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**Forum Kritika:** Reflections on Carlos Bulosan and  
Becoming Filipino

## CARLOS BULOSAN AND A COLLECTIVE OUTLINE FOR CRITICAL FILIPINA AND FILIPINO STUDIES

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### Abstract

As an activist-scholar formation called the Critical Filipina and Filipino Studies Collective (CFFSC) we take the position that Carlos Bulosan is indispensable for an emerging multidisciplinary field that is equipped in defying the neoliberal onslaught against ethnic studies in the United States and the unbridled racism most evident in the ongoing US “wars of terrorism” that haunt people of color throughout the world. We take seriously Bulosan’s insight that “[I]f the writer has any significance, [s]he should write about the world in which [s]he lives: interpret his [her] time and envision the future through his [her] knowledge of historical reality” (*On Becoming Filipino* 43). While Bulosan for our times can be taken up in an assortment of ways, for the purpose of this article we draw upon Bulosan’s writing and praxis to conceptualize an outline for CFFS that can offer grounded analysis and academic critique.

### Keywords

*America is in the Heart*, Carlos Bulosan, Critical Filipina and Filipino Studies, MIGRANTE, *On Becoming Filipino*, political economy, culture and the politics of

difference, community organizing

### **About the authors**

**Michael Viola** is lead faculty of social justice and global studies in the Liberal Studies Program - Graduate Programs in Leadership and Change at Antioch University Seattle. Viola's scholarly work investigates neoliberal policies and modes of resilience manifest in different educational contexts while also offering grounded qualitative understanding to the prospects of diverse alliances built among various student, teacher, worker, and community-based formations across a range of countries. Along with his participation as a coordinating member of the Critical Filipino and Filipina Studies Collective, Viola is active with the Philippines – United States Solidarity Organization (PUSO) in Seattle, Washington.

**Valerie Francisco** is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Portland in Oregon. Francisco's forthcoming book examines the strategies of maintaining a transnational family from the perspectives of Filipino migrant women working as domestic workers in New York City while their families live in the Philippines. Fundamentally, she interrogates the implications of neoliberal globalization on intimate relationships such as those of the family. In her analysis of the hardships in transnational families, Francisco also pays attention to the ways in which migrants engage their experiences of dislocation and diaspora to craft resistance. Francisco's research is informed by the transnational activism of GABRIELA, an alliance of progressive Filipino women's organizations in the Philippines and in other countries internationally; and MIGRANTE International, an international alliance of Filipino migrant workers. She also serves as a coordinating committee member for the Critical Filipino and Filipina Studies Collective.

**Amanda Solomon Amorao** received her PhD in literature from the University of California, San Diego. Her research focuses on Philippine writing in English during the period of American colonialism. She has been a lecturer at San Diego State University's Center for Asian Pacific Studies and UC San Diego's Ethnic Studies Department. Currently, she is the Interim Associate Director for Writing at UC San Diego's Culture, Art, and Technology Program. Outside of the university, Dr. Solomon Amorao serves as the Executive Director of the Kuya Ate Mentorship Program, a grassroots organization providing educational workshops on Filipino history, culture, and identity in local San Diego high schools and middle schools. She is also a member of the Coordinating Committee for the Critical Filipino and Filipina Studies Collective.

Now culture being a social product, I firmly believe that any work of art should have a social function – to beautify, to glorify, to dignify man . . . Since any social system is forced to change to another by concrete economic forces, its art changes also to be recharged, reshaped and revitalized by the new conditions. Thus, if the writer has any significance, [he] should write about the world in which he lives: interpret his time and envision the future through his knowledge of historical reality.

- Carlos Bulosan (*On Becoming Filipino* 143)

## Introduction

The pioneering struggle for ethnic studies led by the organizing efforts of immigrant and racialized youth in the 1960s and 1970s created new terrains of possibility for teaching and learning within the university. Led by a multiracial student coalition called the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) at San Francisco State in 1968, college students and community activists bravely organized for a curriculum that placed their unique histories within, contributions to, and aspirations for a truly just and democratic American society at the center of analysis. Politicized student groups such as the Black Student Union, Latin American Students Organization, Asian American Political Alliance, and the Pilipino American Collegiate Endeavor (PACE) organized against the atrocities of internal colonialism and racism that framed their unique histories and lived experiences. The collective effort to realize ethnic studies was grounded in a radical ethos of emancipation and solidarity. Thus, as a result of the militant youth activism of this period, historically dispossessed groups gained wider access to exclusionary sites of higher learning. A new generation of scholars would have the means to produce groundbreaking interdisciplinary scholarship that highlighted the subaltern voices of US history.

It is during this important period that Epifanio San Juan, Jr. published *Carlos Bulosan and the Imagination of the Class Struggle*, a pioneering study of Bulosan's literary writings, anti-capitalist analysis, and labor organizing activities. A year later in 1973, Bulosan's *America is in the Heart (AIH)* was reprinted by the University of Washington Press (originally published in 1946) presenting to a new generation of multiracial youth a personalized and historical perspective of what it meant to be Filipino in the United States during the depression era. As ethnic studies became more entrenched in North American universities during the 1980s and 1990s, Bulosan's *AIH* became required reading. His rich writing, which extends widely beyond *AIH*, has enabled youth, activists, and intellectuals within and beyond the academy an archive to historicize and theorize the plight of racialized Filipino/a labor, including a new variety of Filipino/a immigrants now dispersed throughout the globe as Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). As Filipino/a bodies

were exported throughout the world as a means to keep the Philippine debt-ridden economy afloat because of uneven capitalist economic development in the 1990s, scholars such as San Juan have pointed to how Bulosan's anti-racist and anti-capitalist body of work would be widely reinterpreted and consequently contained within a neoliberal framework of diversity, difference, and multiculturalism. The pacification of Bulosan's radical politics was not an isolated occurrence. In fact, it was analogous to a wider trend that scholar Vijay Prashad highlights, in which university administrators rendered the anti-racist and anti-capitalist organizing for human liberation in the trailblazing fight for ethnic studies "as the promotion of diversity and shook out any epoch-changing elements as it institutionalized difference" (xvi). Prashad elaborates:

Radical traditions within the world of color would be cast out in favor of traditional social forms that appealed to authority and order . . . Multiculturalism embraced bourgeois cultural diversity as long as white supremacy and corporate power could be set aside and generally left out of any discussion. Colleges would learn to be tolerant of differences, while social movements would have to forgo any demands for substantial change in the system. (xiv-xv)

Today, with the cannibalistic processes of capitalist accumulation and deepened global crisis coinciding with the revival of social movement politics and praxis (evident in the Occupy Movement to Arab Spring), the threatened US ruling bloc has proved even less patient in its strategies to contain the politicizing threats of ethnic studies.

Within this political climate, what can we gain in returning to Carlos Bulosan? As an activist-scholar formation called the Critical Filipina and Filipino Studies Collective (CFFSC), we believe Carlos Bulosan is indispensable in equipping our contemporary defiance to the neoliberal onslaught against US ethnic studies that has contained the field's emancipatory potential through a toothless rhetoric of individualism and multiculturalism. We also take the position that Bulosan's work is a vital archive to support a contemporary scholar activist project that seeks to defy the unbridled racism evident in the ongoing US "wars of terrorism" that haunt people of every color throughout the globe. Since the CFFSC's beginnings in the 1990s, its members have been motivated in breathing new life to Bulosan's writing, organizing, and radical praxis. Bulosan possessed a unique political position as he actively participated in immigrant labor struggles for justice and equality for Filipinos living in the United States while also connecting such activities to the demands for freedom and genuine sovereignty in the Philippines.<sup>1</sup> Bulosan's uncanny collection of creative, autobiographical, and testimonial writings articulate an internationalist Filipino consciousness where the demands for immigrant rights, racial equality, and workers' justice in the United States are linked to the democratic

calls of ending foreign domination in the Philippines and throughout the globe.<sup>2</sup> Bulosan's political standpoint remains urgent for our times. This argument has been highlighted elsewhere, such as in the

innovative ways Filipino American activist formations are educating about, and intervening in, the asymmetrical power relations between the United States and the Philippines as a global agency indignant with the conditions of militarization of the entire island under the guise of US joint military training exercises (Visiting Forces Agreement), the alteration of the Philippine constitution to abide by the neoliberal demands of global 'free trade,' and the continued circulation of Filipino migrant workers to North America, Western Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and other regions throughout the world. ("Toward A Filipino Critical Pedagogy" 2)

As a scholar-activist collective, CFFSC has begun to organize both in theory and practice against the oppressive conditions cited above. We actively joined the post-9/11 anti-war mobilizations and organized to support Filipino immigrants targeted by reactionary and xenophobic homeland security actions.

In 2012, after a few years of inactivity, a new generation of scholar-activists has officially re-constituted the collective, organizing together with progressive scholars, educators as well as lecturers, researchers, instructors, and various other education practitioners in colleges and universities. The mission of CFFSC is "to organize educators and scholars to interrogate and challenge histories of Western imperialisms (Spanish and US imperialisms), ongoing neocolonial relations in the Philippines, and their relationship to past and present Filipina/o migrations through our research and teaching both within the university and beyond it." The outline for Critical Filipina and Filipino Studies emerges from these efforts and our ongoing engagement with the historical writings of Carlos Bulosan.

In advocating for ethnic studies generally while also contributing towards the development of CFFS specifically, we take seriously Bulosan's insight that "if the writer has any significance, [s]he should write about the world in which [s]he lives: interpret his [her] time and envision the future through his [her] knowledge of historical reality" (*On Becoming Filipino* 43). While Bulosan for our times can be taken up in an assortment of ways, for the purpose of this article we draw upon Bulosan's writing and praxis to conceptualize a multidisciplinary outline for CFFS that can offer grounded analysis and academic critique in the realms of 1) political economy, 2) culture and the politics of difference, and 3) community organizing.

## Political Economy

Bulosan wrote about the underside of America for Filipino immigrants

entrapped in conditions of racist violence, hunger, and impoverishment. He described his duties as an artist and writer as ways to “trace the origins of the disease that was festering American life” (*On Becoming Filipino* 126). In a society of opulence, he dialectally connected the prosperity of a small few to those who “are bleeding where clubs are smashing heads, where bayonets are gleaming . . . Where the bullet is crashing upon armorless citizens, where the tear gas is choking unprotected children. Where the prisoner is beaten to confess a crime he did not commit. Where the honest man is hanged because he told the truth” (*On Becoming Filipino* 133). In forwarding CFFS we believe it urgent to build new conceptions to understand a world that has changed immensely from the epoch of Bulosan’s writing. Nonetheless, contemporary artists, writers, and knowledge producers can renew Bulosan’s efforts in refusing to add descriptive form to a system of decay and disease. In other words, we seek to advance CFFS to confront the root causes of a dispersed Filipino/a polity besieged by hunger and alienation while offering an alternative vision of society fueled by “a higher dream of human perfection” (*On Becoming Filipino* 177). Such an endeavor requires a critical analysis of capitalist political economy.

Bulosan’s literary works, ranging from *AIH*, *The Cry and the Dedication*, as well as his poetry, short stories, and even his published letters chart what Paulo Freire terms “conscientization” – or how individuals come to understand the world through bitter firsthand experiences framed by the growth logic of a capitalist system.<sup>3</sup> Bulosan is adamant that conceptualizing and creating a world where human needs are met is not possible within the existing capitalist structure. As scholars have incisively maintained, Bulosan mobilizes his various writing as an act of protest and rebellion against a political economic order where its benefactors are permitted to plunder natural, cultural, and human resources abroad while also perpetuating analogous violence and repression at home.<sup>4</sup> In a personal letter, Bulosan offers a written diagnosis of how capitalism has shaped human experience rendering qualities of hate, greed, and selfishness as natural:

Hate, greed, selfishness – these are not human nature. These are weapons of destruction, evolved by generations of experimenters in the service of ruling groups, be it a tribe, a clan, a prince, a kind, a democracy. These destructive elements have finally become so subtle, so intricate, so deeply rooted in men’s minds in our time, the era of international finance, that many people sincerely, though ignorantly, believe them to be the guiding forces of nature. (*On Becoming Filipino* 182)

Bulosan’s writing portrays how the unity of thought and action (praxis) for neocolonized Filipino immigrants can exist in contradictory forms. *AIH* in particular portrays how the first wave of Filipino immigrants who arrived in the

West coast during the 1920s and 1930s survived within the squalid conditions of monopoly capital and state terror. He illustrates how many *manongs* of this generation because of their lived experiences have adopted an understanding of social relations as unchangeable and as a result carried out activities such as gambling, alcoholism, and petty crime that at best could not alter or worse, reproduce the extant order. On the other hand, Bulosan documents how Filipino immigrants struggled to see past the widespread ideologies that naturalized the injustice of the period and organized to create genuine conditions for another society. Bulosan would describe in his various writings how a new world is in the process of emerging grounded in the ideals of “[l]ove, kindness, pity, tolerance, happiness, beauty, truth, these are the real human nature from which a galaxy of other relevant virtues spring” (*On Becoming Filipino* 182). He elaborates,

The old world is dying, but a new world is being born. It generates inspiration from the chaos that beats upon us all. The false grandeur and security, the unfulfilled promises and illusory power, the number of the dead and those about to die, will charge the forces of our courage and determination. The old world will die so that the new world will be born with less sacrifice and agony on the living . . . (*On Becoming Filipino* 214)

Bulosan’s writings—whether fictional, autobiographical, or poetic—were consistently framed by a larger collective mode of shared marginalization and anti-capitalist struggle. He demonstrates that an anti-capitalist political movement can start from numerous locations (out of daily life; in organized labor processes; around mental conceptions; in diverse social relations). As a scholar activist formation, we believe Bulosan’s radical accounting for and critique of capitalist political economy gestured throughout his creative literary work remains essential in nurturing social movements and emancipatory ideas that generate inspiration against “the chaos that beats upon us all” (*On Becoming Filipino* 214).

The task of creating the world anew is an immense challenge as we are faced with the worst economic crisis since Bulosan’s writing. An inability to understand the growth logic of capitalist political economy in a period that some scholars such as John Foster have referred to as the “Second Great Depression” entails the very real prospect of human and planetary disaster. Thus, we position CFFS as a means to creatively cross disciplinary boundaries, radically theorize, and collectively confront global problems impeding the life changes of a Filipino Diaspora and its links to the unlimited expansion of a capitalist social order.<sup>5</sup> Equipped with a radical political economic analysis, CFFS can develop conceptual tools to grasp unfolding dynamics of one moment while carefully calibrating how relations with others are adapting and reverberating as suggested by David Harvey. To elucidate this point more concretely, let us briefly explore how such political economic analysis



– namely one that draws upon historical materialism – can critically apprise two unique yet interlocking issues that have enormous implications in forwarding CFFS pertinent to Filipino/as in a global diaspora: immigration and climate change.

Bulosan traced the roots of this diseased and decaying political economic system motivated solely in an unnatural quest for profit. He represented the consequences of such a system divided by two central classes: an elite capitalist class and a diverse constituency of working class people. Bulosan understood from his own life experiences and close engagement with laboring Filipino immigrants lacking the most basic prerequisites of material existence – adequate food, water, clothing, shelter, employment, healthcare, safety – that these two class formations hold a completely different relationship in the process of capitalist production. The working classes are the producers of wealth but do not benefit from its creation. In his essay, “Freedom from Want,” Bulosan explains: “But we are not really free unless we use what we produce. So long as the fruit of our labor is denied us, so long will want manifest itself in a world of slaves . . . If you want to know what we are, look upon the farms or upon the hard pavements of the city . . . We are the creators of abundance” (*On Becoming Filipino* 131). Conversely, the small capitalist class is the direct beneficiary of the wealth generated from the various labor of working people and the natural resources extracted from the earth. We believe the extension of Bulosan’s historical materialism for our times is not retrograde and deterministic but instrumental in historicizing as well as assisting the constitution of an emancipatory Filipino/a global agency. Understanding the asymmetrical antagonism at the point of production is an intrinsic component of understanding the various waves of Filipino migration while challenging the logic of white supremacy. In other words, we believe that no reforms can get to the root of accelerating anti-immigration and racist sentiments in this country without ultimately addressing the logic and structure of an inherently exploitative capitalist system. Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy argue in their important text *Monopoly Capital* that in the past, “entire groups could rise because expansion made room above and there were others ready to take their place at the bottom” (279). What Bulosan articulated in *AIH* grounded in the lived experiences of Filipino immigrants was that the ascent to the higher rungs of the economic and social ladder was no longer possible for entire groups of people – only individuals. Thus, we agree with Baran and Sweezy’s insightful claim, “for the many nothing short of a complete change in the system—the abolition of both poles (power at one end and powerlessness at the other) and the substitution of a society in which wealth and power are shared by all—can transform their condition” (279).

The exploitation of Filipino/a labor in the United States during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and throughout the global diaspora in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not confined to the domain of unequal economic exchanges but likewise in unequal ecological exchanges. The ceaseless growth logic of capitalism does not take into account the finite capacity of life and nature. Thus, under our existing political economic order there is a stark

contradiction in the relationship (or metabolism) between nature and capitalist society. John Foster argues in his essay entitled, “The Epochal Crisis” that a metabolic rift is “reflected in the robbing of the soil of its nutrients shipped to the city in the form of food and fiber with the resulting pollution of urban centers—that it extended to international trade, with some countries in effect robbing others of their soil within a general process of ecological imperialism.” Such dynamics of capitalist production has disproportionately affected the ecology of neocolonized peoples of the Third World. A political economic analysis provides CFFS with the theoretical ballast to intervene in the contemporary debates surrounding global climate change and refuse to sidestep the role of capital in syphoning the natural resources (and labor power) of the Third World to enrich those at the top of global imperialist hierarchy. Specifically, the unquenchable growth logic of capitalist production has facilitated multinational businesses to enter the Philippines and promote large-scale mining, logging, and other corporate enterprises that have devastated the Philippine ecology while making its populace more susceptible to wide scale catastrophe. This was made evident in the large-scale casualties in the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan (also referred to as “Yolanda”). As we have highlighted in our collectively written “Typhoon Haiyan Relief: A Critical Filipino/a Perspective,” Typhoon Haiyan which formed on November 3, 2013 and dissipated on November 11 is the most powerful tropical cyclone ever recorded to make landfall. With waves almost as powerful as a tsunami engulfing entire coastlines, Haiyan has affected almost 13 million people in 44 provinces in the Philippines leaving nearly 8,000 dead or reported missing. We refuse to believe that such environmental catastrophes can be understood and more importantly altered without a critical accounting of the ecological relationship to human activity and the practices of capitalist production. The natural disasters that will continue to sweep the islands as a consequence of enhanced environmental degradation can only be ameliorated through the disruption of capitalism’s expansionist drive both in theory and in practice. Such an undertaking will not succeed through individual efforts alone but must be carried out as a collective political project. Bulosan points to the vast possibilities of establishing new social and environmental relationships when the narrator of *America is in the Heart* affirms the humanity and collective potential of the Filipino peasantry. “I knew that if there was one redeeming quality in our poverty, it was this boundless affinity for each other, this humanity that grew in each of us, as boundless as this green earth” (10). It is with this understanding that CFFSC draws upon Bulosan to theorize culture and the politics of difference and actively participate in the organizing of community.

## Cultural Productions and the Politics of Difference

Bulosan’s historical-materialist analysis of the global political economy clearly shaped his view of art and the social responsibilities of writers and other cultural

producers. The relationship Bulosan envisioned, however, between art and capital is not a simplistic base-to-superstructure approach in that cultural productions are mere reflections of material conditions. Culture has to be grounded in those conditions but could and should also intervene – hence Bulosan’s insistence that the writer “*envision the future* through his knowledge of historical reality” (italics ours). Bulosan’s narratives and cultural productions capture the consequences of material forces on Filipino subjects but also how Filipino subjectivity can never be fully reduced to those material forces; Bulosan’s writings reveal the dehumanizing conditions of the *manongs* as “cheap labor” but also simultaneously how their decisions, actions, and expressions resisted their proletarian status.

While it is undeniable that culture can be commoditized and cultural productions used as spectacular tools of control, culture is still a realm in which political possibility can emerge. In creating culture and telling story, the Filipino subject can articulate agency, contributing to the collective effort to imagine society differently. It is Bulosan’s insistence on this dialectical relationship between material conditions and cultural productions that can shape the approach of CFFS. CFFS can turn to Bulosan not just as a model of anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist critique but also as a model of recognizing and representing the agency that escapes systems of power. Through such recognition and representation, a CFFS framework can strive for a liberatory politics that fulfills Bulosan’s call to “beautify,” “glorify,” and “dignify” all peoples, particularly Filipinos in the homeland and throughout the diaspora.

The enduring nature of Bulosan’s *AIH* rests in the complexity of his narrator’s inner life that powerfully contrasts the capitalist and imperialist dehumanization of Filipinos both as cogs in industrial development and as the discursive Other of US civilizational achievement. Bulosan’s narrator navigates the transformations of Philippine society under benevolent assimilation in part one of the text and then the violence of US domestic racism in part two. As San Juan succinctly expresses, the power of Bulosan’s writing is located in his “strategy of cultural resistance that would subvert the Eurocentric representation of Filipino ‘Otherness,’ and alterity captured in the perception that it was a ‘crime to be a Filipino in America’ (135). *AIH*’s narrator, Allos, is a “composite” figure (to borrow Marilyn Alquizola’s phrase) that complicates the categorization of the text as either autobiography or fiction. Such generic blurring, however, is Bulosan’s method of creating a collective Filipino identity that resists how Filipinos have been “othered” by imperialist and capitalist forces; this collective sense of identity can suggest important lessons to CFFS, particularly concerning the pursuit of Filipino dignity and the politics of difference.

Bulosan’s writing is defined by this persistent tension between his own individual identity and his conscientious presentation of a unified voice of Filipino experience. Such a voice, however, constantly hovers between taking on a monolithic Filipino identity *and* breaking down due to undeniable differences between the historical Bulosan and his “fictive” narrators. Bulosan’s writings and cultural productions that

invoke this collective and resistant identity thus pose key questions for CFFS. First, what lessons can CFFS learn from Bulosan about resisting a universalizing Filipino identity that is not attentive to the particulars of race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, and religion that exist amongst Filipinos whether or not in diaspora? How does Bulosan himself avoid (or not) the pitfalls of universalizing a proper rational subject in the same vein of that which fueled the workings of imperialism and colonialism emerging around the period of the European Enlightenment? For example, while CFFS is informed by the history of the *manong* generation and its labor activism, celebrations of Bulosan or even of Itliong and Vera Cruz that lack historicity can potentially set up models of labor radicalism that do not take into account current global conditions of the feminization of labor. Therefore, studying and honoring the achievements of these men must not result in a patriarchal model of labor politics that privileges industrial and agricultural labor over the domestic and informal.<sup>6</sup>

Second, while recognizing these politics of difference, how can CFFS avoid an incapacitating incommensurability of difference? While the experience, narratives, and activism of the Filipino caregiver in San Diego can never be the same as that of Bulosan's generation, it still remains that a kinship persists – one not based on a transhistorical Filipino essence but upon parallel experiences within systems of Otherness. The goal of a CFFS discussion of culture and the politics of difference is, like Bulosan's fictive narrator, to constantly resist monolithic universalization and the paralysis of difference. It is to occupy the tension of the space in-between both poles and from that space explore a potential collectively resistant agency. This is the space from which we “envision the future through [the] knowledge of historical reality,” and it is this space that can be accessed in culture and, importantly, through genuine dialogue and collaboration.

It is telling that Bulosan's essay “How My Stories Were Written” is not a methodological exposition of his creative process but, rather, an almost allegorical tale grounded in the meetings and exchanges between another of Bulosan's fictive narrators and the figure of Apo Lacay, an “old man” from Bulosan's home province of Pangasinan who tells tales from “the era of the great distress of the land” (*On Becoming Filipino* 111). Bulosan's myth-like essay suggests the role of culture, particularly narrative, in the creation of a Filipino subject that seemingly crosses time and space but is still always in relation to the specificity of historicized material conditions. Moreover, it also suggests how cultural producers and socio-cultural critics invested in a CFFS framework can guard against the possessive individualism that is the hallmark of neoliberal capitalism.

In “How My Stories Were Written,” Bulosan conscientiously presents himself as the inheritor of peasant oral tradition, an oral tradition embodied by Apo Lacay and shaped by resistance to and survival of Spanish colonialism. Apo Lacay comes down from his solitary life in the mountains to the narrator's village to tell stories “about the people who had wandered and lived and died in that valley ages ago” (*On*

*Becoming Filipino* 111). Most of the villagers laugh at the old man, but the narrator finds wisdom in Apo Lacay's words and holds onto them as potential reminders of the world he feels he will leave behind in the future. The day comes when the narrator prepares to depart – though the reader does not learn till the end of the story that America is the site of his exile – and before his departure, he seeks out Apo Lacay.

In the mountains, the two meet despite the fact that Apo Lacay has been presumed dead by the rest of the villagers. The narrator tells Apo Lacay that he would like to remember all of the old man's stories. To which Apo Lacay responds, "You mean it will be your book as well as mine? Your words as well as my words, there in that faraway land, my tales going around to the people? My tales will not be forgotten at last?" (*On Becoming Filipino* 113). As the narrator affirms this shared sense of authorship and the transformation of the oral tradition in the homeland into the print culture of the diaspora, he observes how Apo Lacay:

had become a little boy again living all the tales he had told [...] about a vanished race, listening to the gorgeous laughter of men in the midst of abject poverty and tyranny. For that was the time of his childhood, in the age of great distress and calamity in the land, when the fury of an invading race impaled their hearts in the tragic cross of slavery and ignorance. (*On Becoming Filipino* 113-114)

As the narrator observes the transformation in Apo Lacay's face, he knows that it is also the transfigurative moment of Apo Lacay's passing. The narrator buries Apo Lacay but does not feel sad, as the death seemed so "quiet and natural" (*On Becoming Filipino* 114). Shortly after, the narrator sails to America.

Bulosan's narrative of how his stories are written provides insight into the constitution of Filipino subjects connected by and brought into existence through cultural resistance and the history of (neo)colonialism. Apo Lacay's person and tales are evidence of both the violent toll *and* failure of Spanish colonialism. He remains as the lone survivor of Spanish Catholic conquest and conversion, a witness to both the material and cultural genocide who survives to pass on his stories to the preeminent figure of the Filipino diaspora in America. This history of resistance informs and lives on in Bulosan's own writing. The narrator closes the essay with: "And now in America, writing many years later, I do not exactly know which were the words of the old man of the mountains and which are mine. But they are his tales as well as mine, so I hope we have written stories that really belong to everyone in that valley beautiful beyond any telling of it" (*On Becoming Filipino* 114). Here Bulosan connects the Pangasinan villagers, the legacy of colonialism, the shadow of benevolent assimilation, and the experience of migration and US domestic racism through the blurring of authorship.

Whose stories are Bulosan's? Are they his own, Apo Lacay's, the villagers', or

everyone's simultaneously? In this shared production of culture, no single figure owns this representation of Filipino subjectivity, yet all participate in it. All three are necessary to Bulosan's process of writing his stories and invoking a powerfully resistant Filipino subject across time and space. Ultimately, however, while all three are connected, they are not equivalent. Bulosan's allegory thus poses cultural production and the formation of the decolonizing and anti-capitalist Filipino subject as an unending process of imagination and exchange. It is a process that balances between the potential universality of the Filipino subject *and* a necessary politics of difference. It is a process shaped by and capable of intervening in material forces. And, finally, as the story of the relationship between Apo Lacay and Bulosan's narrator demonstrates, it is a messy collaborative process in which authorship becomes blurred. In many ways, it is this collaborative process that this article itself engages in – three disparate voices attempting to articulate an outline for CFFS informed by but incapable of being reduced to the writings and practices of Bulosan himself. This is the powerful possibility of a Critical Filipina and Filipina Studies Collective and whatever transformative agencies and projects that may emerge from it.

## Community Organizing

Parallels between Bulosan's second wave Filipino migrants, and today's continuous waves of post-1965 Filipino migrants are important in understanding the conditions under which Filipino migrants can build solidarity with one another. As we have argued, our contemporary conditions have changed greatly since the epoch of Bulosan's writing. In struggling to understand the widespread social, cultural, and economic changes that have taken place in the aftermath of a post-war industrial boom, we find great insight in Mark Twain's remarks that "History does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme." We take the position that a CFFS framework must consider the evolving and ongoing (neo)colonial relationship between the Philippines and the US. Today, under the guise of neoliberal globalization, CFFS can offer community-based explanations to the permanence of the colonial and imperialist agenda of the US in the Philippines and its connections to the racialized international labor markets in which Filipino/a migrants are employed as precarious, low-wage workers (such as farm workers, cannery workers of old, and the caregivers and domestic workers of today). A subaltern Filipino/a condition informed Bulosan's inspiration to collective action and illustrates a radical Filipino agency drawing upon one another for creative survival and unabashed resistance. Therefore, CFFS cannot be confined to an academic endeavor intent on the documentation of diverse Filipino/a experiences but a political project actively engaged with community formations that are actively uncovering, examining, and altering unjust global structures that are responsible in framing shared experiences of oppression. In offering a preliminary outline for CFFS, we are attentive to

Bulosan's exploration of becoming Filipino in America not merely as an exemplary immigrant narrative but rather in the words of San Juan in his paper, "Carlos Bulosan, Filipino Writer-Activist," "a political project of realizing collective emancipation...a question of becoming Filipino on what grounds, for what reasons and principles" (128). Thus, a historical materialist analysis of "becoming Filipino" is an effort to analyze the political economic underpinnings that shape the organizing strategies of Filipino/as within and beyond the US nation state as they make sense of the America in their hearts.

In *AIH*, Bulosan describes conditions of landlessness and usury that was the basis for Allos and his generation's internal migration, and ultimately, Allos's international migration to the United States. Today, neoliberal globalization in the Philippines has exacerbated land dispossession through rampant land-use conversions, development aggression by agri-business corporations, continuing sale of Philippine lands by the Philippine government to external buyers, trade liberalization, and land privatization. The Philippines as a neoliberal state continues to prioritize economic development in terms of liberalizing the Philippine economic agenda through loosening restrictions on land and land use. A new feature of its neoliberal transformation is the systematizing labor export and migration management. As Robyn Rodriguez in *Migrants for Export* has observed, landlessness remains a pivotal issue in inducing internal migration in the Philippines while working in tandem with the Philippine labor brokerage state to export labor and maintain a remittance industry to compensate for the lack of the economic development. The long-standing, complex, neocolonial relationship between the Philippines and the US is a key factor in organizing the current-day, large-scale outmigration of Filipino/as.

At present, Filipino/as have come to the US and taken up a range of occupations. Scholars in sociology such as A. Portes and R. G. Rumbaut have given much attention to the upward mobility of Filipino/a immigrants and second generation Filipino/a Americans due to their work in professional sectors like nursing. However, absent in the sociological literature is the Filipino experience working in gendered low-wage industries and temporary contractual workers. The dearth in these recent types of migrant workers reinforces the model minority myth as the model of Filipino assimilation in the US. Still, similar to the Filipino experiences Bulosan wrote and documented in *AIH*, there is a critical amount of immigrants from the Philippines, a majority of them women, that are experiencing abuse and exploitative treatment based on their immigration status (or lack thereof).

Many Filipino migrants, over half of them women, arrive in the US and are pushed out of their immigration status because the lack of legalization avenues in the US immigration systems. When out of status, yet still in need of work, they often work in precarious low-wage industries such as domestic work, which includes housekeeping, care giving, and nannying. Because of the illegalizing character of US immigration law highlighted by Mae Ngai, even Filipino migrants arriving with

contracts in professional sectors such as education, nursing, construction, and steel work experience trafficking and criminalization due to expired work visas. For example, Filipino migrants working as caregivers in the San Francisco Bay Area experience rampant wage theft from private and facility employers in terms of underpaying the minimum wage and no overtime pay, and work without labor standards such as lack of health benefits, no meal or rest breaks, and no sick leave.<sup>7</sup> The neoliberal attacks on social services in the US leave a great need for underpaid workers in sectors of care and health in the US, thus providing a common milieu for migrant workers in different occupations.

Exploitative cases abound of Filipino professionals contracted in the Philippines and suffer contract-substitution when they arrive in the US.<sup>8</sup> For example, in the 2007 case of the Sentosa 27++ nurses, a recruiting company called Sentosa Care LLC hired Filipino migrants in the Philippines to work as nurses in New York City. Upon their arrival, they underwent contract substitution and were employed by an alternate agency to work in nursing facilities instead of as hospital nurses. The Sentosa nurses, over half being women, were compelled to work jobs they were not recruited for. After two years of workdays over eight hours a day and subpar living conditions, 10 trafficked nurses walked out of their jobs to protest their gross living and working conditions. Their recruiter subsequently filed a civil case against the nurses for patient abandonment even if the nurses walked out during off hours. In response, the Sentosa nurses organized together to file to dismiss the civil case against them and file a complaint with the Philippine Overseas Employment Agency (POEA). In a liminal position as temporary visa holders in the U.S. and migrant citizens of the Philippines, the nurses were perplexed about which government they could trust or seek help from. When these avenues were delayed in lengthy legal processes, the Sentosa nurses drew support from political organizing in the Filipino American community in New York City and transnational connections to an organization called MIGRANTE, an international alliance of Filipino migrant organizations in over 20 countries globally. Organizing in New York City alongside MIGRANTE's campaign in Manila linked Filipinos in the diaspora and enabled global opposition to inhumane treatment of Filipinos as precarious and trafficked workers. Such organizing efforts that were both local and transnational in scope allowed the campaign to gain widespread visibility that put pressure on the companies silencing the nurses' and sought accountability from the Philippine government.

Currently, collaboration between Filipino/a migrant workers and Filipina American scholars animate the twenty-first century, transnational yet local iteration of Bulosan's labor activism. In recent years, CFFSC scholars Francisco and Rodriguez have collaborated with migrant caregivers and domestic workers to develop a participatory action research project called the "CARE Project." The goals were to collect the stories of caregivers to ultimately develop leadership and organizing skills among migrant workers and to put Filipino/a migrant workers at



the center of the research process. The CARE project, as an intersection between migrant activism and scholarly research, served as a catalyst for supporting the development the leadership of several migrant worker leaders towards the formation of a MIGRANTE Northern California and was further utilized to galvanize grassroots organizing within migrant workers in San Jose, Long Beach, and San Diego, California. The research projects and the organizations that have formed through a cyclical process of investigation and political education have resulted in various campaigns against wage theft, solidarity across low-wage migrant workers (especially those who have been trafficked, see Grand Isle Shipyard workers in New Orleans), and a demand to end the systematic labor export of Filipino/as globally. CFFS draws from the engagement of Filipino/a migrants in the project of becoming Filipino through activism, mobilization, and knowledge-production. Scholars' partnership and involvement in these types of projects and campaigns are actively supporting the leadership of today's migrant workers but they themselves can provide a vantage point for analysis and reflection.

Filipino/a migrant workers are building solidarity under worsening neoliberal conditions in the Philippines. Such a crisis has induced the forced migration of Filipino/as and their corresponding experiences of exploitation as migrant workers in the US. Migrants are drawing from their lived experiences of "being Filipino in America" and are nurturing a politics of migrant working class consciousness. Such a consciousness places proper critique of the Philippines as neoliberal state eschewing the labor export policy as a form of national development under global capitalism. We believe such immigrant praxis is an invaluable site of community organizing and knowledge-production offering grounded critiques of corrupt Philippine governance, landlessness, and struggles for survival within a context of widespread poverty and continuing outmigration. Drawing upon such collective organizing experiences illustrated in the praxis of Bulosan as well as MIGRANTE, CFFS can offer invaluable insights to the collective experiences and causes of being racialized, gendered, immigrant subjects in precarious, low-wage industries.<sup>9</sup> Bulosan's *AIH* illustrates how many Filipino migrants, upon their arrival to the US, used their sensibilities as criminalized migrants and low-wage workers to establish common ground. This dialectic between Filipino/a migrants' interpretation of global and local neocolonial conditions gives way to relationships that can build bridges with one another through experiences of marginalization. And although experiences as Filipino migrants are not exactly the same, their points of unity emerge from a structural critique of neoliberal globalization in the Philippines and in the US.

Continuing the tradition of Filipino politics that maintain an oppositional stance to oppression, imperialism, racism, and xenophobia, we believe CFFS can draw upon the work of Bulosan to understand the history and legacy of Filipino labor organizing in the US. CFFS is an emerging yet inchoate field that seeks to interrogate the continuing sociopolitical and economic conditions that promotes

the continuous export of people from the Philippines. This collective paper has become a means to explore how those structural forces shape the ways in which Filipinos in the US come together, recognize one another as viable political agents and organize under the political project of “becoming Filipino.” In this way, many of the current-day Filipino migrants are defining the project of becoming “Filipino” through their solidarity under the (neo)liberal/colonial conditions of impoverishment, forced migration, precarious work conditions, and gendered labor. MIGRANTE offers CFFS an alternative model to build upon grounded grassroots transnational labor organizing that echoes the creativity of Filipino activists in Bulosan’s writing and generation; both generations are attuned to the political and economic conditions of their time, but also to the specific cultural needs of the communities they represent.

## Conclusion

In this essay we have outlined a CFFS that draws inspiration and analysis from the praxis of Carlos Bulosan. As outlined above, Bulosan remains essential for contemporary scholars to build upon and forward an interdisciplinary subfield that unapologetically places the collective resistances of Filipino/as in a global diaspora at the center of its analysis. We recognize that the perspectives articulated in our collective outline for CFFS is not comprehensive as all the authors identify as Filipino/a American. Nevertheless, operational with a historical materialist analysis of political economy, sincere in its engagement with culture and the politics of difference, and connected to various community activist formations both in the US and abroad, we believe our outline for CFFS can demarcate what E. San Juan has eloquently identified, “Filipinos in the United States possess their own historical trajectory, one with its own singular profile but always linked in a thousand ways to what is going on in the Philippines” (*On Becoming Filipino* 111).

Reviewing the literature within our respective fields of education, sociology, and literature, we are optimistic about the renewed interest in Bulosan and more generally the growing body of scholarship on Filipino American experiences and its relationship to the Philippines and the Filipino diaspora. We recognize that the production of such scholarship was only made possible from the historic successes of diverse working people and social movement politics. Such struggles have also enabled the formation of our scholar activist formation briefly summarized in the introduction of this essay. We believe CFFS as a politicized field of study is situated to build upon this important and ongoing history for ethnic studies by foregrounding an element that academic scholarship at times has abstracted or more dangerously elided altogether and that is the necessity of collective struggle. Collective struggle is what binds the experiences of Filipino/a *manongs* with racialized US formations as well as contemporary OFWs across both history and geography. It is for this reason that Bulosan serves as a significant historical signpost in our outline for

CFFS.

The subaltern history that Bulosan gave voice to is part of our present and also points to the potentialities for an alternative future. Can we realize Bulosan's dream for another world "where war is eliminated, unemployment vanquished, profiteering a legend from the ledgers of predatory animals, and peace reality translated into every human endeavor with the accompanying crescendo of a triumphant democracy" (*ILWU Yearbook* 1)? The process towards realizing such a world, very much like this essay, will be untidy and at times incompatible. Therefore, our objectives in collectively outlining CFFS is not simply toward further establishing an academic subfield, but to participate in the continuing struggle for a just society and a better life. Toward these ends, CFFS will require new methods of international and interracial solidarities where collective voices are cast upon (academic) institutions of power and exclusion. It will necessitate the pooling of ideas and resources so that a united yet diverse voice can be summoned in the cause of challenging dominant ideologies that detach the individual subject from larger social forces, community formations, and resistant histories. It is only fitting that we conclude our outline for Critical Filipino/Filipina Studies with Bulosan's own words as he best conveys a collective project we have inherited and are actively striving to fully realize in our times:

What I am trying to do, especially in my writings . . . is to utilize our common folklore, tradition and history in line with my socialist thinking. . . . But in the long run we are pooling our knowledge together for a better understanding of [wo]man and [her]his world; not to deify [wo]man, but to make [her]him human, that we may see our faults and virtues in [her]him. (*On Becoming Filipino* 181)

## Notes

1. This political standpoint is certainly not unique to Carlos Bulosan. For more on the emergence of a radical diasporic Filipino/a consciousness see Michael Viola's "W.E.B. Du Bois and Filipino/a American Exposure Programs to the Philippines: Race Class Analysis in an Epoch of 'Global Apartheid'" in *Race Ethnicity and Education* and "Toward a Filipino/a Critical (FilCrit) Pedagogy: Exposure Programs to the Philippines and the Politicization of Melissa Roxas" in *Journal of Asian American Studies*.
2. This is most evident in the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU) Local 37 Yearbook Bulosan would edit. In the *Yearbook's* introduction, Bulosan articulates the vision of Local 37. He explains how the central objectives of the union are "channeled toward the collective interest and welfare of the whole people; a society, we must repeat, where war is eliminated, unemployment vanquished, profiteering a legend from the ledgers of predatory animals, and peace reality translated into every human endeavor with the accompanying crescendo of a triumphant democracy" (ILWU Yearbook, 1952 1). Internationalist in their scope, Local 37's vision was not limited to the American working class, as the *Yearbook* highlighted world events taking place in China, Korea, Canada, and various countries of Western Europe. However, with regard to global affairs the collections' central focus was the political situation in the Philippines. For instance, in a piece titled, "Terrorism Rides the Philippines" the author (widely regarded to be Bulosan) exposes the repressive violence used against organized labor and the Philippine government's persecution of nationalist leaders.
3. For more on the intersection between critical pedagogy and the Filipino diaspora see Michael Viola's: "The Filipinization of Critical Pedagogy: Widening the Scope of Critical Educational Theory" in *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*.
4. See the important analysis offered by Jeffrey Cabusao in his "Decolonizing Knowledges: Asian American Studies, Carlos Bulosan, and Insurgent Filipino Diasporic Imagination," 2011; E. San Juan's "Carlos Bulosan, Filipino Writer-Activist: Between a Time of Terror and the Time of Revolution," 2008; Libretti's "Carlos Bulosan's Songs of Innocence and Experience: From Utopian Americanism and Internationalism to Filipino Nationalist Politics and Culture," 2006.
5. Capitalist production does not take the form of simple commodity production, which has been widely represented as the circuit of C-M-C. This myth of bourgeois economics tells us that a commodity (C) represents a definite, qualitative use-value that is exchanged for money (M) and then is exchanged for yet another commodity (C). Bulosan saw behind this capitalist veil and would certainly align with a historical materialist understanding of what is called the "general formula of capital," or M-C-M'. In this formula, money (M) is exchanged for labor power and commodities to produce a new commodity, signified as (C), which is sold for the sole purpose of ascertaining more money (M'). This is not a closed system as M' facilitates the next circuit of production to obtain M" followed by M'" in an unsustainable progression

of endless accumulation and expansion. As such, it is not use value or the fulfilling of concrete human needs that constitutes the objectives of capitalist production but rather exchange value or the creation of greater profit (or surplus value).

6. Amanda Solomon Amorao analyzes further the potential re-inscription of a patriarchal framework of labor organizing as it pertains to re-membering the *manong* generation and Bulosan's writings in "Liberatory Desires and the Hypersexuality of Philippine Independence," Association of Asian American Studies Conference. The Westin Hotel, Seattle, WA. 18 April 2013.
7. For more on the conditions of Filipino migrant workers in the Bay Area, see Valerie Francisco and Robyn Rodriguez's "Globalization and the Rise of Undocumented Migration" in *Hidden Lives and Human Rights: Understanding the Controversies and Tragedies in Undocumented Immigration*. Ed. Lois Lorentzen. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clio, forthcoming.
8. See Robyn Rodriguez's "Towards a Critical Filipino Studies Approach to Philippine Migration." *Philippine Palimpsests: Essays for the 21st Century*. Eds. Martin Manalansan and Augusto Espiritu, forthcoming.
9. For an example of what it would mean to draw on such collective organizing experiences, see Valerie Francisco's "Ang Ating Iisang Kuwento' Our Collective Story: Migrant Filipino Workers and Participatory Action Research." *Action Research*.1 (2013): 78-93.

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