences of those conditions. This last point we also saw demonstrated in the passage I cited above from *America Is in the Heart* in which Allos, despite being aware that legislation had just passed proscribing marriages between whites and Filipinos, still blames the bad behavior of other Filipinos for his mistreatment rather than recognize the pervasiveness of racism in the dominant US culture. In that scene Bulosan tells us that he can only acquire the truth by adopting an “historical attitude” and interpreting his chaotic experiences from “a collective point of view.” In a sense, this is exactly what Bulosan achieves in “Be American” through his formal choices in telling the story. Having the innocent Consorcio replicate the experiences that we know his cousin endured, Bulosan underlines again the collective nature of this experience and moves beyond representing an isolated individual experience to connecting those individual experiences to and refocusing the reader’s attention on the larger systemic structures of US racial capitalism or colonialism which condition and organize those experiences.

The story exemplifies again Bulosan’s aesthetic mission of providing a more authentic imagination of the conditions facing Filipinos and other racial minorities and exploited classes. Ultimately, it is the understanding that one’s oppression is not one’s own fault that helps one to overcome feelings of powerlessness and to organize and direct collective political action against dehumanizing structures

and institutions. Indeed, the story Bulosan tells in “Be American” is finally one of hope rooted in a faith in the collective efforts of the army of dispossessed and disinherited who constitute the “other America” to one day through struggle realize the ideal of a genuinely democratic, free, anti-racist, and economically just US society and culture. While Bulosan challenges the typical individualist story of immigrant success, the belief in which, “Be American” suggests, will leave the Filipino immigrant demoralized, isolated, and impoverished in the United States, he replaces that individualist narrative with an alternative narrative of American opportunity rooted more concretely in an accurate representation of the conditions of Filipino life in the United States.

Bulosan shows us, for example, how the Filipino migrant worker developed an alternative culture that helped him build community and foster a collective identity based in a shared historical experience, even in the context of a migrant life. As the cousin explains, when he loses track of Consorcio at one point,

I did not think much of his disappearance because we are a wandering people due to the nature of our lowly occupations, which take us from place to place, following the seasons. When I received a box of grapes from a friend, I knew he was working in the grape fields in either Fresno or Delano, depending on the freight mark. When I received a box of asparagus, I knew he was working in Stockton, . . . There were no letters, no post cards—nothing. But these surprising boxes, crates, and barrels that arrived periodically were the best letters in the world. What they contained were lovingly distributed among city friends. (56)

He continues explaining how he similarly sent packages to friends, addressing them to poolrooms or restaurants where they usually worked for a season. If others opened and enjoyed them, he tells us, “it was not a crime. The enjoyment which was originally intended for my friends was his and his friends’. That is the law of the nomad: finders keepers” (56). Consorcio, the cousin tells us, “had not yet learned the unwritten law of the nomad” (56). Eventually, the cousin does begin to receive packages from Consorcio, thus letting him know that “he was working and had learned the unwritten law of the nomad on this earth” (57). It is precisely this “unwritten law” that Bulosan gives written life to in his literary practice, creating socially symbolic narratives, representations of imaginary relationships, which align more accurately with Filipino lived experience. In this sense, we can see Bulosan’s imagination move beyond Althusser’s constrained conceptualization of ideology in primarily, if not only, repressive terms, as a kind of false consciousness. Bulosan also sees ideology, generated in part through aesthetic practice, as productive and utopian, pointing the way to a democratic and just economic world. Indeed, one of the results of this literary practice, at least as imagined in the story, is the fostering of a Filipino national consciousness that comprehends the realities of American

global capitalism and thus can both align the expectations of Filipinos accordingly to minimize the trauma of immigration and also direct action in more fruitful and collective directions to improve conditions and organize for democracy.

The story illustrates this point as we see Consorcio assimilating not into the dominant American culture but rather into the Filipino migrant culture that affords him an identity and ideological perspective rooted in and comprehensive of a shared historical perspective, having learned the “unwritten law of the nomad.” It is at this point that Consorcio begins to respond to his fall from innocence, to the recognition that the American promise was a false one, in a more healthy and productive manner. Recognizing and adjusting his expectations to correspond to the American reality he has in actuality experienced, Consorcio more effectively addresses his situation, nourished by the collective culture in which he begins to take part as an active agent. As the cousin receives more packages and letters from Consorcio, he asserts:

My cousin Consorcio, the one-time illiterate peasant from the vast plains of Luzon, had indeed become an American without knowing it. His letters were full of wondering and pondering about many things in America. Now he realized his naivete when he had landed in San Francisco. But he realized also that he could not ask too much in a strange land. And it was this realization that liberated him from his peasant prison, his heritage, and eventually led him to a kind of work to which he dedicated his time and life until the end. (57)

Thus, Consorcio, in overcoming his innocence or naivete about American life and ceasing to ask for “too much,” actually frees himself psychologically to direct his efforts away from bankrupt individualist pursuits that will end only in demoralization or frustration and toward collective organization of the working class to fight for democracy, freedom, and economic justice which America promised but failed to deliver.

It is important to be clear here that to “not ask too much” does not mean to capitulate to one’s position but rather to accept one’s position by recognizing the real social obstacles one faces so that one can find a more responsible way of responding to those obstacles instead of wasting energy by innocently ignoring them. For, indeed, Consorcio comes to believe his cousin that America is a land of opportunity; the opportunity of which he avails himself, however, is running a publication devoted to “defending the rights of workers and upholding the rights and liberties of all Americans, native or foreign-born” (58). He understands that the struggle is not for individual assimilation into a culture of upward mobility but rather for collective socio-economic and cultural transformation, as “he knew that it would take all the people to unmake the happiness which had caught up with us” (58). Thus, the story re-routes an abstract utopianism into a utopian narrative of

collective fulfillment that is projected into the future as a consequence of directed and consciously organized struggle and is rooted in a concrete engagement with historical process.

In the terms of this essay, then, one might say that Bulosan transcends an “innocent” idealism or utopianism that does not grapple with the concrete and specific historical problems that need to be addressed to develop a master narrative of liberation, moving instead to a utopianism rooted in a recognition of concrete historical experiences of exploitation and oppression as conditioned by socio-economic structures and perpetuated by hegemonic ideologies. For Bulosan, the success of this gesture relies heavily on his ability to communicate and make readable the Filipino national experience in the United States, that of internal colonization, as conditioned by the mechanisms of US imperialism in the Philippines and domestically. This challenge, it turns out, was a formidable one given his reception by American critics who tended to reconcile his fiction with typical immigrant narratives of assimilation.

In his work “The Story of a Letter,” we see perhaps Bulosan’s most forceful attempt at directing readings of the Filipino experience away from such abstract renderings, as the story thematizes the act of reading itself and seems implicitly to insist that the competent interpretation of any text must be sensitive to the context of specific life experiences and cultures. Reduced most simply, the story is about a peasant family in the Philippines trying to understand a letter written in English sent from the son Berto in the United States. Because the letter is written in English, neither the father nor the young son who narrates the story can read the letter so that they must seek somebody to translate the letter.

This pursuit takes ten years and leads the family through the historical encrustations of Spanish and American colonialism in the Philippines and through the Filipino experience of internal colonization and racial labor exploitation in the United States. First, for example, the father goes to the village priest to translate the letter, only to find that the priest has died of overeating, a common trope in Bulosan’s stories that registers the gluttonous exploitation of the Catholic Church in abetting Spanish colonialism. Next, the father and son wait for another son, Nicasio, to return from school in the city where he has learned English. Nicasio never materializes, and the implication is that he has fled colonial exploitation in the Philippines for the United States, lured by the illusory prospects of democratic inclusion and equal opportunity purveyed to him in his American colonial education. As the family seeks other options, along the way they also lose their land, another reference to the depredations of US colonialism which often involved the dispossession of peasants from their land. This event in turn forces the young son also to flee the poverty of the colonial situation and to try his luck in the United States. While in the United States, the son endures the typical Filipino migrant labor experience and reunites at one point with his brother Nicasio caught in the same routine. We learn that while in the United States, the son had remembered

the letter, sent for it, translated it, and sent it back to his father. At this point in the story, however, Bulosan does not reveal the contents of the letter. Mysteriously, the letter somehow is sent back to the son in the United States after the father has died, and it is addressed to a hotel the son has never frequented. At the end of the story, the son opens and reads the letter, telling us he received it the same day he received a letter informing him Berto was serving in the Navy and the same day Nicasio was being inducted into the US Army (that is, they are taking part in the US militarization of the world that, as mentioned at the start of this essay, furthers their own colonization). As he reads the letter, he is “choking with tears at the mystery and wonder of it all” (44), and we finally learn the contents of the letter:

Dear Father (my brother wrote): America is a great country. Tall buildings. Wide good land. The people walking. But I feel sad. I am writing you this hour of my sentimental. Your son. — Berto. (44)

While the contents of the letter are more than a little anti-climactic, Bulosan’s point seems to be that the meaning of the letter, or the meaning of the language itself, must be attached to or contextualized in the historical experience it references and in which the language is grounded. The meaning of any utterance, to be fully understood, must be rooted in and traced back to the specific historical, experiential, and cultural source from which it proceeded. This point becomes clear when we consider why Bulosan does not reveal the contents of the letter until the end of the story, as Bulosan’s point seems to be that the reader needs to be familiarized with, indeed brought through, the history and experience of the colonization of Filipinos in the US and the Philippines in order to understand the meaning of the letter. The sense seems to be that even the son could not have fully comprehended the letter without having gone through the experience of migrant labor, of racial labor exploitation, in the United States. The reader cannot read the letter at the end of the story and enjoy an innocent ignorance of the lived historical experience of Filipinos enduring colonization both in the Philippines and the United States. Much as in “Be American” where Consorcio can only arrive at an understanding of racial exploitation in the United States by rehearsing that which his cousin has already experienced, so in “The Story of a Letter” Bulosan suggests that the meaning of the letter cannot be abstracted from historical and experiential contexts into an ahistorical innocence but must in some sense be made identical with those contexts. Indeed, where as in other stories I’ve explored Bulosan might bring us through innocence to experience and the systemic structures that condition it, in “The Story of a Letter” he does not even permit a flirtation with innocence, driving us through the historical experience of colonialism and its encrustations before we can encounter Berto’s letter as a potential abstraction. We see again what I have been identifying throughout this essay as Bulosan’s aesthetic strategy of developing in narrative an imagination of the relationships of Filipinos

to their real conditions of existence that comprehends as faithfully as possible those conditions of existence—both as lived experience and as conditioned by the larger American colonial system. Indeed, in connecting lived experience with larger systemic structures, we can characterize Bulosan's aesthetic as engaging in what Georg Lukács called realism, a literary practice that represents people, practices, and things as the effects or embodiments of larger historical processes (*Studies in European Realism* Preface).

We can see from the selected fiction I have explored here that Bulosan's writing seeks repeatedly, so to speak, to return to the source, to the national dimensions of Filipino life both within the Philippines and the United States as he works to capture representationally the US imperial system that conditions both. By grasping these national dimensions and providing narratives that effectively imagine Filipinos' relationship to the real conditions of life, these narratives provide the potential to foster a liberatory Filipino political consciousness and program, just as we saw Consorcio experience a freedom to resist when he came to accept the realities of the Filipino national experience in the United States. Moreover, as we saw with Consorcio, this national consciousness, this self-consciousness, makes possible the building of broader democratic coalitions, as, in Frantz Fanon's words, "the consciousness of self is not the closing of a door to communication. Philosophic thought teaches us, on the contrary, that it is its guarantee" (247). Indeed, while Bulosan's aesthetic, as we can see in his final novel *The Cry and the Dedication* which treats the Huk rebellion in the Philippines, invariably drives him back to the concept of "country" or of "nation," communicating an intuitive understanding that the path to a genuine universalism must go through the nation, that, to quote Fanon again, "It is at the heart of national consciousness that international consciousness lives and grows" (247-8).

In our contemporary world, Bulosan's aesthetic provides us the means to cultivate a popular political consciousness to demystify and resist the ideological persuasions that enable the recursive imperialist assaults taking place in the name of democracy and national security. Bulosan's aesthetic means to intervene in our minds and our very sensibilities, our hearts, such that we both know and feel the world through filters differentiated from the emotional and epistemological frameworks informed by the ideologies of globalization underwriting such efforts as the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the revival of a US military presence in the Philippines. If global capitalism seeks to construct national identities as involved with the incorporation of those nation-states and national cultures into the universalizing or internationalizing logic of capital, it seems logical to imagine that challenging the developmental logic of global capitalism or imperialism would require speaking, acting, and feeling from a site of local contradiction; and it is the site of the independent or dissenting nation from which the putative peace and harmony of the now stale new world order can be most fruitfully problematized. Yet finding a way to foster an individual and collective consciousness as well

as a sensibility, a mode of feeling, that can sensuously grasp our concrete lived experiences as indexes and products of larger systemic structures remains the challenge. It is this challenge that Bulosan's aesthetic meets, making his work profoundly relevant to the struggles to reclaim cultural and material space against the injustices of global capitalism we collectively endure in our contemporary world.

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