MIGRATION, IMAGINATION, AND TRANSFORMATION:

Revisiting E. San Juan, Jr.'s *Carlos Bulosan and the Imagination of the Class Struggle*

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Abstract

This paper argues that an examination of the historiographical trajectory of scholarly works on the Philippine peasantry, particularly peasants in Luzon provinces, and transnational migration can deepen our understanding of Carlos Bulosan's life and works. Using E. San Juan, Jr.'s *Carlos Bulosan and the Imagination of the Class Struggle* as the analytic focus in pursuing the argument, we aim to contextualize Bulosan's life story within the larger framework of the history of Philippine peasant movements and draw connections between his life in America and the contemporary experience of Filipino migrants. To reach these objectives, we need to understand San Juan's text as part of a wider scholarly terrain that has become increasingly interdisciplinary over the years from the 1970s up to the present.

Keywords

historiography, peasantry, transnationalism

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THE TRANSFORMING LANDSCAPE OF PEASANT STUDIES

E. San Juan, Jr.'s *Carlos Bulosan and the Imagination of the Class Struggle* (hereafter *CBICS*) was a crucial act of rescue. Published in 1972, just “a few weeks before Marcos declared martial law” (San Juan, “Excavating the Bulosan Ruins” 156), *CBICS* revisited and assessed the poetry, fiction, and private correspondence of Carlos Bulosan, the most prolific Filipino writer of peasant origins, to save him and his work from obscurity and misappropriation. San Juan’s intervention was critical not just in salvaging the works of a now-renowned literary giant, but also in reevaluating the Filipino peasants’ past, especially in terms of their responses to colonialism and feudalism. *CBICS* presented an alternative historical narrative for the peasantry, which was, and still is, in danger of becoming an exoticized subject of study.

CBICS and San Juan’s subsequent works on Bulosan remain the standard texts on this subject matter, notwithstanding criticisms (e.g. Casper). Joseph Galdon, despite finding fault in San Juan’s “Marxist (and Maoist)” appropriation of Bulosan and deriding his “narrowness and his intellectual presumption” (215) in a scathing review of *CBICS*, conceded that “San Juan has so much obvious talent” (222). More appreciative reviewers lauded San Juan’s efforts to integrate Bulosan’s work into the resurgent nationalist tradition of the 1970s, such as University of the Philippines President Salvador P. Lopez, who hailed *CBICS* as “the most comprehensive, perceptive and penetrating work of literary criticism yet done in the country” (qtd. in Galdon 215). Soledad Reyes noted that *CBICS* was the start of a second phase in San Juan’s scholarly evolution, a framework that demanded a departure from the formalist tradition of Philippine literary criticism of the 1960s (to which San Juan himself substantially contributed) and corrected an imbalance caused by the assumption that “literature can be studied in a vacuum” (325). San Juan’s insistence that “literature is essentially a reflection of the lives of men in a particular society” (325) is an insight that goes beyond literary criticism; not only does it pave the way for a greater appreciation of vernacular texts and radical literature, but it also strengthens the relationship between literature and other disciplines, such as history and sociology.

With *CBICS*, San Juan blazed the trail for the “Bulosan scholars” who would come after him, and they have been, and still are, largely corroborating San Juan’s main arguments in his 1972 book. For example, Susan Evangelista echoes San Juan’s view on Bulosan’s most well-known work, *America is in the Heart*, when she considers it as a “collective history—a history of the West Coast Filipino migrant workers during the Depression” (27). In his introduction for *Kritika Kultura*’s 2014 Forum Kritika on Bulosan, Jeffrey Arellano Cabusao acknowledges San Juan’s “deft editorship” of Bulosan’s *On Becoming Filipino* and *The Cry and the Dedication*,

which “enable[d] readers to appreciate Bulosan’s contribution to the unfinished project called ‘becoming Filipino’” (130).

CBICS’s importance also lies in being one of the first works to set the agenda for a critical appreciation, not just of Bulosan but of the early attempts to interpret and appropriate his life and works. In the 1940s, Bulosan’s writings became an instrument for the American literary establishment to promote a neutered multicultural pluralism, devoid of his socialist and anti-imperialist leanings, that had significant value for the US due to the Second World War. However, the texts of Bulosan, as the exiled exotic poet from the Pacific, lost their utility after the war. In the next two decades, Bulosan was a largely benign figure, and he would have probably remained a novelty in Asian American literature had the University of Washington Press not republished *America is in the Heart* in 1973, a decision made by the publisher after prodding from Ethnic Studies scholars who were confident about the book’s marketability (San Juan, “Filipino Writing in the United States”). The renewed interest in Bulosan was of course a product of American radicalism that had been set in motion in the late 1960s. Philippine society was also in upheaval at this point, but its radical social forces, who drew inspiration from Andres Bonifacio and the Katipunan, had minimal knowledge about Bulosan. Given the circumstances in both the Philippines and the US, the timeliness of the release of *CBICS* in 1972 cannot be overestimated.

Through San Juan’s reassessment, the dominant appreciation of Bulosan’s *America is in the Heart* underwent a radical reorientation from that of a commentary on peasant gullibility and maladjustment into an indictment of US imperialism and peasant exploitation. From a narration of peasant maladjustment, such as Bulosan’s initial years in the US, *America is in the Heart* became a novel that charts the transformation of the consciousness of the Filipino colonial wards from peasant-colonial individualism towards a militant proletarian ideology. San Juan’s reversal of misappropriation is also evident in another Bulosan work, *The Laughter of My Father*. Much to Bulosan’s chagrin, the work that catapulted him to literary fame was also seen as humorous and as representative of the “pure Comic spirit,” to which he angrily responded that he was “not a laughing man.” San Juan discarded the early analysis of *The Laughter of My Father* as a humorous caricature of rural culture and idiosyncrasies in favor of a narrative in which one can truly get a glimpse of peasant life and mentalities during the critical interregnum between Spanish and American colonialisms. After all, Bulosan’s rage against the inequalities in Philippine peasant society was precisely what pushed him to write, as “you have to be angry at something if you want to be a writer” (Bulosan, “I am not a Laughing Man” 138). Moreover, it was San Juan’s intervention that enabled other scholars to elaborate further on the subversive nature of *The Laughter of My Father*. When L.M. Grow points out that survival through humor and indolence

was in fact an attempt at subversion, as “laughter is double-edged, cutting both ways eliciting tears of sorrow and happiness at the same time . . . a weapon for those who know how to use it” (38), it was an affirmation of San Juan’s earlier views. San Juan has argued that the peasants’ use of these methods and perspectives, although seen by the colonial establishment as anti-social, presents unique opportunities to “sabotage authority” as “cunning naiveté in times of emergency or disaster affords him insight into alternatives and options, accessible only in a comic or detached context” (“Radicalism” 335–336). Feminist readings of Bulosan, such as Marilyn Alquizola and Lane Ryo Hirobayashi’s defence of Bulosan’s satirical treatment of women “to make us angry at a global context” that a world free from gender and class domination was yet beyond reach (87), would have been impossible if not for San Juan’s efforts to counter the perception of Bulosan as a rustic writer from a colonized world. Clearly, the genealogy of scholarly knowledge about Bulosan—indeed, the current scholarly conceptualization of Bulosan’s identity as an organic intellectual whose growth and class transformation were facilitated by his experiences as farm worker, journalist, poet/fictionist and labor organizer—can be traced back to San Juan’s initial analyses in *CBICS*.

In *CBICS*, San Juan was unequivocal about the historical underpinnings of Bulosan’s works, that Bulosan’s “apprenticeship and education in the world” allowed him to recognize the imbalance of power brought about by socioeconomic class differentiation (94). Although critical of earlier peasant uprisings that aimed to address this imbalance, Bulosan still believed in “man’s infinite capacity to shape his character and his destiny by collective action” (96). Moreover, Bulosan went beyond the limiting context of gaining temporary individual victories and prioritized the collective action of the disenfranchised. Analyzing the collective consciousness of Filipino peasants is crucial in understanding Bulosan, but the reverse holds true as well, probably even more important: Bulosan presents us not with an academic perspective, but a personal account of someone who intimately knew peasant life at a time of intense agitation.

Notwithstanding the invaluable scholarly insights to be gained from studying Bulosan’s life and works, as San Juan was planting the seeds for “Bulosan studies” in the 1970s, he had already noted in *CBICS* that Bulosan’s radicalism was at risk, referring to a tendency to reduce him to a “naive peasant” who was incapable of adjusting and competing in the new colonial structure. San Juan himself in an earlier review of Philippine literature, said that from Bulosan “one notes the strong feeling of guilt in a self-made man whose intellect is his main resource and who is compelled always to work in the fields with Filipino peons as an act of fidelity to the home of his fathers” (“Philippine Literature in English in Crisis” 168). This fuelled Bulosan’s view that “peasants are always helpless victims of the city exploiter” (161). Prior to *CBICS*, San Juan aptly connects Bulosan to Rizalian literary traditions, but

viewed *America is in the Heart* as a “masterpiece of Gothic self-pity . . . a picaresque testament to our romance with a Platonized America” (161).

San Juan, almost four decades after 1972, cautions his readers once again as he laments how Bulosan’s revolutionary message can be blunted and the organic intellectual “institutionalized as a harmless ethnic icon” (“Carlos Bulosan, Filipino Writer-Activist” 14). The 1970s, given the decade’s reputation in Philippine history as a period of dissent and progressivism, seemed to be the perfect time to signal the (re)birth of a new revolutionary icon, and yet it was also the time when scholarly attention toward the peasantry took on a less militant turn. Bulosan was thus canonized in a decade that both cultivated and threatened his radical message.

Scholarly work on the peasantry reached its peak during the 1970s and was clearly influenced by the nationalist struggles in Asia after the Second World War. From the 1940s up to the politically charged global arena of the 1970s, attempts at decolonization in the region were led by nationalist or revolutionary movements that had the peasantry as their critical mass base. The establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 was led by the Chinese Communist Party, whose Red fighters came from the ranks of the peasantry. The nationalist struggles of Vietnam during the post-war period and its successful defense against imperialist aggression during the 1960s heavily relied on the participation of the peasantry.

The narrative of the peasantry’s participation in the anticolonial and antifeudal struggles in the Philippines was no less compelling. The Hukbong Bayan Laban sa mga Hapon (Hukbalahap), which used guerrilla warfare against the Japanese during the Second World War and later on waged an agrarian revolution up to the 1950s, had its ranks of fighters filled with peasants. The reestablished Communist Party of the Philippines engaged in a rural-based protracted war with its armed component, the New People’s Army, composed mainly of disenfranchised farmers and agricultural workers.

The agrarian nature of revolts in Asia led to a fascination in the social sciences with peasant studies, as scholars attempted to grapple with these realities. In fact, the highly regarded *Journal of Peasant Studies* was launched in 1973 and immediately became a platform for competing schools of thought on peasant issues. Opposing views also characterized studies on the Philippine peasantry in this decade. Scholars who were looking at the revolutionary capacity of peasants could even pick from a variety of vistas. Marxist analyses, for example, were of different types: from Amado Guerrero’s (1971) overtly political tract, which applied Marxist–Leninist–Mao Zedong thought to his analysis of Philippine society, to Cynthia Bautista’s (2010) scholarly approach to political economy. The “history from below” variety has been associated with the works of Reynaldo Ileto (1979)

and Eduardo Tadem (2007). The opposing views can be seen, for instance, in the divergent interpretations of peasant uprisings by Iletto and David Sturtevant.

On the one hand, Sturtevant's seminal work, *Popular Uprisings in the Philippines 1840–1940*, presented a linear representation of peasant uprisings, echoing Renato Constantino's evaluation of these movements as proto-nationalist, a part of the historical evolution of social movements from the "little tradition" of peasant mysticism towards a "great tradition" of ideologically guided movements. Sturtevant concluded that peasant participation in uprisings such as the Tayug rebellion was a manifestation of the peasantry's desire to be liberated from their exploitative conditions, which were due to their landlessness, but they were unable to elaborate on this desire due to the lack of a "modern" ideology to chart a concrete direction, hence they resorted to processing this desire through religio-mystical paradigms.

On the other hand, Iletto's groundbreaking book, *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840–1910*, rejected Sturtevant's linear analysis. Instead, Iletto foregrounded the peasants' folk mentality as something distinct from the "great tradition" rather than an embryonic form of it. This mentality was defined by a syncretic worldview that fuses precolonial animist traditions and Christian narratives. Iletto's argument led other scholars to explore the so-called millenarian tradition among the peasantry. Francisco Nemenzo did so in an essay first published in 1984 as part of the "Marxism in the Philippines" series of the Third World Studies Center. In this historical reassessment of Marxist-inspired struggles in the Philippines, Nemenzo contends that the old Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP), "from the provincial committees to the cells in the villages and military units, was dominated by the millenarian-populist rather than the Marxist-Leninist world view" (6). The millenarian trope in characterizing peasant mentality is also evident in Augusto Espiritu's critique of the supposed modernist façade of Bulosan. Espiritu posits that "Bulosan's involvement in the world of oral culture, animism, and folk spirituality foregrounds the importance of religion and how it continues in vital ways to shape the perceptions, the worldviews, and the ideas of transnational Filipino intellectuals" (72).

An entirely different perspective is presented by the so-called moral economy framework. Following in the footsteps of James Scott, Benedict Kerkvliet wrote his landmark study, *The Huk Rebellion*, using the moral economy framework. Scott and Kerkvliet's general line of argument in these works is that peasant responses, be they everyday resistance or full-blown revolts, stem from their reaction to the breakdown of patron–client ties and do not aim to seize the forces of production and political control from the rural elite; rather, their goal is simply to ensure the stability of the peasant economy, if not the restoration of patron–client relations. Applying this framework to the Huk rebellion, Kerkvliet argued that the PKP,

with its ideology based on conflict rather than stasis, did not organize and lead the rebellion. This claim did not sit well, however, with well-known personalities within the PKP and the rebellion itself, such as William Pomeroy and Jesus Lava, both writing critical reviews of Kerkvliet's book (Nemenzo).

Critics of the moral economy framework, with Samuel L. Popkin probably being the earliest and most well-known, see its weakness in its presumption of the peasants' inability to recognize their exploited state and its reduction of peasant responses to maladjustments during socioeconomic transitions. Within Philippine social sciences, moral economy would also be subjected to criticisms, as can be gleaned from the syncretic approach put forward by Abinales.

Such a battleground of ideas was the intellectual milieu in which *CBICS* found itself right after its publication. Given this wide range of scholarly works on the peasantry, seemingly on the verge of an epistemological exhaustion, an enormous gap remained unfilled, a pressing question unasked: what about the genuine peasant voice? The need to understand peasant consciousness and its development demanded an organic peasant voice, an intervention lest it becomes buried in academic assumptions and theories. *CBICS* filled that need, not through the formulation of another sophisticated theoretical framework, but by mainstreaming into the world of academia the stories and characters of Bulosan, the peasant.

ENCOUNTERING BULOSAN AND COUNTERING THE SUBALTERN SCHOOL

San Juan, in the first lines of *CBICS*, was quite explicit in his project for Bulosan. Bulosan, according to San Juan, "in the years to come will be justly recognized as the first Filipino writer in English who, in the period of transition from feudal-bourgeois to proletarian ideology, spearheaded the vanguard of the revolutionary working class in its struggle against colonialism and exploitation" (*Carlos Bulosan and the Imagination of the Class Struggle* 1). This campaign led to the publication of countless articles and scholarly works on Bulosan, including his unpublished novel, *The Cry and the Dedication*, a work on the Philippine socialist movement of the 1940s and 1950s. Bulosan's life and literature, for San Juan, were powerful narratives on the capacity of the marginalized to transcend their class origins and unite for a common goal. Bulosan, the peasant-turned-migrant-turned-proletariat, characterized the radical transformation of Filipino colonial wards in the US who would unite later on with other migrant workers of different racial and ethnic backgrounds to campaign for better working conditions, humane wages, and the elimination of racism in both the workplace and communities. Despite living in the US for 26 years, Bulosan still saw himself as a colonial subject, connected to the struggles in his homeland because his fellow peasants and workers in the

Philippines had the same aspirations: emancipation from colonial exploitation and the asphyxiating economic conditions imposed by the local elite. This was why Bulosan, despite being separated by distance from the nationalist struggles in the Philippines, actively supported the anti-Japanese resistance in the Philippines during the Second World War.

Bulosan's narrative is crucial when viewed with the emergence of postcolonial studies in the second half of the twentieth century. The outbreak of nationalist and anticolonial struggles after the Second World War necessitated an evaluation not just of the structures of political and economic control implanted during the heyday of colonial rule, but also of the colonized and their efforts towards decolonization. The utilization and appropriation of Marxism by revolutionaries such as Fidel Castro, Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh, and Frantz Fanon, not just to understand their colonial milieu but also to chart alternative futures, was a phenomenon that both academics and activists especially in the West attempted to comprehend. Their third-world perspectives on liberation were published and distributed globally especially in the 1960s, effectively creating an established set of literature on colonial and postcolonial perspectives for various disciplines, including literature, history, sociology, and political science. San Juan was the first to see Bulosan in a light similar to these anticolonial/postcolonial thinkers and called on fellow nationalists in the Philippines to revisit the redemptive message of Bulosan even though he came from a relatively distant colonial past.

The relevance of Bulosan and *CBICS* continues even up to the present time, especially with the emergence and popularity of the so-called subaltern studies of the 1980s. Bulosan's narrative presents a strong argument against the rejection of the universality of categories, such as class, and provides a critique of the localization of peasant struggles by the adherents of this school of thought. Their views regarding the existence of distinct, localized, and diffused interests in society and the incompatibility of Enlightenment values with societies in the East fall flat when juxtaposed with how Bulosan elaborates on poverty suffered by his family brought about by feudalism and colonialism. The denial of the capability of peasants to recognize the role of class assignments and economic relations suddenly becomes incongruous when Bulosan connects his feudal origins to his oppression as a colonial ward in the US. He shows how this experience is shared not just by Filipino colonial wards such as himself but also by all peasants and workers in the Philippines and the US.

"Bulosan, the peasant" is one fundamental facet of Bulosan's persona in the scholarly imaginary that *CBICS* emphasized. Right from the start, San Juan was clear about Bulosan being a rare example of a writer of peasant origins who was able to articulate the experience of the colonized. San Juan rejected the tendency to

reduce Bulosan, and by extension the peasantry, to naïve individuals and collectives who were incapable of adjusting to new colonial structures, prioritizing equilibrium over revolutionary change, needing change but were too simplistic to fully chart a program for it. San Juan points to Bulosan's fiction, which, though reflective of rural unrest, articulated a sense of optimism as it carried themes that ranged from peasant resistance and subversion of colonial-feudal existence to peasants gaining victories over the powerful economic elite. Bulosan's profile as a peasant becomes even more valuable when one recognizes that he lived through a period of intense agitation among the peasants of Luzon. Bulosan's (1946) reconstruction and critique of the Tayug rebellion, in which he examined both the Colorums and confused peasant spectators, was a narrative of the early collective actions of the Philippine peasantry against the exploitative conditions of rural life, one that reveals his thoughts on the class identity of its leadership.

Bulosan, through his narrative of the Tayug rebellion, counters the assumption that peasants are unaware of their social, economic, and political marginalization and simply prefer to maintain a liveable status quo. Speaking through Allos, his fictional alter-ego, Bulosan reconstructs the peasant mentality of his milieu, a peasantry that is aware of the exploitative nature of feudal and colonial relations and desirous of liberation from the strangleholds of both colonial oppressors and local elites. Nonetheless, the failure of the Tayug uprising to fully deliver the peasantry from their landless condition was not because of lack of action from peasants, but due to its faulty leadership, a "vengeful sect of anarchistic men led by a college-bred peasant who had become embittered in the United States" (*America is in the Heart* 60). Although Bulosan was aware that the worsening socioeconomic conditions of the peasantry needed to be addressed, the peasant class had to understand its own milieu to independently chart for itself its liberation.

IMAGINING A TRANSNATIONAL PEASANT-MIGRANT

Despite the voluminous body of work on peasant studies, by the 1990s the scholarship in the Philippines had taken a backseat as the peasant question became less pressing in the minds of scholars. For those who were still engaged in analyzing Filipino peasants, the peasant question had to be reformulated because a "new" phenomenon had to be confronted: the issue of transnational migration as embodied by the modern overseas Filipino worker (OFW).¹ Moreover, the reality of transnational migration among peasants is one critical aspect in interrogating the image of the risk-averse peasant put forward in the moral economy framework. In the eyes of migration scholars, the decision to leave the rural village is a rational choice of a profit-maximizing peasant. Transnational migration, as personified by the peasant-turned-OFW, remade the landscape of peasant studies.

The focus of recent literature on migration was occasioned by the sudden increase in the number of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) coming from rural villages in the 1970s, an outflow that persists to this day. At this point, the scholarly attention to Philippine peasants was informed by the so-called agrarian transition or the erosion of the traditional political economy of the peasant village as it is being penetrated by capitalist relations of production (Kelly). The pressure of migrating felt by the peasantry has historical roots, mainly stemming from the failure of genuine agrarian reform to effect comprehensive and equitable rural development. Administrations from the time of Manuel Quezon to Diosdado Macapagal imposed band-aid solutions, which often involved internal migrations (i.e., homestead programs in “pioneer settlement areas,” such as in Mindanao), to quell peasant unrest. These safety valves had been exhausted by the time of Ferdinand Marcos, who needed to find a stopgap measure beyond the confines of the nation-state.² Marcos’s promotion of overseas contract work, deemed as the beginning of the OFW phenomenon, was thus intimately linked to decades of rural underdevelopment and state failure in democratizing the agrarian economy, accentuated by tectonic shifts in the international political economy and the geographical distribution of capital (e.g., the oil shocks, the decline of the welfare state, etc.), which also sets the demand for cheap sources of labor. Ironically, one of the effects of OFW remittances on migrant-sending rural areas is the emergence of an “inflated land market that creates pressure for land use conversion” (Kelly 490), a most convenient loophole for landlords to evade agrarian reform.

Ethnographic research in migration studies has also revealed the connection between transnational migration from rural villages and the agrarian transition. Cynthia Bautista was one of the first to uncover this link in her study of agrarian differentiation in the village of Santa Lucia, Sta. Ana, Pampanga. She analyzed the impact of wage-labor opportunities in the Middle East on the changes in land distribution and economic diversification in a locality where farm-based income was no longer the primary source of wealth. Though the destination and demography of migrant workers shifted in the 1990s toward female OFWs obtaining employment in the developed countries of East Asia, the rural and underdeveloped character of migrant-sending communities remained. As Nobuhiko Fuwa and James N. Anderson conclude in their study of female OFWs in Japan from Sisy, Pangasinan, most of the workers’ fathers were either tenant farmers or marginally employed. A more recent work, Filomeno V. Aguilar’s *Maalwang Buhay*, describes the impact of transnational migration on the socioeconomic profile of a rural barangay in Batangas: from a cash-strapped peasant economy in the 1950s, the community had completely lost its rice production activities by the 1990s.

The abovementioned works form just a fraction of a wide-ranging literature on transnational migration originating from rural villages. Regional perspectives are

even available, such as in the works of Philip F. Kelly. In particular Kelly reminds us that migration has a profound effect on the political economy of migrant-sending agrarian villages and on the processes of rural change. Aguilar points to transnational agrarian class relations, specifically how transnational migration tends to “worsen village inequality” in the “homeland” (“Global Migrations”).

The literature on peasant-migrants also shows how transnational migration has been a reality for Filipino peasants at a much earlier stage, even as far back as Bulosan’s time. While San Juan contends that due to the colonial relationship between their places of origin and destination, Bulosan and his fellow workers in the US West Coast were “not immigrants in the conventional sense, nor settlers” (*History* 62), such a narrow, technical definition of migration might occlude the analytic significance of both the peasants’ experience of being uprooted and their similarities with fellow Asian groups in the US mainland. For as Mae M. Ngai shows us, racial violence directed toward Filipino workers only highlighted both their difference in a foreign land and their shared subordinate status alongside Chinese and Japanese migrant workers. If Filipino workers were fundamentally different from other “alien” ethnic groups, how do we then understand the emergence of interethnic solidarities, such as those between Filipinos and Japanese in 1920s Hawai’i, as related by Yen Le Espiritu?

This last point is linked to another insight from the literature on migrant studies, the impact of transnationalism on the migrant peasants’ own conceptualization of their class position (“The Filipino Peasant Imagination”). This insight allows us to gain a greater appreciation of San Juan’s characterization of Bulosan in *CBICS*. For instance, the transformative power of migration is seen in how San Juan dissects the “pathos of the uprooted Filipino worker in America during the Depression” (47) and juxtaposes it with childhood memories of the idyllic life in the countryside. Through *CBICS*, we hear Bulosan declaring his aim “to work harder toward a united mankind and one world” as a result of his experience in seeing the “slums and kitchens of California, out of the fear and hatred, the terror and hunger, the utter loneliness and death, I came out alive spiritually and intellectually!” (48). While San Juan makes it clear that Bulosan’s imagination of the class struggle began “at home,” one cannot discount how migration sharpened that imagination.

The alterity inherent in transnational migration gave Bulosan and many other peasant-migrants the gift of comparison, to take a page from the work of Benedict Anderson. The ilustrados of the late nineteenth century Anderson talked about were of course different from the peasant-migrants of the mid-twentieth century, but important similarities were also evident. Compared with the ilustrado’s elite, or at least middle-class, background, Bulosan’s fellow migrants were of peasant origin. The lowly socioeconomic profile of Bulosan’s cohorts in the US was emphasized

by the fact that before the 1920s practically all Filipino immigrants in the US were students, “fountain-pen boys” (McWilliams 234), who made a good impression in the host country because of their education and elite upbringing (Melendy). They were represented by the likes of Camilo Osias and Carlos P. Romulo (Espiritu), pensionados who would eventually find themselves holding the reins of power in the prewar and postwar Philippine state. From the 1920s to 1935, most of the Filipinos who came to the West Coast were of lower-class origin: predominantly young men without formal education, unskilled, practically illiterate in English or Spanish. But similar to the experiences of ilustrados, the social conditions the migrants found themselves in helped shape a collective identity. Filipinos in the US often lived in groups to save on rent; outside their domiciles they often congregated in the few establishments that openly catered to Filipinos. Collective ownership of consumer items among them was common, from clothes to cars to musical instruments. Vices, especially prostitution and gambling, added to their social cohesion (McWilliams). Just like the expatriate Rizal and del Pilar before them, these peasant-migrants forged their solidarity and imagined the Pinoy community.

Indeed, the act of comparison shocked the ilustrado and the peasant-migrant because it exposed the metropole’s failure to meet the expectations of the uprooted colonized. Bulosan’s writings, both in his correspondence and in his fiction, evoke the same feeling of disenchantment. The shattering of the exiled Filipinos’ erstwhile beliefs and dreams about the US (Bulosan, “The Sound of Falling Light”) is mirrored in San Juan’s choice of quotes from Bulosan’s “My cousin Vicente’s homecoming” in *CBICS*. In that story, the Father praises Vicente, “It’s wise to use what you have seen in America,” to which Vicente replies: “I haven’t seen much in America, I was told that there was democracy everywhere, but I was tired of too much dishwashing” (43). However, whereas the ilustrados’ shock resulted in their eventual imagination of the distinctly upper- and middle-class Philippine nation, for Bulosan and his compatriots, theirs led to a radically different synthesis. This synthesis involved their appropriation of America as their own and, more importantly, the forging of a distinctly transnational, working-class identity.³ Jeffrey Cabusao reminds us that the flow of the narrative from *America is in the Heart* to *The Cry and the Dedication* “can be read as Bulosan’s imaginative theorization of collective Filipino subjectivity that is only possible by grasping the interconnectedness of complex class struggles in the Philippines and the United States” (134).

THE QUESTION OF REVOLUTION

The end of the Second World War only hardened Bulosan's anti-imperialist stance alongside his multiracial and class-specific solidarities. As San Juan notes, the "Cold War and McCarthyism extinguished Bulosan's hope" (*After Postcolonialism* 28). The outbreak of hostilities between the Huks and the US-supported Philippine government gave birth to Bulosan, the revolutionary.

The physical distance separating Bulosan from his homeland was never a hindrance to his involvement in the ongoing class struggle in the Philippines. Bulosan's commitment was unquestionable, as evident in his literary works that portrayed the lives of Huk guerillas fighting the Philippine government and his actual links with progressives such as Amado V. Hernandez (San Juan, "Excavating the Bulosan Ruins"). Caroline Hau analyzes *The Cry and the Dedication*, a story about the lives of seven Huk fighters, not merely as Bulosan's "sophisticated theorizing of the 'unfinished' revolution" (216) but more importantly as a call for a "democratized notion of a praxis" (242).

It is in light of these points—the urgency of theorizing an unfinished revolution and democratizing praxis—that one observes how much San Juan's life-long scholarly engagement with Bulosan has mirrored the latter's career. San Juan's sustained interest in studying Bulosan was due to the revolutionary potential that he found in the peasant-migrant's writings, a potential that had important political implications for the unfinished revolution that he was also observing and involved in "from a distance." From *CBICS* up to present, San Juan's partisan scholarship in favor of a democratic struggle against imperialism and its local agents in the Philippines is no secret. Despite being based in the US, San Juan remains consistent in his anti-imperialist politics even as he continues to dig deeper into the more personal side of Bulosan. In fact, his most recent article about Bulosan connects newfound details about the latter's more intimate side with the ongoing US war on terror (San Juan, "Excavating the Bulosan Ruins").

Ironically, Bulosan's canonization, which has been greatly influenced by his revolutionary message, also has the potential of diluting his radicalism. The literary canonization of Bulosan unfortunately entails the attendant act of locating its position within the literary terrain. The tagging of Bulosan's works as Filipino-American literature is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it elevates a segment of Asian American literature that had been neglected for practically the entire twentieth century. Up until recently, colonial-era questions of authenticity and representation in this genre had been hounding writers and critics alike. On the other hand, the question of defining Bulosan and Filipino-American literature also ran the risk of essentializing "Filipino America" as a concept—as

well as Filipino-American studies as a variant of ethnic studies in the US—and of leading toward sectarianism (San Juan, “Filipino Writing in the United States”). *CBICS* avoids this dilemma by foregrounding class as the principal analytic tool. The double-edged character of Bulosan’s canonization is also evident in his role in the emergence of “Filipino diaspora” as a theoretical frame to understand the transnational social phenomenon of Filipinos migrating to different parts of the globe. San Juan is critical of its suppositions and implications and is especially concerned with the inconsistencies of the diaspora, as a corpus of literature and an actual community, as it oscillates between anti-imperialist action and fitting in mainstream US society (“The Filipino Diaspora”). Nonetheless, San Juan remains optimistic because contemporary Filipino Americans “have begun to articulate a unique dissident sensibility based not on nostalgia, nativism, or ethnocentrism but on the long durable revolutionary tradition of the Filipino masses and the emancipatory projects of grassroots movements in the Philippines” (“Filipinos in the United States” 124). For many, if not all, of these progressive Filipino Americans, Bulosan serves as a source of inspiration. Like Bulosan, writing for this new generation of Filipino-Americans “becomes a mediation between the negated past of colonial dependency and a future ‘America’ where people of color exercise their right of self-determination and socialist justice prevails” (San Juan, “Filipino Writing in the United States” 143).

To conclude, the publication of San Juan’s *CBICS* in the 1970s was part of a wider scholarly trend that foregrounded the historical significance of peasants. Competing schools of thought reveal the academic and political importance of understanding peasant consciousness. However, as the scholarly community moved away from the question of the revolutionary peasant in the 1990s, migration studies and its ethnographic methods became heavily integrated into academic research on the peasantry. Nonetheless, the historical roots of transnational migration and the implications on class dynamics that have been uncovered by this new literature contribute to a greater understanding of *CBICS* and Bulosan’s legacy as a peasant-migrant intellectual. This is not to assert that *CBICS* was a bridge between the peasant studies of the 1970s and 1980s and the more recent migration studies. What this paper aims to contribute is a new view of Bulosan and *CBICS*, that, despite (or perhaps, because of) the historiographical shift of focus from rural localities to transnational mobilities, *CBICS* remains relevant because of the salience of Bulosan’s migrant character. A published work’s sustained significance, or even its inclusion in the canon, is not enough to ensure the realization of its project. What historians and critics at home and in the “diaspora” therefore need to do is to transform the historical analysis of Bulosan into a revolutionary practice.

Notes

1. Before the mid-1990s, OFWs were referred to in popular media as overseas contract workers (OCWs).
2. Of course, these land resettlement programs led to conflicts in the places of resettlement. In the case of Mindanao, such government policies led to resentment among dispossessed Muslims. It is thus not surprising that the Moro insurgency erupted during the time of Marcos.
3. This, despite the fact that their supposed working-class compatriots from the American Federation of Labor showed their nativist prejudice against Filipinos in the US West Coast by using racist discourse to aid the plan of Filipino exclusion. Ironically, as pointed out by Fivar (32), “While charges of anti-union sentiments leveled against Chinese and Japanese have some merit, the charge was incorrect for the Filipino. On the contrary, they tried to ‘hold the line’ against wage reductions in agriculture and responded favorably to unionization drives.”

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