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Aurelio Bulosan's Wartime Diary: An Initial Look at a Newly-Discovered Document

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Texts and Documents

Aurelio Bulosan's Wartime Diary: An Initial Look at a Newly-Discovered Document

SUSAN EVANGELISTA

At the very end of his autobiographical novel *America is in the Heart*, Carlos Bulosan's two brothers, Amado and Aurelio, both go off to join World War II. The Japanese have invaded the Philippines and the call has gone out for US-based Filipinos to enlist with the American forces. In a final, rather sentimental gesture of interracial solidarity, Macario gives Carlos a dime (U.S. 10¢) and asks him to pay Larkin, the black shoeshine boy, to whom it is owed. When Carlos does so, Larkin invites him to split a ten-cent beer and says that from now on he will remember Macario whenever he sees the face of an American dime. Carlos leaves the bar feeling warm and suffused with an almost maudlin faith in America, which, he assures his readers, no one will ever be able to take away from him.

And thus ends Carlos Bulosan's major work. Later he became more overtly political (as in the ILWU Local 37 Yearbook, 1952) even if still somewhat romantic (*The Power of the People*), and then finally slipped into a stage where he wrote mostly love poems. He did write some poetry about the war, but he never spoke of his brothers' war experiences. Amado (Brother Dionisio in the book) it seems, simply disappeared from sight altogether and apparently finally died in prison somewhere in the U.S. However, Aurelio (Macario in the book) joined Company C of the First Filipino Infantry Battalion, formed on 19 February 1942, in San Luis Obispo, California and eventually did participate in the retaking of the Philippines. Furthermore, he wrote about it.

Aurelio's old wartime diary, (see pp. 468-69) recently discovered by Fidel Nemenzo of the U.P. in the family home in Binalonan, has now enjoyed very limited circulation. (Nemenzo graciously allowed the

2 people: Profile in 3 towns
was mentioned. Bratall
Placed at Bombuzaya (Sister of)

Threat: People must surrender in 24
persons in order that Roulatel
be imprisoned.

People sent representations to
English Govt (Cuba) via Office
of British Consular w/ Am

Agreement / Ross, that he will surrender

if he is that Gaps will stop
the... + people who will
surrender will not be killed.

Gaps has offered a job - he is asking
to be at 12 M. The He will
be responsible for you. His
name is... One off. Enki
Pulsoe (Get. Eric Of at its time)
was agreed to surrender which he
refused. Enki's route a letter
to him stating:

I don't like to surrender. If you
you will force me to surrender just
to come to my hideout with Gaps
I promised that you can get
me unless dead. Or, if you like
to come over + have a fight w/
Eric's

Eric's escaped because the place
was being searched.

24 Dec 47

Approximately 100 men + O
surrendered to Gaps - Green leaf.

3) Incidents prior to November

Fought against Japs inside

Linearea - 30 Japs dead + 60
1 EM

1943 - No deliveries of great quantities

1944 - Sep 12, LHA 5 (Luzon Assault
Group) 40201
Entered 20 Aug LHA commenced
2nd Lt. 15 Sept

Reason (1) He was wanted by the Japs.
for taking Benjan. De...
a... 5204...
of... of...
De... 3 capt.

12 Nov - Left for Basal, Tagabas
to get arms shipped by LIS
Army through... with
120 men. Returned by...
to... of...

When needed Pop. packed up.
Jap. spec - liquidated
No fight against the Japs
for it was an order - Mac

6 Jan - Ordered to operate - fought against
Japs - Tuboy (Sa M) at 7 PM
1 Colosa loaded w/ Japs 1 Jap
was about to escape - 6 Japs taken

Unaware that these Japs were
taking 2 cart loads of...
8 Jan. 7 AM. Went Penass (Chib) fought
against Japs - killing 20 Japs.

present writer, and perhaps one or two others to xerox the complete text.)

How important is this text? Historically it is probably of rather limited significance, although it does provide some interesting insights into the feelings and perceptions of one expatriated Filipino who returned to the land of his birth under rather odd circumstances, as part of the U.S. invading forces towards the end of what had been a long and terrible war. It probably has greater significance, however, from a literary point of view, not so much in its own right as for the light it may shed on Carlos's work, on the general style of thinking and perceiving shared by the two brothers and perhaps by the wider Filipino-American community of the time.

The diary can almost be read as a continuation, from a slightly less skilled hand, of *America is in the Heart*. Like Carlos, Aurelio builds on little scenes, vignettes which focus on common people and their sufferings and sometimes their magnitude of heart, through which the author then affirms his faith in humanity, as it cuts across lines of race, nationality, and sometimes even class. Aurelio too becomes sentimental and flowery over the beauty of the human spirit, and especially of its realization in Mother America, using, as Carlos did, a rhetoric which seems totally unacceptable today but which no doubt seemed most natural in its time. It is, then, easy to believe that the Aurelio who wrote this diary is indeed the Macario who asked Carlos to return the dime to the shoeshine boy as he himself marched off to war to liberate his homeland.

The Filipinos who were in the United States in 1941, were, needless to say, all too eager to join the American fighting forces in World War II. Manila was attacked and invaded almost immediately after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, causing Filipinos to flock to recruitment centers all over the West Coast. There were, however, some legal problems to overcome. President Roosevelt had called up all U.S. citizens and resident aliens, overlooking the unique legal status of Filipinos who were classified as nationals—i.e., neither citizens nor aliens. This was soon remedied, however, and 12,000 Filipinos enlisted in the first and second Filipino Infantries:

The First Filipino Infantry only consisted of Filipinos. When we were drafted (sic), the people here in Monterrey said, 'Boys, you are the only outfit who knows where you are going. You are going to a suicide unit. . . .' Our American contemporaries were proud of us because we all volunteered. We wanted to be there. Magno Cabreross, San Francisco.¹

1. Fred Cordova, *Filipinos: Forgotten Asian Americans* (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co., 1983), p. 218

The First Filipino Infantry started training in San Luis Obispo in the spring of 1942, moving to Fort Ord by Christmas of that year, then on to Camp Beale in January of 1943, then to the Hunter Liggett Military Reservation and Camp Roberts in the spring, and back to Camp Beale in December of 1943. Finally in the spring of 1944 the Infantry embarked for Asia, reaching Oro Bay, New Guinea in June. Then, according to the Bulosan diary, the group embarked from Fenschaten, New Guinea, in October and landed in Leyte on 20 October. Other probably more reliable historical sources attest, however, that the Filipino Regiment was not involved in MacArthur's October landing and retaking of Leyte, but that they arrived somewhat later for "mopping-up" operations. What the diary says about the fighting involved, strikes this reader as somewhat more than "mopping-up" but less than an initial invasion, but it is almost certain that Aurelio's dates are incorrect. (This fact suggests that the diary was probably written at a later date, although the experiences recounted still seem genuine enough).

But then again, the interest in this diary is more in terms of the nature of the perceptions involved than of historical accuracy. One of the first things that strikes Bulosan's readers is that, despite the rhetorical statements of enthusiasm for going back to defend the native land, Bulosan and his friends sound very much like Americans suddenly transported to the Third World. They take the war rather lightly, singing "Home on the Range" while shooting down Japanese planes.

On his second day in Leyte, his first trip to Tacloban, he meets a man named Mr. Torres, who is the ex-governor of the province. The man couldn't speak English even as well as his eleven year old son could, and this created problems for both American and Ilocano. But many years previously, long before he had immigrated to the United States, Aurelio had done some teaching in Mindanao and had learned a bit of Visayan. Besides, this man Torres had with him a gift for the servicemen which more than made up for the effort expended to talk to him:

This man Torres saw me and tried to speak with me in Visayan which I was fortunate to speak a little. I asked him to speak slowly so that I will be able to understand him. When I spoke his dialect, he was very happy to know that I am also a Filipino which he had a great doubt for me whether or not I was a countryman of his. So from his undercoat which was bulging with many things, he brought two bottles of whiskey. He handed them to me and I gave one bottle to Cal Young who was with me at this time. I did not want to give any drink to them because I was sure that I needed all the drink I can take hold of because I never had any drinks for so many months. But I figured out that they too are like myself, thirsty and hungry for drink.

The other bottle is for the eight of us (all enlisted men). In the middle of the road I opened the bottle. And when I tried to open I looked at the label which I really did not care whether or not it was a good drink so long as there was liquor in it. But for the fun of it, I looked at the label anyway, and to my surprise, I saw this label which reads "Three Roses." This is an American whiskey. How on earth could have this people been able to save this luscious drink during all these years! I asked this man Torres how on earth he was able to save this kind of whiskey during all this time and he said that he was saving the bottle for us and for all the liberation army. He was smiling and was terribly glad to give everything he had but we were very busy looking for some more Japs in the surrounding blocks and so we left him standing in the middle of the road happy just like the rest of the natives. (p. 42.)

One is jolted by the off-hand way in which this earlier day *balikbayan* refers to his countrymen as "natives." The "happiness" of these "natives" over the arrival of the American troops is stressed again and again, often with a bit of condescension. This is particularly apparent when Bulosan discusses the lack of plumbing in the area, describing the poverty, filth, and backwardness with considerable distaste.

Much later in the diary, however, Bulosan makes a strong case for, to his mind at least, the superiority of the Ilocanos. As they sail into Lingayen Gulf, an Irish-American named John O'Hara asks him whether the people here are culturally the same as those in Leyte, and he responds that the area is more advanced and

the people are more cooperative and understanding than any other people in the Philippines. The houses are much better and the roads are just the ones we have in the state of California . . . it is little California, agricultural and prosperous (p. 78)

Home town pride at its best!

At any rate, there is a constant sense of the writer's distance from the people of Leyte, and of the great admiration of the people for the American troops, especially because most of the enlisted men were in fact Filipinos. In the burned-out town of San Miguel, near Tacloban, Bulosan is approached by a man who had also lived in the United States, but who had gone back to Leyte in 1939, under the Repatriation Act.² Since then his wife had died of malaria, for which he could provide no medicine, and the Japanese had commandeered all his corps, leaving him to worry about feeding his three children on noth-

2. The Repatriation Act, passed the US Congress in 1935, provided free transportation to Filipinos wishing to return to their homeland, but made it very difficult for its beneficiaries to return to the United States.

ing. He wished, naturally enough, that he had stayed in the United States so that he might be able to go back to Leyte as part of the American invading forces.

Despite their condescension, however, the men of the First Filipino Infantry enjoyed getting to know the people of Leyte. All the women were beautiful, of course, and there were dances (at 1 PM), and people were generous with smiles and food, even though the latter was in short supply. The men were tired of K-rations and wanted to eat 'real' food — dried fish and such. Aurelio traded his underclothes to an old woman for a bunch of bananas, which his friends in turn finished off before he himself ate any.

Just as the people of Leyte admired these brown Americans fighting men, the Filipino-Americans showed respect for the fight the guerillas had put up over the years. Here we get a sense of Bulosan's political ideology coming through, as he talks about the heroic struggle of the little people, the poor and relatively helpless, against the Imperialist Japanese. He writes especially of a guerilla captain named Leon Ringor, a school-teacher by profession, whom he meets in Tacloban and who tells him that his wife and child had been bayoneted by the Japanese because the child, a seven-year-old boy, had been playing in the street with an American flag.

Then Pedro, one of his students in the school, had brought him into the guerilla organization in the mountains. Pedro has his own very strong feelings about race and class, and when he describes the guerilla troops to Leon Ringor, he says the following:

You will find most of them underclothed, underfed, and sickly, but they are all used to it now . . . Most of them are high school boys. The sons of farmers. All brown Filipinos. No mestizos. The mestizo friends we used to have backed out. They turned to be Jap collaborators. They became the Jap informers, and that is why so many of our good boys were killed in the town and in the mountains when they came to mop up the guerillas in these woods. I told our leader that we should not trust the mestizos because they always complained about the food and the clothes we wear. They have no backbones . . . They are bastards like the Japs. They are the sort of people we are trying to iliminate (sic) from this world. . . . (p. 49)

Then Pedro goes into his Thomasite rhetoric on how it is in the nature of man to be free and how he must fight for that freedom unto death if necessary. But in the end this speech veers away from what Bulosan likely learned from American teachers and turns towards what he probably learned in the labor organizations of the thirties: the working man, in every part of the world, is the center of the economy, he on whom prosperity is built, and he alone is worth dying for.

Later in the telling of this incident, when the guerillas know the American forces have landed, Pedro and Captain Ringor come face to face with a fleeing Japanese soldier. From Bulosan's account of Ringor's statement, one senses a twinge of sympathy for the soldier, who apparently speaks fluent Tagalog and pleads that he too was just looking for peace, that he was forced by his government to fight, and that he wanted to live. Pedro, however, had seen his own father killed and mutilated by the Japanese, and could not forgive. Pedro bayoneted the sobbing man, and he died bleeding. Then, says Ringor, "The only good Jap is a dead Jap" (p. 57).

Ringor was of course delighted that the invading American forces were in fact mostly Filipinos:

Then he stood up smiling and happy to have known me from America. He said that altho all of you Filipinos have been away from this land I always knew that you will come back to fight for your people and for the things America stands for. After he had said this, he gripped my hand firmly with a friendly feeling and then I said to him: Yes, I, for one has (sic) been living in the U.S. for almost seventeen years. America is a wonderful country but the Philippines was always in my heart and soul. (p. 53)

He had started his conversation by saying he wanted the world—and particularly Americans—to know how hard and well the Filipinos had fought for the American democratic ideals. And Aurelio is indeed appreciative of this fact:

I listened to him for almost three hours. I listened to him very intensely and I knew that he is a great man in his own category. I never thought that a man in this part of the world even thought of fighting for human decency and having a complete understanding of the main cause of this war. He saw me with tears in my eyes, how happy I was to have known him. (pp. 52-53)

Once again the reader is left with the feeling that for Aurelio, and at least in Aurelio's eyes for the Filipino guerillas as well, this was a war pitting all the decent, democratic forces of the world against the darker forces of authoritarianism, emperor-worship, etc. The diary plays several times on the idea that the Japanese were supposedly willing to die for their emperor—once to say that the American troops are all too willing to help them do that, and two or three times to say that in a pinch they run away like everybody else. They are called Japs, damn Japs, stupid Japs, tricky Japs, bastard Japs, and every Japanese death is recorded with glee. One Japanese plane was shot down in a swamp,

and when Aurelio and friends ran to the area, hoping to get a souvenir of the dead man, they found that the plane and the body had been sucked under the mud and had disappeared.

The Good Swamp had swallowed the both of them, and that was the end of the bastards. (p. 62)

This is no doubt American war-time rhetoric, and may reflect as well the basic, pervasive anti-Asian racism of California. At the same time Aurelio's remarks on democracy, justice, and human decency—and let us remember that Carlos liked to talk like this as well—sound like they may have come straight from the mouths of the early American teachers of his childhood.

But at the same time we have already seen a hint of a somewhat more radical class analysis—for instance when Aurelio records Leon Ringor's report of his student's comments on the mestizos—i.e., the elite, half-Spanish families—and their failure as guerillas, and, eventually, their traitorous actions. This is picked up again later, when Bulosan meets, still in Leyte, an old high school friend from Lingayen who has since been serving as a guerilla in the hills of Leyte. He talks of the troubles caused for the resistance by the collaborating politicians, big shots, and again, mestizos:

They are the ones who registered as Spanish citizens, he said. They were the big businessmen in all the towns and localities. Their daughters often go out with some Jap soldiers. They were very friendly with them and I know of a beautiful mestiza in a little town here who gave birth to a baby. It is a boy and he looks like a Jap in all his features. Yes, Aurelio, I must tell you this because you understand the real situations in which most of the ruling classes of the Filipinos have played during the Jap domination. They made us more miserable than the Japs themselves. (p. 68)

Somewhat later, when the troops have moved on to Lingayen, Aurelio explains to the American soldier John O' Hara how economic and political power works in Pangasinan—and in California. Again the big business men rob and exploit the helpless working class people who are "simple and ignorant," backed up, naturally, by the "shrudness (sic) of the politicians."

In this same section Bulosan reiterates his feeling of class solidarity among the poor, this time in a nostalgic conversation about "back home" in California between himself and a Mexican immigrant named Ramon Gonzales, late at night as they stretched out and smoked in their fox holes on the Pangasinan shore. In the morning, however, the

Mexican was dead, having been shot in the temple by a Japanese sniper during the night.

In another paradox of rhetoric, feeling and content, which once again the reader familiar with Carlos Bulosan's work will quickly recognize, Aurelio raves about the wonders of America, then quickly undercuts this with a few of the less-fortunate realities of it:

Yes, I said, America is a wonderful country. The people are also wonderful. It is like heaven out there. There is clean and wonderful living in any part of the land, but to a man of my type, I have never been so fully happy on that country in spite of all the joys of living it offers me. The air that I breathe in did seem to choke me. I did not seem to feel free to do anything I feel like doing altho there is a great freedom of any living man in the eyes of the existing laws of the land, somehow, the Filipinos were not freed to do what they have always wanted to do like any decent living individual. I told her there is not freedom because racial discrimination still exist in the country no matter where you go. . . . for this simple reason I have not been fully happy . . . Now that I am in this country, I hope to find full happiness and freedom and can speak with all equality and without shame and fear in my heart. (p. 65)

He is talking, at this point, with a young woman whose husband fought at Bataan, leaving her when her child was only six months old. The child is now three-and-a-half and she has not heard from her husband, but she is waiting patiently, convinced that he is still alive. Aurelio liked her very much and was struck with her faithfulness, but did not, as one might expect, turn this into a generalization about the virtues of the Filipino woman. Instead he used it as an occasion to remember a girl he knew in Los Angeles and generalize on how wonderful people, particularly women, are:

After I left her house, I walked under the stars thinking of the wonderful people I have met in the U.S. I remembered talking to a girl somewhere in Los Angeles some years ago before the war came. She is as nice as this one—lonely and living with great hope to have her husband come back to her . . . she too, inspite of her limited schooling, had learned many things in life that an unobservant individual cannot understand. . . . (p. 66)

Here the reader is again forced to remember Carlos Bulosan and the way he too makes fairly extravagant statements about his adopted homeland, only to undercut them with illustrations of the country's shortcomings. Carlos is more subtle, usually more specific and less inclined to generalize about things like discrimination. Instead he presents incidents like the one in which the Holtville storekeeper refused

to sell milk to a Filipino and his white wife and child, so enraged was he over the interracial marriage. But he is just as extravagant in his pro-American, pro-democracy ravings.

This polarity in Carlos's works has often concerned scholars for the very simple reason that in this day and age few people sing such praises to the American way of life. And since Carlos was a known radical, probably a Communist, these maudlin patriotic statements seem rather out of character. One scholar considers them unfortunate remnants of Bulosan's own bourgeois mentality.

THE BULOSAN BROTHERS

For this writer one of the major interests in the particular document under study, the diary of the older Bulosan, is that it shows much the same type of perception, political viewpoint, etc., found in the work of Carlos. The fact that his way of looking at the world is shared by the two brothers does not, of course, rule out the possibility that it represents hold-over bourgeois thinking, but it does open up the possibility that those habits of thought are not so idiosyncratically Carlos's alone, but that they may represent strong currents of thinking among most of the early Filipino immigrants to the United States. This is, after all, the generation taught and influenced by American teachers, so their idealism should not come as much of a surprise to us. The ideal is undercut, as we have seen, again and again, and the disillusionment is clear even if it isn't explicitly verbalized. Writing was considerably more polite in the thirties and forties than it is today.

It would be hard to say whether the Bulosan brothers were more sentimental by nature than most traditional Filipinos are. This is certainly a very strong personality trait in the two of them. They are very open to deciding that people in general are brave, courageous, noble, etc. Both brothers have a special soft spot for women. It has often been noted that while *America is in the Heart* contains no positive experiences with Caucasian men, it has several Caucasian women, and only one such woman, the *agent provocateur* who encourages a strike and later seduces Carlos's friend Jose, is treated negatively. Again, there may be historical reasons for this sex-based division. Perhaps the women of America really were more open to the Filipinos than the men.

The strong element of class analysis that both Bulosans use, finally, when they make an effort to separate good people from bad, is probably something learned in the labor unions, in the lettuce fields and salmon canneries and other more radical political organizations. Most of these organizations were headed by educated, intellectual Filipinos a cut above the field worker type (although these men too did work

in the fields) and they, as well as Aurelio and Carlos (who were also rather gentle and quite learned—Aurelio through formal education and Carlos through his reading) were most certainly exposed to and interested in Marxist thought.

Thus it seems that of the three most noticeable elements in Aurelio's diary, the first, the pro-American rhetoric, probably comes from the colonial element of Philippine history at that time, the American education of the early Filipino immigrant. The second, the sentimentality towards people in general and especially towards women, was probably enculturated into the Bulosan brothers in their childhood, and the third, the somewhat radical orientation towards the economics of society, probably grew out of the Filipino experiences in California.

The fact that this does not seem an easy mix today should probably not disturb us. Perhaps the main significance of Aurelio's work is the fact that he does echo that of Carlos in these three areas, which make up a general perspective. Of course these men were brothers and had the same upbringing, but the coincidence of outlook may suggest that it was a common pattern among the Filipinos in the United States at this time and thus, despite its apparent internal contradictions, historically significant.