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Pilipino Paradox: Carlos Bulosan's Vision of Identity in *America is in the Heart*

Despite having gained their independence from the United States following the end of World War II, Filipinos still suffer from a crisis of cultural identity due to nearly 500 years of imperialist rule. Because of this crisis, Filipinos have often been marginalized in the annals of history unlike some of their Asian counterparts. But through this crisis of identity, some Filipinos transcended the racial boundaries of the time and instead created a very universal and human identity, even amidst the harsh reality of imperialism. One such person was Carlos Bulosan, who became one of the most prolific Filipino writers of his time despite a limited education.

Born on the Philippine island of Luzon in 1913, Bulosan immigrated to the United States when he was only 17 years old. In 1946 (coincidentally the same year in which the Philippines was granted its independence from the United States) he published what is arguably his most famous work: *America is in the Heart*, a "semi-autobiographical" novel that follows the experiences of a young man named Allos from his childhood in the 1920s to the beginning of the Second World War in 1941. However, the novel is rife with inconsistencies, dichotomies, and paradoxes. But out of these paradoxes, Bulosan creates a new sense of self-perception that is neither Filipino, American, or Filipino-American, instead arguing that being "American" implies certain human (rather than ethnic) traits.

Critical analyses regarding Bulosan and his writings (particularly those written by Epifanio San Juan, Jr.) have often been framed within the context of a Filipino diaspora, which at

its core means that Filipinos, though dispersed throughout the world, share a deep connection with their homeland. Other scholars such as Rocío G. Davis argue for the effects of this diaspora on both Filipino and Filipino-American literature. However, both scholars criticize the novel for its inconsistency, with San Juan arguing that it is partially the result of American imperialism in the Philippines. While both scholars are right in assuming that the Filipino diaspora is instrumental in the creation of both Filipino-American literature and Filipino-American identity, they fail to acknowledge that Bulosan's inconsistency in *America* is not necessarily a fault but rather a strength.

America is in the Heart is often described as a "semi-autobiographical" novel in the sense that it "reflects the collective life experience of thousands of Filipino immigrants who were attracted to" the United States "by its legendary promises of a better life" (Bulosan, vii). However, to provide exposition and narrative for Allos's character, Bulosan often drew inspiration from his own life. For example, like Bulosan, Allos is born to a family of Filipino peasant farmers. As one of the younger siblings, Allos's parents cannot afford to send him to school, and instead put him to work in the fields, planting crops and selling whatever produce he can in the local markets. When the family loses its land due to a poor crop yield, Allos is forced to go to America in the hope of finding better opportunities for employment, and in doing so becomes a member of the *manong* generation, a term used by historians to describe the first major wave of Filipino immigration to the United States following the country's annexation of the Philippines. Upon their arrival in America, most members of the *manong* generation found work in the fields, and consequently had to travel throughout the Western United States from season to season as migrant farm workers. After Allos's arrival, however, one cannot differentiate between the fictional and autobiographical parts of Bulosan's narrative. (In this

case, the term “fictional” is used in the sense that some events may not have affected Bulosan personally.) Interestingly, none of the scholarship regarding *America is in the Heart* bears any indication as to which events are autobiographical and which are not. The lack of scholarly argument suggests that the novel is in fact a reflection of “the collective life experience of...Filipino immigrants” to the United States (vii). As a result, the novel has garnered acclaim as what E. San Juan calls “the only extant epic chronicle of Filipino migrant workers in the United States’ (San Juan, 50). By speaking on behalf of the *manong* generation, and arguably Filipinos in general, Bulosan’s quest for self-identity becomes much more nuanced as it is elevated to a quest for collective identity. In doing so, Bulosan makes the first step in creating his vision of “America,” a place founded upon commonalities instead of socially-constructed differences.

Despite being a depiction of a so-called “collective life experience,” *America is in the Heart* is written from the perspective of a first-person narrator. By compiling the individual experiences of the *manong* generation into one person (i.e. Allos), Bulosan in effect creates a composite of the “every-man” protagonist, which has been a staple of American culture due to its emphasis on individualism. Through his depiction of a Filipino in a quintessentially American archetype, Bulosan repairs the disparity that exists between Filipino immigrants and their white American counterparts, albeit paradoxically by using a trope that is associated with America. In his essay titled *Have Come, Are Here: Reading Filipino/a American Literature*, scholar Rocío G. Davis attributes this phenomenon to the unique sense of connection a Filipino-American (or rather a Filipino immigrant to America) has with both America and the Philippines, as “the ‘American’ cannot forget its imperial history with the ‘Filipino,’ otherwise, the yoking of ‘Filipino’ and ‘American’ produces not an ethnic immigrant who casts off the Old World, but

etymological dissonance” (Davis, 11). Due to the extent of American imperialism in the Philippines, both countries are forever intertwined in the lives of Filipinos, particularly with regards to language. As one of the most fundamental aspects of culture, language is crucial in shaping new identities.

But before a new identity can be created, the old one must first be broken down. The American government in the Philippines accomplished this using the most unlikely too: education. At the end of the 19th century, American foreign policy shifted dramatically as the nation expanded its reach around the world, acquiring territories like Alaska, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, Guam and the Philippine Islands. To gain popular support for the cause of imperialism, the American government argued that the country had a moral obligation to “civilize” these newly-acquired nations through education in a concept known as benevolent assimilation. However, education came at a price, as young Allos discovers during an unexpected visit from Macario, his eldest brother and the only family member attending school. As his brother and father approach and greet each other, Allos notes how they “shook hands affectionately, which was uncommon because ordinarily Macario would have kissed my father’s hand; but he was being educated in the American way” (Bulosan, 20). In controlling such a fundamental institution as education, the United States influenced generations of indigenous Filipinos, resulting in the subtle subversion of local traditions. In the years following the Spanish-American War, some of the Filipino elite, known as *pensionados*, were permitted to travel to the United States and attend American universities. Upon the completion of their degrees, these students returned to the United States, bringing back the values that they learned in America with them. Some *pensionados* worked in the field of education upon their return, where they served as teachers and administrators. As a result, America exported its values abroad efficiently and effectively, propagating them to the far

reaches of the Philippines. But even more alarming, as the Filipino scholar Faye C. Caronan notes, is the fact that the “education systems” established in the Philippines following the Spanish-American War “functioned as technologies of forgetting by reproducing a historical narrative that elided the violence of and resistance to the US conquest of these colonized islands’ (Caronan, 338). Under the guise of benevolent assimilation, the United States re-invented Filipino national identity in such a way that instead of adhering to their traditional values, Filipinos were defined by their education “in the American way,” thus facilitating the loss of Filipino identity and the search for another.

The effects of “the American way” of education are evident throughout Bulosan’s novel. For example, *America is in the Heart* is written in English, save for a few words in Tagalog (the official language of the Philippines) that Bulosan included in addition to their English equivalents. The fact that Bulosan still includes Tagalog words in his writing exemplifies his connection with both countries and the opposite of Davis’s “etymological dissonance” (Davis, 11). Davis goes on to say that “[t]he American colonial legacy” is responsible for “the critical link between writing in English in the Philippines and Filipino/a American literature, and positions Filipino/a American writers into a wider global category” (6). By choosing to write in English rather than Tagalog, the original language that he has been raised to speak, Bulosan seemingly rejects his Filipino identity, however, one must also consider Bulosan’s intended audience. Because it is a novel that gives a voice to both the good and bad experiences that Filipino immigrants had in America, and is therefore an attempt to raise awareness about the issue, Bulosan must have written *America is in the Heart* as a plea to the American public at large. Interestingly, the Tagalog words that he includes are only mentioned in the first part of the novel, which follows Allos’s early life in the Philippines. In doing so, Bulosan’s protagonist

appears to be treating his life in the Philippines as separate from his later life in America. But by establishing this dichotomy between the two worlds to which he belongs, Bulosan's protagonist acknowledges that he belongs to both America and the Philippines, effectively placing him in a borderland, which is arguably the "wider global category" that Davis refers to.

The borderland in which Allos and the other members of the *manong* generation live is most evident in the narrative structure of the novel, which seems to be episodic in the sense that each chapter often details where Allos goes and what he does on a certain day. This makes the novel appear as if it was written in the format of a diary, though this is not at all true. In addition, the novel repeatedly makes clear that Allos does not remain in one place for so long. For example, in one chapter he may be escaping a mob of whites in San Jose, while in the next he may be attempting to organize workers in Alaska's fish canneries. This motif of migration, though factual in the sense that Allos is a migrant worker, also serves the stylistic purpose of emphasizing the unique place that he and other Filipinos occupy as members of a borderland. Because they cannot settle down in one place for too long, either due to the change in the seasons or the discrimination that they suffer at the hands of white American society, Bulosan's protagonist and other Filipinos have difficulty in finding the same sense of community, acceptance, and identity that they had found in the Philippines and supposedly in the American mission of benevolent assimilation. The unique categorization of Filipinos is supported even in the historical record. As Epifanio San Juan, Jr. writes in *From Exile to Diaspora*, "Filipinos in the thirties were officially designated 'nationals,' wards under the U.S. 'tutelage.' They were neither aliens nor eligible for citizenship because they were neither Caucasian nor Negro" (San Juan, 27). In the legislation that followed, beginning with the Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1934, Filipinos were officially recognized as aliens, and would remain so until the end of the Second

World War, when some Filipino soldiers were granted citizenship status in return for the valor and support that they gave to American soldiers. One could argue, then, that Bulosan's motif of constant migration reflects the many official classifications that the United States had given the Filipino people, or rather the indecision that the country had in classifying Filipinos. In doing so, readers can better understand the confusion that Filipinos must have felt in their quest for acceptance and identity under the policies of American imperialism. This confusion drive Filipinos like Allos and Bulosan into the borderland, and it is in this borderland that Allos eventually creates the unique identity which he defines as America.

One must also consider the historical effect of the Great Depression, which is at its worst at the time of Allos's arrival in the United States. As Juanita Tamayo Lott notes in her work titled *Common Destiny*, the Depression "challenged all Americans as distinctions and inequalities between citizens and aliens hardened. More and more, Filipino-U.S. nationals...were targeted as competition for white labor and were accused of taking jobs from white men" (Lott, 20). At the time, if white workers organized a strike, minorities could be used as a source of alternative labor since they were willing to work for lower wages. This led to increased resentment against Filipinos and other minorities, which eventually evolved into outright racial discrimination. What was once an economic dispute had now become a social one. Social discrimination against Filipinos soon manifested itself in the form of anti-miscegenation laws, which prevented Filipinos from marrying white Americans. Based on the imbalanced ratio of male to female Filipino immigrants (the *manong* generation was composed mostly of young Filipino men), these laws would remain in effect until the late 1940s, when they were declared unconstitutional. The institution of anti-miscegenation laws illustrates the paradoxical effect of U.S. imperialism in the sense that while Filipinos were being educated in "the American way" of

equality at home, they faced the complete opposite upon their arrival in the United States. The harsh reality of life in America left many Filipinos disillusioned with the country that was supposed to care for them, contributing to the crisis of identity that Bulosan attempts to solve in his novel.

Some Filipinos reacted to the paradox of American imperialism in very different ways, as Bulosan illustrates in the dichotomy between Allos and Amado, one of Allos's older brothers, during their first meeting in America. Mistaking his younger brother for a random Filipino, Amado initially tries to rob Allos. In justifying his criminal existence, Amado claims that he "had a good job for some time, but the depression came. I had to do something. I had to live" (Bulosan 124). The effects of the Depression notwithstanding, Amado is so disillusioned by the discrimination that he faces that he must turn to thievery to "live" in America. To make matters worse, he appears to be satisfied with the life that he leads, indicating his cynicism toward American imperialism and its policy of benevolent assimilation. Through the dichotomy of Allos and Amado, Bulosan depicts two different versions of Filipino-American identity, with Amado representing the disillusioned and Allos representing the more hopeful members of the Filipino immigrant population.

In understanding the hope for America that Bulosan expresses through Allos, one can also understand his definition of Filipino-American identity in the embodiment of "America." If one follows the development of Allos's character over the course of the novel, he or she will notice two dramatic shifts, one of which occurs after his arrival in the United States. While having lunch, Allos is accosted by two police officers and subsequently spends the evening in the local jail. Following his release, Bulosan writes of the anger Allos feels, and his desire to fight back against anyone who dares to confront him. The second shift occurs after he meets Eileen

Odell, “a woman who was undeniably the *America* I had wanted to find in those frantic days of fear and flight, in those acute hours of hunger and loneliness. This *America* was human, good, and real” (235). Through the metaphor embodied by Eileen Odell, the reader can understand Bulosan’s vision for America and consequently his vision of identity. Instead of classifying Eileen by her ethnicity, Allos simply refers to her as “human.” By extension, then, Bulosan must be referring to America in a similarly neutral fashion. Looking beyond the boundaries posed by ethnicity, which in themselves are merely constructs of imperialism, Bulosan creates a new and unique identity to which he aspires to. Scholars like San Juan argue against Bulosan’s stance, claiming that “[t]he Filipino dream of independence fades into the American dream of equality.’ Suspended in a metonymy of dreams...the Filipino cannot possess any identity worth writing about” (San Juan, 63). The flaw in San Juan’s logic lies in the dichotomy which he arbitrarily establishes, thus pitting the Filipino against the American. While Bulosan does relate “the Filipino dream of independence” and “the American dream of equality,” the former does not “fade” into the latter, as Bulosan is able to bridge the gap between the two ethnicities, to the point that they are “human” and not diametric opposites of each other. Scholar Susan Evangelista elaborates further, stating that “Bulosan viewed his experiences through a framework provided him by his colonial education and the general level of colonial mentality prevalent among the less politically sophisticated in the Philippines of the American period. He never really got over the feeling that the American *ideal* (equality, justice, and a certain degree of prosperity for all) was somehow *there*, simply waiting to be realized” (Evangelista, 38). This also is not true, as evident at the end of the novel, in which Allos realizes “that no man...could destroy my faith in America again. It was something that grew out of the sacrifices and loneliness of my friends, of my brothers in America and my family in the Philippines – something that grew out of our desire

to know America, and to become a part of her great tradition, and to contribute something toward her final fulfillment” (326-327). In expressing his hope for America and arguably expanding on his definition of what America is, Allos acknowledges not only the people that affected his life following his arrival in the United States, but also the trials and tribulations of the people he has left behind in the Philippines. In doing so, he hopes not necessarily for Evangelista’s “American” ideal, but rather for an ideal that is much more universal.

Despite being one of the most acclaimed works of Filipino-American literature, Carlos Bulosan’s novel *America is in the Heart* contains many instances of inconsistency, dichotomy and paradox. But in including these things, Bulosan undermines the system of cultural re-education that was established under American imperialism and its policy of benevolent assimilation. In the process, Bulosan redefines his self-perception, transcending ethnicity to create a new and unique identity. Instances of this redefinition are present throughout the novel, especially in the thoughts and observations of Allos, Bulosan’s first person narrator and protagonist. By redefining America in his own image, and founding his definition on such universal qualities as justice for all, Bulosan effectively uses the values championed by American imperialists against them, making *America is in the Heart* one of the more nuanced examples of resistance to empire through literature.

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