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Carlos Bulosan and Third World Consciousness

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SUSAN EVANGELISTA

INTRODUCTION

Oscar Peñaranda is a young Visayan who immigrated to the United States as a child in the fifties. He has "made it" to a certain extent — he is a college professor in San Francisco — but in his poem *Lakai* he looks back into the history of his people, absorbing their historical experience and associating himself with it.¹ He chooses to identify himself not with all Filipinos, nor with all Visayans, but with the *Pinoys*: Filipinos (whether Ilocano or Visayan) who immigrated to the United States in the twenties and thirties, and who there lived out a history that was totally different from that of their countrymen who stayed behind.

And their countrymen by and large forgot them, and even now refuse to acknowledge the validity and uniqueness of their histor-

¹ From *Liwanag* (San Francisco: Liwanag Publications, Inc., 1975).

Lakai

Old men of my people
You who have seen all
the girlie shows
and smelled every whorehouse
in town

You who have slept
painful hours in piss-trickling
theatres downtown
in skid rows
and slimed every red pink silver
chum king salmon in
Alaska sweat in California fields of grapes
and all sorts of fruits
in dead heat of summer deserts

of loneliness
drank more water and blundered
hundreds of times
more than I have
ever done I am
young you see

Old men of my people
in whom we find no more excuses
for existence but age
the peaceful *tuba* of impotence
be yours and I take my hat off
bow my head in shame
for those who malign you

ical experience. They remain in the popular mind those who left home, seeking largely materialistic benefits in the land of the colonizers, thus divorcing themselves from the mainstream of Filipino history. But in fact they continued to function as Filipinos, albeit in a far-away land, and they created for themselves their own unique historical experience which was neither simply Filipino nor simply American, but a combination of the two, and one which circled back to influence both histories, sometimes in very crucial ways.

One may also argue that there is a continuity in the historical experience of Filipinos in America, from the early days of the depression when there were 30,000 Filipino migrant farm workers in California, finally loosely banded together in an all-Filipino union, until today when Filipinos and Mexicans still perform migrant labor and, together, dominate the United Farm Workers Union. In literature the continuity is clearer still, with the new Filipino-American writers looking straight back to the early Pinoys, specifically to Carlos Bulosan himself, both as a historical person who lived out the early stages of the tradition, and as a writer, the first writer to immortalize the *Lakai*, and the first articulator of Filipino-American history.

Filipino-American history is, then, a separate history, a minority history, which has been clearly articulated in a distinct literary tradition. And because this literature is based on a particular form of consciousness, the pattern of political, historical, and literary understanding of a viable ethnic group subjected to particular forms of exploitation, it is part of a growing body of literature which we call today third world writing.

THIRD WORLD CONSCIOUSNESS

The concept of third world consciousness dates back to 1961 when Frantz Fanon published *The Wretched of the Earth*, but the stirrings of this consciousness preceded the term, and go back, in fact, to 1917 to the October Revolution in Russia, for it was with this revolution that the third world came into being.² Before this time, the world was divided into two: the developed, imperialist

² See Dolores Feria, "Third World: The Literature of Refusal" (Third World Studies Program, The University of the Philippines).

countries, and the backward colonies and semi-colonies of these developed countries. After the revolution the division became tripartite, with the imperialist countries making up the first world, the socialist countries the second world, and the new-colonies (now independent but still economically tied to the imperialist countries) the third world. Later the concept was somewhat modified, until today it encompasses all the impoverished countries of the world, poor because of the on-going effects of the past colonial relationship, whether those countries are now under socialist regimes (China, Vietnam) or under military dictatorships (much of South America and Africa) or under "democratic" one-man rule (the Philippines). It is, then, the designation for that part of the world which is still struggling against the forces of imperialism and neo-colonialism.

Third world consciousness is, then, first of all, consciousness of nationalist identity vis-a-vis the colonizing power, coupled with understanding of the nature of exploitation to which the nationalist group has been subjected. It also involves engagement in a process of *praxis* through which the forces of oppression can be countered. This praxis is made up of the elements of active struggle and reflective thinking, and, often, writing, directed towards national liberation and the radical transformation of society. But despite the emphasis on nationalism, there is also a growing recognition of the oneness of the struggles of all oppressed nations and peoples: history both particularizes and generalizes, and while each struggle is unique, the forces of colonialism and imperialism are one in a very real sense.

Third world writing can be loosely characterized as "revolutionary realism,"³ differentiated from the forms of critical realism that characterized much of nineteenth and twentieth century western literature, which seems frequently to deal with sickness, decay, and the general pessimistic discontent of overdeveloped societies. Bulosan was interested in the critical realists in America — he read Dreiser, Anderson, Lewis, Faulkner, Hemingway, Caldwell, and Steinbeck. He saw that these writers recognized "the extent of the lie that corrupted the American dream," but they fell short of his expectations:

³ This particular term was used to describe third world writing by Lucila Hosillos in *An Anthology of Third World Literature* (Quezon City: Third World Studies Program, U.P., 1978), p. 2.

I had hoped to find in these writers a weapon strong enough to blast the walls that imprisoned the American soul. But they were merely describing the disease – they did not reveal any evidence that they knew how to eradicate it.⁴

Whereas the critical realists blame the decay of the social fabric on materialism, loss of religious and other traditional values, revolutionary realists see the situation in more purely political or historical terms. They are, of course, dealing with an entirely different type of situation, one in which colonialism and severe oppression are the dominant characteristics. The major themes of revolutionary realism are in a sense more optimistic than those of critical realism, since they deal with the awakening of individuals and groups to an understanding of their dehumanization by the oppressive (usually colonial) political system. With this understanding comes a redirection of thought and action towards a revolutionary praxis which is both liberating and rehumanizing. Third world writing thus grows out of a particular type of historical experience, qualified by a perception of man as a free political being capable of recreating and restructuring his own world.

Third world consciousness is thus largely a state of mind or a particular perception of the world and its socio-political relationships, and as such it is logically separate from geographic location. Filipino writers do not have it simply by virtue of being born in or writing in the Philippines, and neither are the more perceptive of first world writers necessarily precluded from sharing it. It is not, however, simply a matter of intellectual understanding, since it involves elements of experiential knowledge of colonial oppression and a sense of identity with an oppressed group. This would exclude, for instance, the radical white American writer even if he happened to be poor. Still, there are groups in the United States with a definite history of oppression that is also related to the colonial experience: blacks were pirated away to the U.S. on British slave ships as a part of colonial trade, and Filipinos were lured to the U.S. as a part of the American "colonial experiment" in the Philippines. Such peoples may share the elements of third world consciousness: they are victims of imperialism, with their own national or ethnic identity, they understand

⁴ Carlos Bulosan, "My Education," *Amerasia Journal* (May 1979): 117.

the nature of oppression, and they are engaged in a struggle for liberation as a people.

CARLOS BULOSAN

Carlos Bulosan (1914-1956) is essentially a third world writer, first because his whole experience was formed by the colonial relationship between the United States and the Philippines, from his education to his immigration and the life he lived in the U.S., and second, because he never forgot that he was a Filipino, even when he was in America. He wrote of the Philippines in his *Laughter* stories,⁵ in *America Is in the Heart*,⁶ in his poetry,⁷ and in his recently published novelette, *The Power of the People*.⁸ As an Asian in California he held fast to his Filipino-ness, never forgetting that it made him what he was in the U.S. His personal history is a history of praxis, involving awakening and struggling against the forces of oppression which weighed so heavily on the Filipinos. His most powerful writing dealt with the collective experience of Filipinos in the United States, both articulating this experience and helping to create it in its uniqueness. Yet he saw the totality, the world wide nature of the struggle, even while within it he gave the *Pinoy* his identity.

Thus the writing of Carlos Bulosan may be considered the articulation of his own world vision, one that was shared by one particular group, the Filipino-Americans of his time. It represents the perception by the group of its own historical milieu, unique in its own sociological, historical, and cultural components, and yet participating in a larger understanding shared by all oppressed groups.

To discover this world vision, one must, then, reconstruct the historical experience that gave rise to it, and at the same time examine the writing that the vision produced. The relationship

⁵ *The Laughter of My Father* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1944).

⁶ *America Is in the Heart* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1946; reprinted., Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973).

⁷ *Chorus for America: Six Filipino Poets*. (Los Angeles: Wagon and Star, 1942); *Letter From America* (Prairie City, Ill.: J.A. Decker, 1942); *The Voice of Bataan* (New York: Coward McCann, 1943).

⁸ "The Power of the People," *Alive Magazine* (Ontario, Canada) 10 September 1977.

may appear to be circular, and in fact it is, for the writing, in the case of Bulosan, functions on both sides of the dialectic of history/consciousness. We may use his writing to reconstruct the history, for literature reflects the “feel” of history in a way that the “hard facts” cannot. Still, the vision must be connected to the reality through the use of more traditional historical data, and thus the circle is broken.

This historical approach is an especially rewarding one for the work of Carlos Bulosan because as a creative reconstruction of the Filipino-American milieu, it also illuminates American history during one of its most interesting and critical periods: the years of the depression, the second world war, and the hysteria of the McCarthy era. Bulosan’s view is a particular view – the insight of an internal colony, a third world island within the first world, but it adds a new dimension to our understanding of American history. It adds a “view from the underside,” which Carey McWilliams says in his introduction to *America Is in the Heart* gives us valuable insight into the society:

One of the best ways to view and understand a society is to see it from the bottom looking up. To be sure, the underview is incomplete. Bottom dogs see, know, and learn a lot but their perspective is limited. But they see more, I have come to believe, than those who occupy the middle and upper reaches; their view is less inhibited, less circumscribed. The view from down under exposes the deceits, self-deceptions, distortions, apostasies; it is likely to be bitterly realistic. It offers a good, if limited, guide to what the society is really like, not what it professes to be. The traditional values sound fine, but what happens to them when put to the test? A good test is the extent to which the society is willing to extend to outsiders, lesser breeds, strangers, the same rights and protections it extends to those who inhabit the upper zones. In this sense, the view of a sensitive, idealistic, imaginative Filipino provides an excellent corrective to the view that leading West Coast institutions projected in the period, say, from 1930 to 1941. For the Filipino was the bottom dog; he occupied the lowest rung on the ladder. Within its limitations, his view was accurate. Although the scene has changed for the better and hopefully it will continue to change, this book *America is in the Heart* will stand as a graphic, historical reminder of what it was like to be a Filipino in California in the years it embraces.⁹

⁹ Carey McWilliams, introduction to *America Is in the Heart*, reprinted, pp. xx-xxi.

It is tempting to expand McWilliams' idea further, and to state that just as the view from the underside gives us insight because it draws our attention to one of the stress points in the social system, more important insights still are to be drawn from this viewpoint as applied to one of the more stress-full periods of history. And surely in American history there has been no more critical time for highlighting the contradictions in the social fabric than the years of the depression, world war II, and the McCarthy era (1929-54). These were the Bulosan years, and also years that were central to the Filipino-American historical experience. Filipino immigration to the U.S. mainland was heaviest during the late 1920s, but it was only after the stock market fell that the state of California took much notice of this new "threat." As the newest group of Asian immigrants on the west coast during the depression years, Filipinos were truly the "bottom dogs." The war changed their status considerably – and of course the Japanese took over the bottom position – but after the war race and politics became inextricably mixed, and Filipino union members were again subject to brutal repression. As McCarthyism faded out, a new class of immigrants began entering – professionals who integrated more easily into the national life at various social levels other than the bottom. Filipinos still have an ethnic identity in the U.S., and all-Filipino unions exist to this day, but the nation is easier on radical politics, California is easier on Asians, and the Filipino group is more diverse.

So the Bulosan years were crucial in American history, and particularly in the Filipino-American historical experience. And Bulosan's perception of these years and this experience perfectly illustrate the development stages of third world consciousness as he passes from alienation and despair to a wider understanding of the forces involved in the historically created situation of the moment, and, with this widening, to recognition of the need for collective action and the praxis of the writer as articulator and creator of a new consciousness.

BULOSAN'S POETRY

A few poems will serve to illustrate this consciousness in Bulosan's work. In the first of these, the destructive forces of aliena-

tion are strong, but there is also a dawning idea of hope, and it is definitely hope in collective action:

Portrait With Cities Falling

This is the shadow of the unexpected hour.
 As I walk across the tight room to breathe
 The thin fog coming in from the strange night,
 As I sit on the rocking chair to watch the key
 In the lock turn twice and stop and turn again,
 The shadow moves like a solid body and divides
 Into multitudes of crosses, one upon the other,
 So that the hands loom like the curling tentacles
 Of a giant seamonster about to strike a prey.
 I am pursued by the shadow. Everywhere I go
 I see ghostly hands moving. I lie sweating
 At night, hearing creeping hands in the darkness
 If I sleep, I am haunted by evil dreams
 If I wake, I imagine monstrous ills.

I open the door and I see a man without eyes.
 But his hands are enormous, they reach everywhere.
 And his feet are millions, they march everywhere.
 At a distance, he is a man; when I look closer,
 I see a woman reclining with starlight in her face,
 Who is like any woman living or dead, only, only
 Her hair is like the rainbow, multicolored, reaching
 Everywhere with the sure quickness of the lighting.
 And under drooping stars, her bigness is humanity.
 A profusion of burdens, a Magdalen of men.
 Sing like violin strings. In the flowing darkness
 The streetlamps flutter. The poor hug their hunger.
 I am waiting, waiting. Soon the sun will be up . . .

Will they bear arms, will they come killing,
 Will the headless man and the starlight woman,
 Will they come together with the ancient emblem
 Will the lonely boy come with them, will they come,
 Will they destroy the crosses across the profound years,
 Will they come, I among them, I who have waited
 Nameless in history, who will remember the hour,
 Will they come to remake the world — ?

The moon dies across the continent.
The wind screams and something lives.¹⁰

The real dread of the future in this poem takes on an unnatural, ghostly form, as the poet, seated in a "tight-room," watches the lock turn twice and then again, and then a shadow enters and it is impossible to escape. Then the poet opens the door and sees the man without eyes, but he is all men, and upon closer examination, all women as well, all humanity. This is a fearful, changing, monster-type image, but it is also a giant "they," and it is in this "they" that there *may* be hope. The series of questions, starting with "will they bear arms, will they come killing," and ending with "will they come to remake the world – ?" is sweeping enough to include all the forces of history: the headless man whose hands reach everywhere, and the woman who is all, and the lonely boy, and the poet himself because he has waited nameless in history. Together they will destroy "the crosses across the profound years," history itself, and they will remake the world. The issue is left in doubt, in the form of a question, but in the final line, "something lives."

Hope is more explicit, more explicitly communal, and less dreadful in "Death and Transfiguration." The poem starts with a rich landscape that is "heaven, heaven"; with the introduction, "This is the land:"

Trees are full under fine starlight.
Fields are bright with drooping wheat.

But this idyllic scene is followed by an abrupt shift: "This is the city." And here we find cold, hard, stone-like alienation and the death of the title:

These are the buildings.
The long streets are empty tonight
The lamps die with the death of midnight
And the tenements are dark. *Cold, cold.*
I feel every moment that moves to blind
The heart with sadness, and slowly, softly
Turns the flaming mind into solid stone

¹⁰ The four poems considered here are all from Bulosan's collection *Letter from America*.

No man is free when life is a fragment
Of a dream whispered by a dying woman.

But from the cold night, the poet's wishes "flame like full wheat under moonlight," and the poem ends with a promise that when the day breaks and exposes the crimes of man, "our crimes,"

. . . Nothing can stop the million voices:
Not till this land and these people
Rise and conquer the loneliness together.

In "Interlude of Dreams and Responsibilities" we find an intriguing circular development from history in its broadest sense to a very matter-of-fact, practical account of American history in the depression, to a lyrical, imagistic account of industrialization and "progress," and back to the "high plane of science" on which all contradictions are resolved. This poem shows a well-developed, hopeful concept of history, with again an abrupt transition to the self, as both participant and practical and lyrical observer:

After how many wars, through how many revolutions,
On what high plane of science, upon what sphere of peace
Will you remember how I listened to the quivering heart . . .
Waiting for the final victory of life?

The straight-forward observer sees the depression:

I saw it. I saw the banks that failed,
And the crowds rioting. I saw the crops plowed under,
And the masses starving. I saw the fields flower once more,
I saw the rise and fall of nations.

Then in an impressionistic sense, we see the rebuilding, with its high human cost:

I saw sunlight mount intricate
Webs of steel and stone, I saw
The years cascade down the canyons of progress,
Littering the streets with the bodies of dead men.

Then again we are transported upward, to the higher sphere of total history, but this is also personalized with abrupt physical references to the bleeding of the lungs of the poet, and more

blood with the "sudden snapping of red wires" in the poet's side.

I find it hard to walk in the night;
 But I watch history rush through the heart of America
 From one ocean to meadow to another ocean, feeling
 The voluminous downpour of blood from the lung,
 The sudden snapping of red wires upon my side.
*After how many wars, through how many revolutions
 On what high plane of science, upon what sphere of peace.*

The poet thus becomes one with history as it rushes through America and he bleeds from the lung. But at the same time it is elevated to an absolute plane where there is peace.

"American History" is a more explicitly political poem, dealing with the case of Sacco and Vanzetti, one of the great failures of "American Justice": the two were framed and executed, apparently because of their radical political beliefs and because they belonged to an ethnic minority which may have appeared to be dangerous at that time. But the case became a celebrated cause among all radicals and many liberals, and indeed Bulosan was not the only one to see the wider implications of the deaths of the two Italians. The poem follows in full.

American History

This is what I say:

I am suffering because I was a radical,
 and indeed I am a radical:
 I have suffered because I was an Italian,
 and indeed I am an Italian.
 I have suffered more for my family than for myself;
 but I am so convinced to be right that you can only
 kill me once, but if you could execute me two other times,
 I would live again to do what I have done already
 I have finished.
 Thank you . . .

Vanzetti, the dreamy fish peddler,
 hurt, but not alone in the alien courtroom,
 voicing the sentiments of millions in his voice;
 to scorning men voicing the voice of starved nations
 in one clear stream of sentiment in his gentle voice,
 that justice and tolerance might live for everyone.

And remember this always, my son:
 In the play of happiness
 don't use all for yourself only
 but down yourself just one step
 at your side and help the weak ones that cry for help
 they are your friends
 they are the comrades that fight for the conquest
 of the joy of freedom for all.
 In this struggle of life you will find more love
 and you will be loved . . .

Sacco, the good shoemaker,
 dreaming of the future with the poet that never was,
 in spheres of tragic light dreaming of the world
 that never was, as each tragic moment passed
 in streams of vivid light to radiate a harmony
 of thought and action that never came to pass.

Our agony is our triumph: Sacco and Vanzetti.

The final words of the poem are actually those of Sacco and Vanzetti, but the poet obviously shares the political understanding expressed in them. The "harmony of thought and action that never came to pass" involves the development of history and the raising of it to the higher plane suggested in the last poem. It did not happen within the experience of Sacco and Vanzetti, but they played their parts, "voicing the sentiments of millions," and they spoke for all the "starved nations," and they and the poet understood the final possibility.

BULOSAN'S PROSE

But the consciousness developed in Bulosan's poetry is very broad, and although it illustrates a total third world perspective, it does not pin-point the identity of the Filipino-American within that world view. For that we must turn to Bulosan's prose. *America Is in the Heart* is of course the most important work for the creation of the Filipino-American identity, but since it has been written about a great deal,¹¹ I would like to focus instead on one

¹¹ See especially Epifanio San Juan, Jr., *Carlos Bulosan and the Imagination of The Class Struggle* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1972), and Margarita Valeros, "An Appreciative Study of the Life and Works of Carlos Bulosan" (M.A. Thesis, National Teachers College, 1955.)

simple and unpublished short story called "Be American."¹²

The main character of this story is a cousin named Consorcio, a naive new arrival, with the great ambition of becoming a U.S. citizen. He gets a job as a janitor, saves up his pay, and buys himself a set of books that cover all fields of classical learning — philosophy, science, law, history, literature. When he discovers he cannot read them, he sells them, set by set, and uses the money to finance night school citizenship classes, unaware that Filipinos (and Chinese and Japanese) were still legally barred from becoming citizens. Eventually he gave up studying and drifted into migrant farm work. The author followed Consorcio's progress from then on, first through a series of small gifts from various fields — a box of asparagus, a crate of lettuce — and then later from postcards and then union newsletters, as Consorcio became more and more articulate. Consorcio made himself into a "real American" by working on the California farms, pioneering in labor organization, suffering defeat, oppression, and jail terms because of his work. When he finally received his citizenship just before he died, it was a mere technicality, for his real "Americanism" had grown as he grew in consciousness and in action, giving of himself to help the farm worker find his own equality.

Cousin Consorcio's experience typifies that of thousands of Filipino immigrants to the United States in many ways. He went to California filled with an idealism that could only be born of the colonial education the Americans had set up in the Philippines. He did the same work that most of the Filipinos did, and he faced the same forms of legal and social discrimination. And he participated in the actions that most clearly differentiated Filipinos from other immigrant groups in America: he learned English well, enough to publish political tracts, and he spear-headed the labor organization movement in which so many Filipinos were so active. The typical Filipino, in fact, whether he worked on the California farms or in the Alaskan canneries, was, and is, a union man.¹³

¹² Undated, available on microfilm from the University of Washington Library, Seattle. Copies of all the Washington microfilms are now available in the Ateneo de Manila microfilm collection.

¹³ Carey McWilliams quotes a California labor analyst as saying that the Filipinos "proved to be more disturbing and more dangerous than any other Asiatic group that has ever been brought into this state." McWilliams goes on to say the following: "Filipinos no longer scab on their fellow workers, and they no longer underbid for work. Prior to 1934, they formed the Filipino Labor Union, restricted to agricultural workers, and soon had established seven locals of the union in the state, with a membership of

Unions were usually all-Filipino in composition, not because Filipinos wanted it that way but because many white unions had already gone conservative and racist. But the union idea is essentially non-nationalist and non-racist, expressing as it does the unity of all oppressed workers. Bulosan saw the need for Filipinos to become simply a part of a greater movement; in an unpublished letter to a union friend, Matt, he wrote the following:

There is no Filipino working class, or Chinese working class, or American working class. There is but one working class, and that is the world proletariat. We are all workers and brothers. Throughout the world, brown and yellow and white and black. But there is also only one ruling class in the world — Filipino, American, English, French, etc. — and they are our enemies.¹⁴

But this broad statement of international and interracial solidarity needs some qualification, for Bulosan is still aware that this strength comes from the forces of his childhood, and that in that sense it is in nationalism that the struggle begins. This is not the xenophobic type of nationalism which pits Filipino against Mexican or Chinese or Japanese, but rather a nationalism in which one finds strength in one's own origin because it is from that origin that comes human dignity. This sort of nationalism is the starting point of third world consciousness. In the same letter to Matt, Bulosan discusses another friend:

I realized Pacay's difficulty with our adopted language, but his presence alone reminds us of the old folks at home. For he represents their silent wisdom, deep and penetrating. People like him can't go wrong when the fundamental principles of life are at stake; he epitomizes the solid rock of nationalism upon which we stand and around which we form a phalanx of defense against the encroachments on freedom.

Bulosan felt that if anything was solid, it was his national origin and the strength that derived from that origin. Nevertheless, in California he became something different from a Filipino; he became a *Pinoy*, and his outlook was then formed by his own historical experience and that of the other Pinoy. He could never again see the world from the viewpoint of the Ilocano peasant, for then

about 2000. The Filipino is a real fighter and his strikes have been dangerous." McWilliams, *Factories in the Field* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1939), pp. 132-33.

¹⁴ "Letter to Matt," on microfilm from the University of Washington, Seattle, ca. 1952.

he was a migrant worker in California, and a member of a minority group. And yet this was not a narrow or enclosed or restricted viewpoint: Bulosan was a migrant worker in California, but he saw the world. And he saw the same struggle throughout the world and throughout time; that is to say the struggle is worldwide and on-going through history. He saw the oneness of the struggle and he saw it everywhere, and as he articulated it, and Filipino-American participation in it, he both created and expressed a third world consciousness that is still evident in the writings of Filipino-Americans today.¹⁵

¹⁵ Especially interesting are the *Liwanag* writers: Oscar Peñaranda, Luis Syquia, Al Robles, Sam Tagatao. See also the Filipino entries in *Roots: An Asian American Reader* (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1971) and *Counterpoint: Perspectives on Asian America* (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1976.)