

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

Carlos Bulosan and the Act of Writing

Oscar V. Campomanes and Todd S. Gernes

Philippine Studies vol. 40, no. 1 (1992): 68–82

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>
Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

Carlos Bulosan and the Act of Writing

Oscar V. Campomanes

Todd S. Gernes



Recapturing distant childhood as far back as I can trust my memory, trying to understand my act of *reading* the particular world in which I moved, was absolutely significant for me. Surrendering myself to this effort, I re-created and relived in the text I was writing the experiences I lived at a time when I did not yet read words.

—Paulo Freire (1987, 30)

In a short story which can be regarded as the sketch for *America Is in the Heart*, Bulosan's scheme for writing is most explicit. Curiously titled "The Story of a Letter" (San Juan 1983, 39-44) this piece is rendered in clipped, telegraphic tones and traces the mysterious trajectories of a letter which engages the narrator (presumably a fictional transfiguration of Bulosan) over geographical space and historical time.

The letter—written to the narrator's peasant-father by Berto, the first of his sons to venture to America—is the axis around which the story spins. Cast in English, a language foreign to the father and his narrator-son, this letter remains unread until the narrator himself has gone to America in an unconscious search for a way to make sense of the letter's meaning. By the end of the story, the content of the letter—clipped and telegraphic as the story itself—is revealed, implicating the entire history of the narrator, his family (recognizably Bulosan's), and of the many Filipinos whose lives coursed through the trans-Pacific traffic between America and the Philippines.

The traffic ruptured family ties and involved the transplantation and relocation of thousands of young peasant sons into an often hostile and alienating environment. The story illustrates how the resulting cultural fragmentation doubles for them: compelled by their circumstances to learn the rudiments of a language that is not theirs, the sons attempt in vain to bridge the chasm between them and their origins. In the story, Berto writes a halting letter to a father who cannot read it, in a language that is alien to them both

and whose brevity of form is the apt analogue to the circumscription of their lives:

Dear father . . . : America is a great country. Tall buildings. Wide good land. The people walking. But I feel sad. I am writing to you this hour of my sentimental. Your son. —Berto (San Juan 1983, 44).

The trans-Pacific traffic, by implication, continues, but it ends with the father whose only possible response is to look for an intermediary, a person versed in the language in which the letter is coded. The search for potential translators is futile. The translators' authority is culturally constructed and historically ascribed, and the father's search draws together the entire history of the subjection of the Philippines, first to Spanish and then American colonial rule. He initially approaches the village priest, and then hopes in vain for the return from school of his son, Nicasio, "the only one in [the] family who could read and write," and then finally enlists a "tubercular young man" who materialized in the narrator's life "to start a school for the children (San Juan 1983, 50)."

The village priest dies of "overeating at a wedding" before he can be of any help (Campomanes and Gernes 1988, 39). Nicasio does not come home from school and leaves for America without saying goodbye, and the village schoolteacher, to the father's disappointment, "knew only Spanish and [the] dialect" (Campomanes and Gernes 1988, 41). Between the search for the first possible translator and the last, three years elapse and the letter becomes figuratively entombed, a mute artifact. The passing seasons that the story marks with such urgency fosters this momentary burial of the letter. In the first instance, the father "looked at [the letter] for a long time, as though he were committing it to memory," and "locked it in a small box" (Campomanes and Gernes, 39). Unsuccessful again in his effort to decode the letter in the last instance, he encourages his narrator-son "to learn English so that [he] would be able to read it to him" (San Juan 1983, 41). The fateful three years allow unfortunate developments to intervene in the life of the narrator and the story of the letter: "Then [our] farm was taken away from us" (San Juan 1983, 41).

From this array of "failed interpreters" alone, Bulosan shows his acute sense of Philippine history and social change. The village priest suggests the Spanish past of enforced ignorance when the all-powerful friar ruled over the material and spiritual lives of Filipino vil-

lagers. Nicasio's foray into education reflects the public school system which the American colonialists put in place to supersede the Spanish legacy of ignorance. The third man, a conjunction of these historical tendencies (Spanish/American) "sets up a school for children" only to teach a language that was never made accessible to Filipinos, representing a dying strain within the historical process.

Meanwhile, the narrator finds himself posing in the nude for American tourists in Baguio and then for an American woman painter in Manila. He eventually "saved a little money [and] took a boat for America" (Campomanes and Gernes 1988, 42). The narrator's consequent story of his travails in America represents the last three parts of *America is in the Heart* in uncanny microcosm. Interestingly, the sojourn in Baguio—which in the book precedes Bulosan's accounts of the American phase of his and his countrymen's plight—is described in the story with a different twist. The American woman who paints him in the nude hails from another state, Texas, and takes him to Manila where her painting of him resumes. The woman who gives him shelter in the book, however, is nowhere to be seen in the story. Thus the story more clearly emphasizes, in a symbolic yet transitional way, the "stripping" which the Filipino undergoes in America as he faces vicissitudes marked by racial exclusion and humiliation. The Pinoy's sale of his labor and dignity is noted by the narrator: "I had never dreamed of making my living by exposing my body to a stranger. That experience made me roar with laughter for many years" (San Juan 1983, 42). The objectification that results from "being painted in the nude" is a visual metaphor for the definition of Pinoys as racial and historical other, exploitable and stripped of the habiliments of dignity.

The story's narrator, in a line of development which resembles that in the book, is hospitalized for some undescribed illness. Here, it is a nurse, not the Odell sisters of the book, who appears to teach him the language and assists his transformation into a writer. The autobiographical lines, while hazy here, are nevertheless unmistakable: Bulosan indeed used two years of confinement for tuberculosis as his period of apprenticeship, reading and writing intensively until he felt confident enough to write in extended forms. The drama of finding his voice, self and vocation, in the story, in the book and in his life, is set before a backdrop of widespread racial exclusion and violence, strikes launched by Filipino plantation and cannery workers against the exploitative practices of their employers, and invigorated organizing. Bulosan, of course, involved himself in the

struggles of his compatriots, becoming a devoted union organizer and publicist.

After his first year of confinement, in the story, the narrator sends for the letter written by his brother Berto, hoping to translate it into the dialect, to decode it for the father and, finally himself. The letter reaches him, he translates it and sends it back, now sensible and accessible. The narrator does not hear from his father, is discharged from the hospital and resumes the life of rootless mobility that is the curse of the alienated Pinoy. At some point in his travels up and down the coast from and to Alaska, at a relentlessly faster clip than the ceaseless dislocation of the narrator in *America is in the Heart*, the narrator-son imagines and then realizes contact with his lost brothers. Toward the end of the story, he is reunited with his brother Nicasio who "had grown old and emaciated" (San Juan 1983, 43). In an unspoken moment of unity with a brother turned fellow voyager, he finds the translated letter returned to an address that no one could have known: "I had never lived in Delano before. I had never given my forwarding address to anybody. The letter was addressed to me at a hotel I had never seen before."

It was now ten years [the narrator recounts] since my brother Berto had written the letter to Father. It was eighteen years since he had run away from home. I stood in the center of the room and opened it. The note attached to it said that Father had died some years before. It was signed by the postmaster of my town.

I bent down and read the letter—the letter that had driven me away from the village and had sent me half way around the world— . . . I held the letter in my hand and, suddenly, I started to laugh—choking with tears at the mystery and wonder of it all. (San Juan 1983, 44)

The reply to Berto's letter then comes in the form of the narrator-son who found himself embarking for America, inevitably driven by the same historical imperatives which pushed his brothers to set out for the possibilities which America represented at the time. The narrator himself, and by implication, Bulosan, becomes figuratively translated so that he, in turn, can function as a translator, a cultural mediator and a spokesman for those rendered speechless by history. He becomes the link, alienated from home, but wrenched back to it by the mysterious return of the letter to an address that could not have been known to him and the postmaster: Delano, where he found his brother, where he "had never lived before," and "at a hotel

[he] had never seen before" (San Juan 1983, 44). Delano becomes in the story a symbolic intermediate ground. Historically, it was a place central to the experience of the rootless Pinoy worker.

The artifactual letter, excavated from the past and decoded, implies encoding powers. While bringing sad news with it—something is lost in the process of translation, the father who received it dies, and the brother who wrote it is only glimpsed once—it also becomes the narrator's medium for a great realization, a new communication, self-recovery. Traversing geographical (trans-Pacific) space and historical time, the letter confronts the narrator with the congealed expression of an entire history, the synapse between his own biography and those men in "hiring halls . . . waiting to be shipped to the canneries in Alaska." "The Story of a Letter" is history told in the aestheticized language of the oppressed: fragmentary but unifying, halting but lyrical in its own way (San Juan 1983, 43).

The mysterious letter which first reached the illiterate boy and his father floated in limbo like the uprooted brother who wrote it and like the uprooted son the boy would become. Finally it caught up with him, now a Pinoy and an able translator who could make sense of it, despite its mystery. The story of this letter—history—thus demands to be told, and so it is. At the same time, "The Story of a Letter" confronts the epistolary situation by collapsing the distance that is the precondition for such a state and that stands for a form of alienation and fragmentation. The story thus valorizes the letter-writing, the dialogue-at-a-distance, that is the natural response of those who are alienated and fragmented from each other and from themselves.

In *America is in the Heart*, the spoken dialogue emphasizes the fecundity of the oral peasant culture from which the Pinoy sprang. As the epistolary situation sets in, the dialogue-at-a-distance, the act of letter-writing becomes simultaneously the greatest impediment and the best means toward the Pinoy's recovery of himself, his history and his cultural integrity. Similarly, Bulosan's nonfictional but literary letters from America to his nephews were kept as artifacts, made to surface, and then rendered intelligible in a fashion which parallels the fictional letter's trajectories in the story. The short story, based on an historically specific epistolary exchange, reveals the dialogic quality of Bulosan's narrative strategy.

In *America is in the Heart*, Bulosan's fully extended work, this dialogism is internalized and becomes a more developed and sophis-

ticated aesthetic. As in the rest of his writing, Bulosan integrates his autobiography with the history of the oppression and struggle of Filipinos in America during, in Bulosan's words, those "swift and frightening years." Bulosan created a worker/writer/narrator so that he could realize a fictive union with his compatriots, frail in health as he was for most of his life and unable to be the itinerant worker in the book and in Philippine-American social history. Read as a "collective biography" of an oppressed minority, the book shows how Bulosan's alternative aesthetic dissolves the formal barrier between the writer and the work, and functions as a strategy for confronting the narrator's sense of cultural fragmentation and an alienating historical experience.

America is in the Heart

The case of the letter reader is really simple enough. Although by writing a letter you are somehow pretending the reader is present while you are writing, you cannot address him as you do in oral speech. You must fictionalize him, make him into a special construct.

—Walter Ong (1975, 19)

The fractured surface of *America is in the Heart* may be more fully appreciated if it is read as an epistolary and lyrical reorganization of the fragmentation that characterized Bulosan's experience in America. For Bulosan, the act of writing is, paradoxically, an act of violence for which "English is the best weapon," and an act of synthesis: "I sat at the bare table in the kitchen and began piecing together the mosaic of our lives in America. Full of loneliness and love, I began to write" (Bulosan 1986, 69, 289).

Letters are received and letters are written at crucial moments in *America is in the Heart*, at turning points in the young writer's life and career. News of his father's death comes in a letter, and this, according to Bulosan, "was the turning point of [his] life" (Bulosan 1986, 164). Perhaps more important in the context of fiction is Bulosan's recollection of his first attempt to write a letter, a personal act of expression and communication which characterizes his fiction and poetry, an act which takes on symbolic meaning in the course of *America is in the Heart*, and which marks yet another turning point in the fictional rendering of the artist's life:

I felt that it was the end of another period of life. I could see it in my reaction to the passing landscape, in my compassion for the workers in the fields. It was the end of a strange flight.

I bought a bottle of wine when I arrived in San Luis Obispo. I rented a room in a Japanese hotel and started a letter to my brother Macario, whose address had given to me by a friend. Then it came to me, like a revelation, that I could actually write understandable English. I was seized with happiness. I wrote slowly and boldly, drinking the wine when I stopped, laughing silently and crying. When the long letter was finished, a letter which was actually a story of my life, I jumped to my feet and shouted through my tears:

"They can't silence me any more! I'll tell the world what they have done to me! (Bulosan 1986, 180).

The act of writing for Bulosan is revelation, an expression of kinship and community, a gesture of autobiography, and an act of breaking silence, of bearing witness to the struggles not merely of the Filipinos but of all oppressed peoples in America striving for liberty, autonomy, wholeness, and self-worth. As the novel unfolds, the protagonist's act of writing becomes increasingly literary, but the epistolary form lingers and gives shape to both personal and artistic expression. Such consistency of form reflects Bulosan's beginnings as a writer, when he wrote letters to both imagined and actual readers to hone his craft (Feria 1960).

A crucial aspect of the book is that public and private modes of discourse are blurred with an intimacy and multivocality that echoes the extended dialog of the family letter. Bulosan himself points out that his act of writing had been from the beginning a sort of letter to the world, a private message universalized. For example, while in the hospital he writes letters to the mother of an illiterate boy from Arkansas, and from this experience he gains the notion that writing can be both a public and private act:

I started writing to an American mother in Arkansas. She had never heard of me, and I had never seen her, but her son was a common bond between us. I was writing to her what I had had in my mind and heart for years. . . . I mentioned places and names. I was not writing to an unknown mother any more. I was writing to my own mother plowing in the muddy fields of Mangusmana: it was the one letter I should have written before. I was telling her about America. Actually, I was writing to all the unhappy mothers whose sons left and did not return. There were years to remember, but they came and went away. I was telling them about those years. Then it was finished (Bulosan 1986, 147).

No matter what he writes and despite a variety of audiences, Bulosan's act of writing takes on the flavor of letters from America to his family in the Philippines.

As James Moffett points out, the epistolary situation emphasizes the relationship between the spoken and the written word, and a familiarity with this relationship is crucial to an understanding of audience, voice, punctuation, style and the various modes of discourse. In a sense, letter writing was Bulosan's literary apprenticeship, an opportunity to practice his craft with a familiar and safe audience in a form flexible enough to permit the major subjects of discourse but one which still emphasized the dialogic drama of communication (Moffett 1968, 41-42).

Letter writing in Bulosan's novel is the young artist's leitmotif, the theme that is most repeated in the book and which functions as the artist's introduction and apprenticeship into the world of belles-lettres. While writing letters to a young American woman, the young writer experiments with the "music of words," their "sounds and shapes":

When I became restless, I wrote to her. Every day the words poured out of my pen. I began to cultivate a taste for words, not so much their meanings as their sounds and shapes, so that afterward I tried to depend only on the music of words to express my ideas. This procedure, of course, was destructive to my grammar, but I can say that writing fumbling, vehement letters to Eileen was actually my course in English. What came after this apprenticeship—the structural presentation of ideas in pertinence to the composition and the anarchy between man's experience and ideals—was merely my formal search (Bulosan 1986, 235).

Letter writing represents for Bulosan the expressive, generative, playful aspect of writing, the initial production of images and ideas. Reading the work of other authors, however, such as Richard Wright, represents his "formal search" for aesthetic form, his probing of social, cultural and intellectual contexts, his sharpened structural perception of the realities of exploitation and oppression in America, and his musing over the scattered pieces of a shattered American dream.

This process of literary socialization, the internalization of texts relating to his particular and idiosyncratic interests, and the act of writing itself awaken social consciousness. The epistolarity of Bulosan's writing style allows him to vacillate between the roles of

spectator and participant. James Britton notes that, "As participants, our feeling will tend to be sparked off in action; as spectators we are able to savour their quality *as feeling*. As participants we are caught up in a kaleidoscope of emotions; as spectators we have these emotions in perspective" (Britton 1975, 81). Bulosan's creation of a worker/writer/narrator combined with his epistolary aesthetic can be viewed as a radical (socially committed) solution to the troubling, indeed tormenting, participant/spectator dichotomy, and the romantic dichotomy between art and everyday life. Bulosan's vacillation between the participant and spectator roles should be seen as part of a larger dialectic that includes the polarity between violence and communication (striking out and writing), transactional and poetic writing (the form letter and the poem), and personal and universal modes of discourse (letters to the Philippines and letters to the world). The decentering of his own subjectivity is a strategy for balancing intense social commitment with the demands of aesthetic form.

Writers who confront social reality, writers who come to terms with the structure of alienation, particularly attract Bulosan. Standing out among others, not surprisingly, is Richard Wright, whom he admired for his profound understanding of America and the dedication of his life's work to his people. As Bulosan notes early in the book, Wright's story of a budding writer's struggle against oppression, *Black Boy*, was paradigmatic, inspirational, and enabled him to gauge his own social and intellectual awakening:

I was fortunate to find work in a library and to be close to books. In later years I remembered this opportunity when I read that the American Negro writer, Richard Wright, had not been allowed to borrow books from the local library because of his color. I was beginning to understand what was going on around me, and the darkness that had covered my present life was lifting. I was emerging into sunlight and I was to know, a decade afterward in America, that this light was not too strong for eyes that had known only darkness and gloom (Bulosan 1986, 71).

The social context of writing and the politics of art are important to Bulosan, so it is important to specify the situation of the writer in America in the 1940s, paying particular attention to issues of race and class. In a brief but illuminating autobiographical piece, Bulosan again distinguishes Richard Wright from other writers of the day:

Hemingway was too preoccupied with himself, and consequently he wrote of himself and his frustrations. I was also disappointed with Faulkner. Why did he give form to decay? And Caldwell, Steinbeck—why did they write in costume? And Odets, why *only* middle class disintegration? Am I not an immigrant like Louis Adamic? Perhaps I could not understand America like Richard Wright, but I felt that I would be ineffectual if I did not return to my own people. I believed that my work would be more vital and useful if I dedicated it to the cause of my own people (Bulosan 1979, 117–18).

America is in the Heart was written just three years after *Native Son* was published (1940), and there are many affinities between the two texts. By implying that Wright's life and work sparked his own social and intellectual awakening, Bulosan acknowledges an artistic and spiritual debt, an acknowledgement that may be interpreted as an aesthetic footnote or reference to Wright's work. The first three parts of *America is in the Heart*, for example, resemble, in form, *Native Son's* tripartite structure (Fear, Flight, and Fate), but there are other important similarities and, of course, differences. Bigger Thomas becomes "estranged from the religion and folk culture of his race . . . [and tries] to react to and answer the call of the dominant civilization whose glitter came to him through the newspapers, magazines, radios, movies, and the mere imposing sight and sound of daily American life" (Wright 1966, xiii).

Wright analyzes the consequences of oppression and racial fear from the perspective of a young black man trapped in an enclosed, urban environment. Bulosan, who rearticulates Wright's ideas from the perspective of a young Filipino on the road in America, extends the critique offered in *Native Son* by shifting the social, historical, and geographical situation. Bulosan thus links the racism, class oppression, northern migration and urban decay experienced by black Americans with the racism, class oppression, trans-Pacific migration and American colonialism experienced by Filipinos, setting his story in the mythic (but now deflated) American West. Bulosan also gives his hero the gift of figurative language, a more rapidly unfolding consciousness, and the ability to express anger—something that Wright was unwilling to do. "I'll kill you white men!" cries Bulosan when he is fired from a job in a bakery for talking back to an insulting white man (Bulosan 1986, 163). And the outburst is liberating:

I had struck at the white world, at last; and I felt free. Was my complete freedom to be fought for violently? Was murder necessary? And hate? God forbid! My distrust of white men grew, and drove me blindly into the midst of my own people; together we hid cynically behind our mounting fears, hating the broad white universe at our door. A movement of the hand, and it was there—yet it could not be touched, could not be attained ever. I tried to find justification for my sudden rebellion—why it was so *sudden*, and black and hateful. Was it possible that, coming to America with certain illusions of equality, I had slowly succumbed to the hypnotic effects of racial fear? (Bulosan 1986, 163–64).

In *Native Son*, underlying tension and violence is the mainspring of the narrative from the novel's opening "Brrrrrrriiiiiinnng!" of Bigger's alarm clock, a tension and violence that becomes explicit at the Dostoyevskian climax of the first part of the book when Bigger succumbs to the hypnotic effects of racial fear and accidentally smothers a young white woman. In *America is in the Heart*, striking out and communicating are the conflicting impulses behind the act of writing, and Bulosan creates a dialectic between written expression and striking out, a dialectic that is resolved with the realization that writing is both a form of violent rebellion and liberating communication.

To put it another way, the act of writing for Bulosan is *inspired* by the impulse to strike out at the oppressor, as he makes clear toward the end of the novel: "I was intellectually stimulated again—and I wanted to discuss problems which had been bothering me. But when I came home to our apartment, sitting alone in the midst of drab walls and ugly furniture, I felt like striking at my invisible foe. Then I began to write" (Bulosan 1986, 305). Thus, the advice of Dalmacio, a houseboy of an American woman in Baguio, who gives Bulosan's narrator an early reading lesson, proves to be prophetic:

"You don't need money," Dalmacio said. "You could work on the boat. But English is the best weapon. I will teach you if you will do some work for me now and then"

He put a book in my hand and started reading to me (Bulosan 1986, 69).

English is a weapon for "striking out at an invisible foe." This foe, perhaps, is an oppressive ideology that threatens to strip minorities

and working people of their humanity and an oppressive society that fragments the folk culture and community experience of individuals within it.

Bulosan uses his English linguistic "weapon" to strike out at the dominant American culture, but also to connect himself to working people of all ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds and to reconstruct and encode the fragmented parts of his Filipino folk heritage. As Bulosan suggests, his act of writing is a process of personally recasting the ideology of a society that offers him only cultural fragmentation:

I was dejected and lost. I could not believe it: the gods of yesterday were falling to pieces. They were made of clay. I had to make my own gods, create my own symbols, and worship in my own fashion. Yes, this is what I would do, now that all of yesterday was dying (Bulosan 1986, 202).

In the process of creating his own symbols, Bulosan returns to the symbols of his past, but paradoxically recreates his peasant heritage in the language of an oppressive culture. However, by writing his novel in the language of letters, Bulosan chooses the people's form of expression, the common discourse.

Bulosan's intent is to reappropriate Philippine folklore and to incorporate it into an accessible narrative to guide the people's struggle for liberation. As he makes clear:

I discovered with amazement that Philippine folklore was uncollected, that native writers had not assimilated it into their writings. This discovery gave me an impetus to study the common roots of our folklore, and upon finding it in the tales and legends of the pagan Igorots in the mountains of Luzon, near my native province, I blazed with delight at this new treasure. Now I must live and integrate Philippine folklore in our struggle for liberty! (Bulosan 1986, 260).

Bulosan's novel, his letter to the world, blurs the boundaries between social, political, and aesthetic discourse, in an attempt to create a radically democratic literature for the Philippines and America.

Significantly, Bulosan entitles his first book of poetry *Letter From America* (1942). In one typical poem, the epistolary mode is actually announced by the persona, who fashions a poem-letter in response to news from home ("You write that in the Far East . . ."). The poem

in its entirety bridges the gaping distance between Bulosan and his imaginary reader and conquers the historical alienation that becomes the lot of the exiled:

You write that in the Far East where you are
They cut down the trees and leveled them to the ground
Where fire stood and laughed and screamed, where birds
Flocked to partake with the festival, but were silenced
By the barking of guns; and their story is the history
Of leaves when inviolate guerdons shake the trees.
You tell me that the mountains are tunneled, the hills
Dug out and thrown into the rivers, and the rivers
Are emptied; you tell me that the fields are planted
With camps, houses, buildings, and the garden where
We had gathered roses for the queen of spring
Is now a stable for horses, and ours is a sleeping
Quarters for soldiers.
You ask me why, and what should I tell you?

What could I say in words?
I sit here fingering actualities, thinking of what
Cities I have seen indistinguishably—like rain;
But could I answer your questions with these?
In any case you would not approve of pictures,
And this makes us one. For the city where
The streets scream for life, where men are hunting
Each other with burning eyes, mountains are made of sand,
Glass, paper from factories where death is calling;
For peace; hills are made of clothes, and trees
Are nothing but candies.
In these we are almost the same. And now that I look
Out of the window I see our America bleeding.
I do not know of any answer to tell you. (Bulosan 1942, 28)

As the exiled persona is apprised of changes that have taken place in his absence, he is quick to seize on the gesture of exchange and the images that the letter writers from both ends have traded. He establishes a commonality of situation—from an originally harmless exchange of letters—through the poem/letter and firmly anchors himself and both his imagined and actual readers within the matrix of their community as the oppressed, both back home and in America. In the process, the letter writer is endowed with the poet's powers, since the images of cultural metathesis and historical tran-

sition are ascribed to him and the poem-letter itself becomes the shared expression of the poet's agony and his reader's fate.

He recalls that "When the bound copies of my first book of poems, *Letter From America*, arrived, I felt like shouting to the world. How long ago had it been that I had drunk a bottle of wine because I had discovered that I could write English?" Bulosan refers to his first conscious act of writing, when he wrote a letter to his brother, "slowly and boldly, drinking the wine when [he] stopped, laughing silently and crying" (Bulosan 1986, 320, 180).

He repeatedly stresses his affinity with peasant culture, a culture that seems to defy the boundaries of the Philippine Islands. Peasants, tillers of the soil, can be found anywhere in America, and Bulosan connects his struggle with theirs:

When the fishing season in San Pedro was over, I left for a small agricultural town called Nipomo. I worked with a crew of pea pickers. I found a new release. The land had always been important to me. I felt my old peasant heritage returning with fresh nourishment. I knew that my future was linked with these tillers of the soil from whose common source I had sprung (Bulosan 1986, 311).

Bulosan finds spiritual nourishment in his peasant heritage, and the act of recreating that heritage in language is a way of nourishing others.

Conclusion

One gleans from Bulosan's writings an important message: that the writer should be first and foremost a writer of letters in a language that speaks to the common, working people. As he is going off to war, Macario says to Carlos, "I think this is really the meaning of life: the extension of little things into the future so that they might be useful to other people." Extending little things into the future also means extending them from one's originating past and community: "I will . . . make all of you live again in my words," and cultural heritage: "Now I must live and integrate Philippine folklore in our struggle for liberty!" Believing that his "inclinations are toward conspiracy," Bulosan nevertheless saw the need to exemplify his own life experience, making it useful and regenerative for his people and his readers. Although directed against oppression, his

act of writing bore the impulse to build intersocial and cross-cultural bridges of communication, meshing the personal and the social, his life story and the story of Pinoys, into a complex and enriching synthesis (Bulosan 1986, 323, 57, 260, 285).

Bibliography of Works Cited

- Britton, James, et al. 1975. *The development of writing abilities (11-18)*. London: MacMillan.
- Bulosan, Carlos. 1942. Letter from America. Prairie, Illinois: Decker.
- _____. 1979. My education. *Amerasia Journal* 6 (May).
- _____. 1986. *America is in the heart*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press.
- Campomanes, Oscar V. and Todd S. Gernes. 1988. Two letters from America: Carlos Bulosan and the act of writing. *Melus* 15, no. 3.
- Feria, Dolores S., ed. 1960. *Sound of falling light: letters in exile* (Bulosan letters). Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press.
- Freire, Paulo and Donaldo Macedo. 1987. *Literacy: Reading the word and the world*. Critical Studies in Education Series. South Hadley, Massachusetts: Bergin and Garney.
- Moffett, James. 1968. *Teaching the universe of discourse*. New York: Hongton Mifflin.
- Ong, Walter J. 1975. The writer's audience is always a fiction. *PMLA* 90 (January).
- San Juan, E., Jr., ed., ed. 1983. The story of a letter. *If you want to know what we are: a Carlos Bulosan reader*. Minneapolis: West End.
- Wright, Richard. 1966. How bigger was born. Introduction to *Native Son*. New York: Harper and Row.