

Jacob Morris
HIST 4726-013
Winter 2020-21
Project Lousy Draft

Immigration in the Empire: Carlos Bulosan and Filipino Migrants in the United States

Emilio Aguinaldo, the Filipino nationalist leader who militarily aligned with the United States during the Spanish American War, told an American general that he found “no authority for colonies” in the “Constitution of the United States” after studying the document “attentively.”¹ Aguinaldo stated that he had “no fear” that the United States would assert imperial control over the Philippines once it had been liberated from Spanish dominion because to do so would directly contradict the principals of the U.S.’s founding document.² American policymakers, however, were determined to resolve – or at least ignore – this contradiction and transform the American Republic into an empire. This essay traces how the contradictions that marked the imperial relationship between the United States and the Philippines played out in the life of Carlos Bulosan.

Bulosan was born into a peasant family in Binalonan, Pangasinan on the island of Luzon in 1913.³ Never able to regularly attend school himself, Bulosan spent his childhood helping his father till the family’s land and joining his mother on long journeys between market towns. By the time Bulosan was a teenager, it became clear to him that his life and ambitions would forever be “circumscribed” if he remained a peasant in the Philippines.⁴ Bulosan boarded a ship bound for Seattle in July of 1930.⁵ He never returned to the Philippines.⁶ Bulosan’s life in the United States was transient and exceedingly dangerous. He constantly traveled the western half of the country

¹ Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876-1917* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), 242.

² Ibid.

³ Carey McWilliams, “Introduction,” in *American is in the Heart: A Personal History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), xv.

⁴ Carlos Bulosan, *America is in the Heart: A Personal History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), 62.

⁵ McWilliams, “Introduction,” xv.

⁶ Ibid.

in search of work during the nadir of the Great Depression. Bulosan's constant flight was not only a search for employment – he was often forced to flee from racist, anti-Filipino violence. Bulosan eventually became involved in the labor movement where he was able to develop his writing skills drafting pieces for socialist and union newspapers. While suffering from the tuberculosis that would eventually take his life, Bulosan began working on his autobiography America is in the Heart. This essay draws heavily from that work. Bulosan articulated a boundless hope for the possibility of America in his autobiography against the backdrop of his many demoralizing experiences in the country.

The Consequences of “Benevolent Assimilation”

American sovereignty over the archipelago was brutally asserted following the close of the Spanish American War in 1898. Between Admiral Dewey's defeat of the Spanish fleet in Manila Bay in 1898 and the last surrender of Filipino nationalist guerillas to American troops in 1902, the U.S. military killed around 220,000 Filipinos through battle and through the famines created by their war of conquest.⁷ American lawmakers justified the conquest of the Philippines by presenting racialized arguments that depicted the Filipinos as inherently incapable of self-government and the American occupation of the islands as beneficent “supervision.”⁸ Theodore Roosevelt stated in his famous 1899 “Strenuous Life” speech that the people of the Philippines were “utterly unfit for self-government and show no signs of becoming fit.”⁹ This racist belief led Roosevelt to conclude that allowing the Philippines to become independent would leave the country in “anarchy,” which would mean that American intervention in the Spanish American War would have been “for harm and not for good.”¹⁰ William Howard Taft, who served as the Philippine commissioner before his

⁷ Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues*, 241-3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 222-3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

term as president, portrayed American control as a means of helping “our little brown brothers” to “develop ... Anglo-Saxon political principles and skills.”¹¹ Imperialists were aided by the material consequences of the closing of the frontier, which more or less compelled the U.S. government to look for new markets abroad to support its burgeoning industrial economy.¹² The Philippines would provide, according to Henry Cabot Lodge, a captive market in which “ten million inhabitants ... would have to buy our goods.”¹³ These justifications for the imperial project coalesced into policy that President William McKinley described as “benevolent assimilation.”¹⁴ The United States were not “invaders or conquerors,” but “friends” who would “protect the natives ... in their employments” by forging (unequal) economic relations between the two countries.¹⁵ Taft’s formulation of America’s imperial mission and its white supremacist paternalism focused on teaching “backwards” peoples that came into shape as official colonial policy through the introduction of an American-style education system. Both aspects of “benevolent assimilation” would shape Bulosan’s childhood and ultimately encourage his migration to the United States.

Conditions in the Philippines of Bulosan’s childhood were changing fast. Investment from American agricultural interests facilitated the accumulation of landholdings in large plantation estates, which created a new class of landless peasants. Among this new group of peasants who had been “dispossessed of their lands” were Bulosan’s uncles.¹⁶ Bulosan remembered how his relatives struggled to adjust to their new precarity and remarked that one uncle “resorted to [revolutionary] violence and died violently” while the other “entered the world of crime and

¹¹ Ibid., 227.

¹² Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 98.

¹³ Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues*, 222.

¹⁴ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 99.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Carlos Bulosan, *America is in the Heart: A Personal History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), 23.

criminals.”¹⁷ Seeing how these new economic conditions deprived their relatives of their land, the Bulosans attempted to take advantage of the education system implemented by the American colonial government to find financial security. “U.S. colonialism stunted the Philippine national economy,” so the few professional jobs available could be financial godsend for peasant families.¹⁸ The family pooled its resources to put one of Bulosan’s older brothers, Macario, through high school in the neighboring city of Lingayen.¹⁹ Even though a high school education was nominally free, students were forced to pay for room and board in “those predatory years.”²⁰ The Bulosan family plot and their small-scale trading business did not generate enough money to support Macario, so Bulosan’s father was forced to sell one hectare of his land after another until their whole farm was owned by a moneylender.²¹ The family’s last hope was for Macario to graduate and secure a job as a teacher. With his salary, they planned to buy back their land from the usurious moneylender. And while Macario did graduate and find work in a local school, the family was not able to regain possession of their land.²² The dispossession of the Bulosans was a result of both the economic disruption caused by American imperialism and the education policy it introduced. That Bulosan’s uncles lost their land before his family indicates that the land pressures generated by the influx of foreign capital into the country had reached the province of Pangasinan before the Bulosans were forced to turn to the moneylender. That they sacrificed ownership of their land to fund the education of Macario demonstrates how professional jobs and the American diploma necessary to acquire them simultaneously squeezed Filipino peasants off their traditional plots.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Yen Le Espiritu, *Home Bound: Filipino American Lives across Cultures, Communities, and Countries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 24.

¹⁹ Bulosan, *America is in the Heart*, 14.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 22.

²² Ibid., 29.

Bulosan wrote that his family's loss of their farm was the "beginning of [his] conscious life."²³ Over the next few years, he would travel across Luzon in search of work. While working with his mother on a large plantation in Tayug, Bulosan witnessed a peasant revolt. The violence with which it erupted and was put down convinced Bulosan that he had "to leave that environment and all its crushing forces."²⁴ He had seen how landlessness had "broken" his father's "spirit," reducing the hero of his childhood to a "pathetic little figure."²⁵ He had also seen how the peasants' last means of redress – revolt – resulted in severe repression. Migrating to America, he resolved, was the only hope for a more dignified life.

The Attenuated Belonging of the "U.S. National"

When Bulosan landed in Seattle in 1930, he entered the country as a U.S. national. This legal category was designed to demarcate the rights of and restrictions on America's colonial subjects. This status was cemented through Supreme Court cases, legislation, and executive actions. The Supreme Court officially categorized Filipinos as nationals in 1912's *Roa v. Collector of Customs*, in which it ruled that "Filipinos were not to be regarded as aliens for customs purposes."²⁶ In 1917, the court ruled that "immigration laws" were "inapplicable to 'persons subject to the permanent jurisdiction of the United States.'"²⁷ The 1924 Johnson-Reed Act explicitly exempted "citizens of islands under US jurisdiction" from being classified as aliens.²⁸ As it took shape, the category of U.S. national came to be broadly defined as those who "owed allegiance to the United States but did not have the rights of citizens."²⁹ Filipinos had two major

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 62.

²⁵ Ibid., 63.

²⁶ Filomeno V. Aguilar, Jr., "The Riddle of the Alien-Citizen: Filipino Migrants as US Nationals and the Anomalies of Citizenship, 1900s-1930s," *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 19, no. 2 (2010): 220.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 100.

rights as U.S. nationals: “freedom of movement within the territorial jurisdiction” and the right to work in the United States.³⁰ The exclusion of immigrants from Asian countries had been made nearly total by the Johnson-Reed Act, and national status allowed Filipinos to bypass these barriers. Professor Yen Le Espiritu argues that the right to travel and work in the United States was afforded to Filipinos because American companies sought “cheapened labor to fill the labor shortage in Hawaii and the Pacific Coast” created by Asian exclusion policies.³¹ The list of rights denied to U.S. nationals was much longer. Filipinos were barred from “voting, establishing a business, holding private and public office, and owning land and other property in the United States.”³² Denied the franchise, Filipinos in the United States were vulnerable to “race-based labor exploitation” without any recourse through representation.³³ U.S. nationals occupied a liminal space between belonging and alienage – Filipinos were wanted as exploitable workers but were not given the protections associated with citizenship. Bulosan’s experiences of exploitative labor practices and racist, anti-Filipino violence are exemplary of how Filipino migrants in the United States were nominally included but practically excluded.

Liminality in the United States

On its way to Seattle, the ship that brought Bulosan stopped in Hawaii.³⁴ Bulosan and his countrymen had been locked in steerage for the whole voyage, but they were met with hostility by the white American passengers when they ascended onto the sunlit decks.³⁵ “Why don’t they ship those monkeys back where they came from?” asked a young woman within earshot of Bulosan.³⁶

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Espiritu, *Home Bound*, 51.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Bulosan, *America is in the Heart*, 98.

³⁵ Ibid., 99.

³⁶ Ibid.

This event, which occurred before Bulosan stepped foot on American soil, presaged many of the interactions he would have with white Americans over the next two decades.

Upon disembarking in Seattle, Bulosan was hired by a predatory labor contractor to work in the “fish canneries of Alaska.”³⁷ Filipino students and transient workers often took jobs in these salmon canneries.³⁸ Bulosan’s contract described how the contractor would deduct “twenty dollars” from his pay for “bedding” and “another twenty for luxuries.”³⁹ Bulosan remembered that “what the luxuries were, [he] never found out.”⁴⁰ In Alaska, Bulosan was forced to work in dangerous conditions and was witness to workplace accidents that left his coworkers maimed.⁴¹ At the end of the season, the contractor had deducted \$165 from his paycheck.⁴² This incident demonstrates how easily exploited Filipino migrants were without the protections of citizenship.

Bulosan’s next job was in an apple orchard in Moxee City, in the Yakima Valley of Washington.⁴³ Bulosan worked for a French immigrant who treated his Filipino workers relatively humanely. One night, while the owner’s daughter was singing with the Filipino workers, a mob of local whites started shooting at the bunkhouse. Bulosan fled for his life across the Rattlesnake Mountains.⁴⁴ This experience captured both the murderous violence directed against Filipinos by white mobs and one of their motivations for violence. The attack began as the Filipino workers were socializing with the orchard owner’s white daughter. Historian Mae Ngai argues that Filipinos were racialized in America as “sexually aggressive.”⁴⁵ The “most common complaint

³⁷ Ibid., 101.

³⁸ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 102.

³⁹ Bulosan, *America is in the Heart*, 101.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 102.

⁴² Ibid., 104.

⁴³ Ibid., 109.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 111.

⁴⁵ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 110.

against Filipinos” in the 1920s and 30s was that “they fancied white women.”⁴⁶ Bulosan witnessed several racist attacks against Filipinos for their interactions with white women. While working in the home of a wealthy woman in Santa Barbara, Bulosan overheard dinner guests discuss this racist stereotype. “I understand that they go crazy when they see a white woman,” one man told the group after another had proclaimed that he would not allow a Filipino near his daughter.⁴⁷ This prejudice functioned to isolate Filipino migrants from American society. The 1930 census reveals that the Filipino population in the United States at the time was that “93 percent” male.⁴⁸ By socially prohibiting interaction with white women on pain of death, the American public asserted that Filipinos were wanted only as exploitable laborers – not as human beings with emotional and social needs.

Conclusion

After being racially profiled by highway patrolmen in California, Bulosan remarked that “in many ways it was a crime to be a Filipino in California.”⁴⁹ He had seen a Filipino bar patron arbitrarily killed by police officers without provocation or cause.⁵⁰ He had been beaten nearly to death by cops in Klamath Falls, Oregon because they wanted to rob him for drinking money.⁵¹ Mere existence was, for Filipinos in the western United States in the 1930s, a capital offense. Despite all that he had seen and suffered, Bulosan ended his autobiography by stating that “no man could destroy [his] faith in America that had sprung from all [his] hopes and aspirations, *ever*.”⁵² That he was capable of maintaining such impossible hope is a testament to his strength.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Bulosan, *America is in the Heart*, 141.

⁴⁸ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 103.

⁴⁹ Bulosan, *America is in the Heart*, 121.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 129.

⁵¹ Ibid., 156.

⁵² Ibid., 327.