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Carlos Bulosan and his Poetry

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CARLOS BULOSAN AND HIS POETRY: A BIBLIOGRAPHY AND ANTHOLOGY. By Susan Evangelista. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1985. 178 pages.

With this well-arranged collection of Bulosan's entire corpus of poems and a lively, cogent biographical introduction and thematic commentary on Bulosan as a "Third World poet" by Professor Susan Potter Evangelista, the Bulosan canon has approached near completion. Except for a few more letters, essays and scattered notes—*The Laughter of My Father* will soon be reprinted in Manila—Bulosan's complete *oeuvre* is now accessible to a new generation of Filipinos, and to a wider English-speaking public, wanting to grasp how it felt like to be a Filipino immigrant worker in the United States, and how that knowledge can be used for humanist liberation.

While *The Laughter* has been translated in over a dozen languages, and a few stories from the collection I edited, *The Philippines is in the Heart* (1978) have been recently translated into Russian, no standard academic anthology of American literature to date has even included, much less mentioned, Bulosan or any Filipino writer living in America, although a token Chicano is sometimes included. Bulosan arrived in the U.S. in 1930 as an "American national" and died in Seattle in 1956 still a Filipino citizen.

While many of the events in Bulosan's life have already become public knowledge and been often rehearsed in most scholarly accounts, at least after my introductory *Carlos Bulosan and the Imagination of the Class Struggle* (1972)—we all owe an incalculable debt to Dolores Feria's edition of Bulosan's letters *Sound of Falling Light* (1960)—Evangelista uncovers nuances in Bulosan's dealings with the Commonwealth government in exile, especially the information given by P.C. Morante; and in his ambiguous relations with American women (a topic that needs in-depth psycho-historical analysis). She also provides a vital and required background to Bulosan's militant role in combatting the vicious McCarthy witch-hunting in the early fifties. She also clarifies the most contentious and controversial aspect of Bulosan's career, his relations with Filipino writers (the item about Yabes' destroying Bulosan's letters during the "Red Scare" in Manila is revealing); and, in the second part of the biography, she persuasively argues for reading Bulosan as a Third World poet, a necessary critical emphasis today.

My own reservation here concerns the contradiction between Evangelista's rhetorical strategy of emphasizing Bulosan's "humanism" (part of united-front cultural politics) and the existential form associated with such transcendent liberal humanism, and the radical (specifically anti-business, fascist practices) substance of Bulosan's life and world-view which she herself documents. Bulosan is indeed historically specific and concrete about the forces suppressing human potential and repressing the existential creativity of immigrants and all working people. He opposed a specific political and econo-

mic system: late (monopoly) capitalism. Only by being specific was Bulosan able to embody a universal appeal.

This contradiction implicit in Evangelista's critical perspective should not detract from the importance of her Third World focus, with which I entirely agree. What needs to be pointed out is that such a contradiction, which inherently bedevils all Bulosan scholars, springs from the paradoxical nature of Bulosan's peasant anarchist sensibility (the form and theme of the poems reflect this necessary uneven development), and also from the critic's own historical position, in this case, an American woman academic positioned in the Marcos interregnum. I hasten to add that this is not a negative comment but an effort to describe the context of our critical endeavors. However, situating the critic in her historical milieu may help explain the major lacuna and weakness of Evangelista's biographical sketch: the violent racism against Filipinos in the U.S. doesn't just go back to the Yakima Valley incident of 1928 but to the atrocities of the Filipino-American War of 1898-1902 justified by the ideology of "Manifest Destiny" dating back to the ante-bellum South, the genocide of native Americans, the brutalizing of Chinese coolie labor in the nineteenth century, and the imperialist forays in South America and Asia. Also starkly absent is the rich revolutionary experience of Filipinos, especially the Tayug and other peasant insurrections in Bulosan's region, which constitutes the necessary paradigm or structuring principle of all of Bulosan's writing.

While Evangelista's biography concentrates on Bulosan as a poet (Bulosan's poetic temper and virtuosity, I would contend, is realized most fully in his short fiction and in parts of *America is in the Heart*), it is inadequate to discuss Bulosan's quite complicated position during the McCarthy period without some reference to his novel of this period, *The Power of the People* (original title: "The Cry and the Dedication.") I stress the importance of this novel because recently Luis Teodoro, a member of President Marcos' Center for Special Studies, has faulted Bulosan for his ignorance of actual happenings in the Philippines and his defective artistic sensibility. Aside from the crude empiricism of Teodoro's method and his lack of feeling for the contextual intricacies of Bulosan's writing *praxis* in the Fifties (how Bulosan transforms Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* motif of the journey into an allegorical—in Walter Benjamin's sense—mapping of U.S.-Philippine relations) or for the historical uniqueness of such a discursive act vis á vis other Filipino novels or novelists (except for Hernandez and a few others, who has dealt seriously with the Huk uprising?), Teodoro's general attack on Filipino progressive thought and writing abroad betrays an objectively reactionary motive.

Opposing the mechanistic narrowness of Teodoro's view, Evangelista's Third World Humanism (notwithstanding my own personal caveats) offers the most sensitive and judicious reading of Bulosan's texts placed in their complex socio-historical determinations.

Not so much for specific texts but for a whole mode of acting in the world of which his *praxis* of writing is the microcosm, Bulosan (like other committed writers) is today a battlefield of socio-cultural contestation. The recurrent attack on Bulosan by formalists, xenophobic sycophants of the regime today, or by pseudo-Marxists makes Evangelista's book a timely, valuable, and powerful weapon—not just a source of cognitive-aesthetic pleasure, which cannot be an end in itself—in the Filipino (and Third World people's) epic struggle for popular democracy, dignity, and genuine independence.

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TOWARD A PEOPLE'S LITERATURE. By Epifanio San Juan, Jr. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1984.

In his Foreword, Epifanio San Juan Jr. points out the indebtedness of literary criticism in the Philippines to the idealist/formalist theoretical framework. San Juan himself admits to being a practitioner of the formalist method, not in the New Criticism sense, but in the Russian formalist mode. The difference, the critic informs the reader, is that this method has been "recontained and deployed within a materialist/dialectical perspective" (p. x). Elsewhere in the Foreword, San Juan states:

What I hope to illustrate here, through a materialist hermeneutics performing both negative (unmasking ideology) and positive (valorizing the Utopian) functions, is the staging of the process in which we can appropriate most effectively Filipino writers/texts which otherwise would be used and exploited for our collective undoing. (p. xii)

At the outset, we are given the book's particular project, which is to fill in the gaps in the arguments of the author's previous writings. As the critic assures the reader, his earlier works centered on arguments which in retrospect were structured by some interstices and fissures. Indeed, *Toward a People's Literature* cannot be adequately understood without some knowledge of San Juan's other texts such as *The Radical Tradition in Philippine Literature* and *A Preface to Pilipino Literature*, to name a few. Nonetheless, it is still possible to arrive at some conclusions regarding San Juan's critical project based solely on this volume's arguments.

What makes this book interesting is not the kind of materials it has chosen to analyze, for other critics have written on the works of Jose Rizal and Amado V. Hernandez, among others. Nor is its significance derived from its use of a Marxist perspective, since a number of our critics have examined such writings from a socio-historical viewpoint heavily influenced by such Marxists thinkers as Georg Lukacs and Mao Tse Tung. In general, critics contemporaneous with San Juan have demonstrated how deeply committed the