

# From Identity Formation to Social Transformation

A Dialogue on Filipino American Studies

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## Abstract

Jeffrey Arellano Cabusao provides an editorial introduction to his 2016 edited volume *Writer in Exile/Writer in Revolt: Critical Perspectives on Carlos Bulosan* (University Press of America, an imprint of Rowman & Littlefield). This anthology gathers for the first time nearly sixty years of literary criticism by scholars in the United States and the Philippines on the first major Filipino writer in the United States – Carlos Bulosan. The editorial introduction will discuss how *Writer in Exile/Writer in Revolt* documents the unfolding of Bulosan’s radical literary imagination which straddle the colonial and neocolonial periods of U.S.-Philippine relations (from the pre-Pacific War period to the Cold War period). Six decades of literary criticism inventory Bulosan’s invaluable contributions to modern diasporic Filipino literature that, when historicized, reconceptualize concepts such as transnationality (border crossing), hybridity, and the binary opposition between Asian/Asian American literatures. In addition to discussing the significance of *Writer in Exile/Writer in Revolt*, the editorial introduction will reprint Cabusao’s dialogue piece (featured in the anthology) with distinguished Asian American scholars Lane Hirabayashi and Marilyn Alquizola on their groundbreaking research on

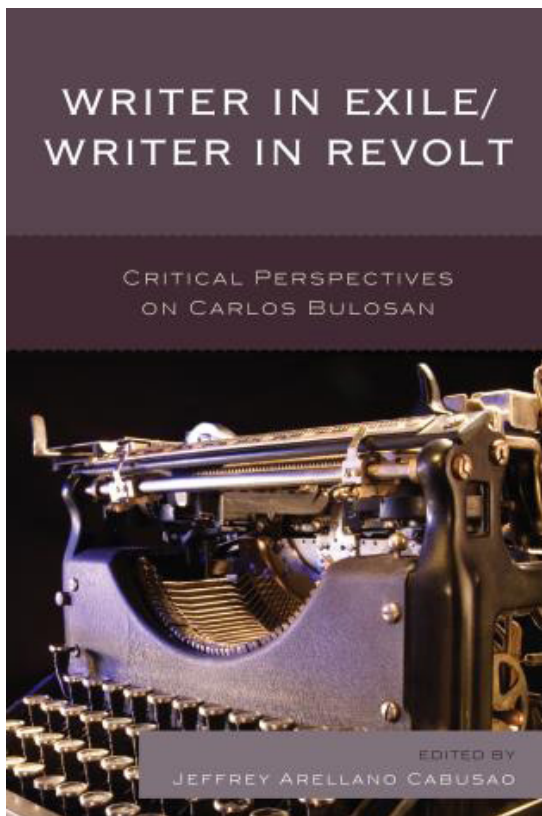
Bulosan's FBI files which reveal the transnational nature of political surveillance/repression and subaltern Filipino resistance that informed Carlos Bulosan's life and work.

**Keywords**

diaspora, exile, hybridity, identity formation, transnationality



Carlos Bulosan



Writer in Exile/Writer in Revolt: Critical Perspectives on Carlos Bulosan (2016)

This is a conversation in process between two Filipino American academics/educators located on opposite coasts of the United States. In this piece, Cabusao and Viola talk to each other about their “coming to voice” as Filipino Americans and their engagement with the field of Filipino American Studies. Their conversation theorizes the formation of Filipino American identity and its connection to the emergence and praxis of Filipino American Studies in the U.S. academy. What is evident in their dialogue with each other is a deep respect for the histories of Filipino Americans and Filipinos in the Philippines and a commitment to connecting intellectual work with collective movements for social change. What is also evident in this conversation is a deep, mutual respect between Cabusao and Viola—they’re breaking bread Fil-Am style. In this piece, we bear witness to two Filipino American academics/educators of the hip hop generation engaging with each other in a way that produces a conversation that weaves between and oftentimes occupies multiple sites at the same time—the U.S. academy, the college classroom, hip hop music, Filipino literature, Filipino American communities, the Philippines, the Filipino Diaspora, the “internal” Third World of the United States, the Global South. Janus-faced, their conversation reflects upon the history of Filipino Americans while simultaneously anticipating new approaches to Filipino American Studies that can only emerge through the collective struggle for self-determination by Filipinos everywhere.

## PART 1

### Growing up Filipino American: Theorizing Racial Identity

**Michael J. Viola (MJV):** I think it is important to ground my relationship to the field of Filipino/a American Studies by sharing a bit of my personal history. My parents came to the United States from the Philippines in 1970. My father was a doctor and my mother a nurse so their professional status expedited their entry to the United States. They were working in various hospitals throughout the East Coast beginning in Philadelphia and then New

York City, and eventually moving to Limestone, Maine so that my father could open his own family practice. I was born in Maine in 1978 and would live there until I was 4 years old. It was at that age that my father became very ill and my parents decided that it would be best to move West so that my mother would have support of relatives to aid her in caring for my dad and watching over my older sister and myself.

We moved to California's Central Valley in 1982. Growing up in Fresno, California I have very little knowledge of the role Filipino/a Americans played in their contributions to the economic, cultural, and political contributions of the region I would call home. Growing up in public schools, I did not learn about the important struggles of farmworkers in the region and the multiracial alliance between Latino and Filipino workers in the formation of the United Farm Workers (UFW) union. I did not learn about important writers and organizers like Carlos Bulosan, Philip Vera Cruz, or Larry Itliong or the contributions of Filipino/a Americans in the creation of an entire academic fields such as ethnic and Asian American studies until after I graduated from college. It was hip hop music that provided me the avenue to explore more deeply a history of immigrant struggle in California.

As a graduate student in 2004, I participated in a study abroad program to the Philippines. It was through that program that I was introduced to the writings of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Filipino American hip hop that has helped shape the lens in which I see the world. I began using Freire's critical pedagogy and Filipino/a American hip hop as conceptual tools to analyze my experiences as an immigrant youth, the neocolonial relationship between the United States and the Philippines, and social movements for radical global transformation. I started to explore the cultural work of Filipino American hip hop artists Native Guns and Blue Scholars in conversation with important Filipino intellectuals like Renato Constantino, Carlos Bulosan, E. San Juan, and Delia Aguilar. Before moving forward, I'd love to hear your own story of being a Filipino American.

**Jeffrey Arellano Cabusao (JAC):** Mike, thanks for sharing your personal story which resonates with the experiences of many Filipino Americans of

our generation. My father is from Alcala, Pangasinan. He joined the U.S. Navy after completing high school in the 1960s. His introduction to America was by way of being stationed in the U.S. south in the 1960s. Witnessing southern-styled racism against African Americans and other people of color combined with his own experience of racialized exploitation in the U.S. Navy (he worked as a cook, a barber, a driver) raised my father's consciousness (awareness) of the shared experience of racism between African Americans and Filipinos. My father petitioned my mother to join him in Hawai'i where he was stationed in the 1970s. My mother, whose family is from Camiling, Tarlac, was trained as a nurse in the Philippines. I was born in Tripler Hospital in Honolulu in 1975.

We moved around a bit because of my father's being stationed in multiple places. We moved from Honolulu, Hawai'i to Orlando, Florida to San Diego, California. I remember starting first grade in San Diego—where a majority of my classmates were kids of color (Filipino, Mexican, African American, and Samoan) with a sprinkling of working class whites. It was within this interethnic working class milieu that I developed my identity as a Filipino American (see Yen Le Espiritu's *Filipino American Lives* which captures the voices of some of the people I knew growing up). At home, I'd overhear my parents' conversations about painful experiences of racism at work compounded by the immense pressure to send money back home (to the Philippines) to support various relatives. These conversations were oftentimes punctuated by yelling or crying that oscillated between Tagalog and Ilocano. It took my mother nearly two decades to find a steady full time job as a registered nurse. Her prior experiences were working in a convalescent home and working as a private nurse for a wealthy white man. I remember this man's name, which was Bill, and his phone number written on the tiny chalk board on our kitchen wall next to the phone. He wanted only Filipina nurses to attend to him.

At an early age, I was struck by the specificity of racism directed at Filipinos which, simultaneously, revealed our common link with other working class communities of color in our San Diego community. Like you, I was also drawn to hip hop music of the 80s and 90s. This music, which

surrounded us young people in Southeast San Diego, became an outlet to articulate our rage at racial and economic injustice and our desire to move beyond the boundaries of race and class. There was no Filipino American Studies curriculum in my school when I was growing up. While I was lucky to learn a little bit about African American history every February in my elementary school in Southeast San Diego, my high school experience in North Park San Diego (a predominately white high school) was completely devoid of any literature by or about Filipinos or people of color (with the exception of two high school teachers who were sympathetic to incorporating an understanding of racism in their curriculum). Attending Oberlin College in the 1990s provided an opportunity for me to confront the psychological wounds (trauma) of racism I've accumulated from childhood through active participation in student organizations (Asian American Alliance, Third World House, Third World Co-op) that were committed to mobilizing for Asian American Studies and Ethnic Studies. Through solidarity with other student organizations (Abusua/African American, La Alianza/Latina/o, Lambda and Zami/LGBTQ) our organization mobilized various rallies and teach-ins to address institutionalized racism (and its connection with sexism and homophobia). With kind support from our Multicultural Resource Center on campus, our campaign developed a speaker series of prominent Asian American scholars and activists. We invited Yuri Kochiyama, E. San Juan, Jr., Delia D. Aguilar, Evalyn Hu-Dehart, Peter Kwong, Ronald Takaki and others to campus. E. San Juan and Delia Aguilar nurtured the intellectual curiosity of young Filipino Americans on our Oberlin campus—encouraged us to think deeply about the social responsibility of Filipino American intellectual life that must not be restricted by the boundaries of the academy.

### What is Filipino American Studies?

**MJV:** Filipino American Studies has its roots in the radical student movements of the 1960s that emerged through a wider context and conversation with an anti-war movement, the civil rights struggle, and the women's liberation movement. Asian American college students throughout the United

States were becoming politicized and identifying with the analysis and activism of the Black Power movement but also the Third World Liberation struggles in Asia. The Bay Area became an important geographical space for the incubation of radical politics as well as international and multiracial solidarities. For instance, Filipino/a American student and community activists at San Francisco State College found it integral to identify with the causes of the Third World liberation struggles in the Asian continent and took on the name of the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF). A statement of goals by the Philippine American Collegiate Endeavour (PACE), one of the key organizations in the TWLF, acknowledges their understanding of racialized and immigrant communities and the commonalities with Third World peoples. They proclaimed their goal as “to fuse ourselves with the masses of Third World people, which are the majority of the world’s peoples, to create, through struggle, a new humanity, a new humanism, and a New World consciousness, and within that context collectively control our destinies.” Asian American scholars Gary Okihiro and Daryl Maeda have historicized the praxis of student activists in demanding that college education be directed toward the service of their communities and a mechanism in dismantling the structures of U.S. imperialism, racism, patriarchy, and a myriad of interconnected social oppressions (Okihiro, 2016; Maeda, 2009, 2011).

What has not yet been foregrounded is the role of Filipino/a Americans in this ongoing struggle.

Certainly, Filipino/a American studies began to emerge as an academic field from the material conditions and activism of the late 1960s, however, I think it would be a major oversight to frame Filipino/a American studies without a historical understanding of Filipino/a experiences and struggles prior to 1968. Understanding this history can further propel and equip Filipino/a American studies in further theorizing the ways that resistance can be coordinated with other racialized groups within the United States as well social movement forces outside of it toward recreating the world anew.

**JAC:** Mike, I appreciate your situating the emergence of Filipino American Studies within the mass movements of the 1960s—specifically the student



strike at San Francisco State College (now San Francisco State University) in the late 1960s, which gave birth to the country's first School of Ethnic Studies. One of my favorite essays on this history is written by Asian American scholar-activist Glenn Omatsu—*The Four Prisons and Movements of Liberation*," which is the lead essay in Karin Aguilar-San Juan's *The State of Asian America*. While Omatsu's essay primarily focuses on the development of the Asian American Movement, Asian American Studies, and Asian American political consciousness, it also sheds light on the central role Filipino American students played in the Asian American Movement and the creation of Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State. I love your quoting the PACE statement on connecting Filipino American experiences with the masses of the Third World and in the process creating new forms of consciousness. What strikes me about the history of Ethnic Studies, Asian American Studies, and Filipino American Studies is that, at their inception, these fields of knowledge production had the following characteristics: 1.) they were informed by mass movements for social justice outside of the academy; 2.) they began to explore the experiences of people of color within the United States within a shared historical, social, and economic context; 3.) they sought to develop a larger global perspective that enables one to see connections between the experiences of people of color within the United States and the experiences of the masses of people within the so-called "Third World" (now the Global South). What's striking to me are the ways in which the inception of Ethnic Studies, Asian American Studies, and Filipino American Studies paved the way for comparative methodological approaches and other key concepts within the field today such as diaspora and transnational. Here I'm reminded of one of Angela Davis's speeches from the 1980s on the "global meanings" of Ethnic Studies. She observed how Ethnic Studies has always been concerned with building bridges between people of color across the globe.

**MJV:** Jeff, your work on Carlos Bulosan is important. What role does Bulosan play in the history of Filipino American Studies (and Ethnic Studies, Asian American Studies)?

**JAC:** Carlos Bulosan is a significant figure in the development of the overlapping fields of study mentioned above – Ethnic Studies, Asian American Studies, and Filipino American Studies. The Asian American Movement of the late 1960s and the renewal of anti-imperialist nationalist sentiment in the Philippines in the 1970s (against the U.S.-backed Marcos dictatorship) opened a space for the retrieval of Carlos Bulosan’s works which had been relegated to the dustbin of history by the 1950s. The retrieval of Bulosan was made possible by the intersection of the Asian American Movement in the United States and the revitalized mass movement for national sovereignty in the Philippines.

What’s interesting and inspiring about Bulosan’s retrieval by young Asian Americans and young Filipino activists and scholars is their being drawn to (and informed by) earlier periods of social movements for racial and economic justice in the United States and the Philippines. Bulosan’s now classic text *America Is in the Heart* documents the collective experiences of Filipino migrant workers in the United States from the period of the Great Depression to the outbreak of WWII. In addition to dramatizing the tortuous ways in which the Filipino peasantry are exploited in a U.S.-occupied Philippines and subsequently transformed into Filipino migrant workers in the United States where they are subjected to all kinds of racialized forms of violence and exploitation, the narrative brings our attention to the fierce militancy of Filipino migrant workers—their contributions to U.S. labor history from the UCAPAWA to the Committee for the Protection of Filipino Rights (see Michael Denning’s *The Cultural Front*). Filipino labor militancy of this period laid the foundation for the emergence of the United Farm Workers Movement in the 1960s (from Larry Itliong to Philip Vera Cruz).

Asian American historian Lane Hirabayashi, a scholar influenced by the student strike for Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State in the late 1960s, once shared with me that he is always inspired by the ways in which Filipino migrant workers during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century cultivated and sustained a tradition of collective militancy against racism and economic injustice. This Filipino tradition of militancy laid the foundation

for the Asian American Movement. When tracing Bulosan's development as a writer and activist, we learn of the ways in which Filipino labor militancy from the 1930s was sustained in the midst of political repression of the 1950s. This is captured in his work as an editor of the *ILWU Yearbook* and his novel *The Cry and the Dedication*.

Bulosan's retrieval in the 1960s and 1970s not only enabled Filipino American activist-scholars to connect to the interethnic working class struggles and mass movements of the 1930s, but to also re-connect with a long collective Filipino memory of anticolonial struggle in the Philippines for self determination. When we examine the development of Bulosan scholarship, we'll notice that some of the sharpest analysis produced during its early stage was informed by the revitalization of anticolonial struggle in the Philippines during the 1970s. *Writer in Exile/Writer in Revolt: Critical Perspectives on Carlos Bulosan*, which I edited in 2016, traces the development of Bulosan scholarship from the United States and the Philippines over the span of nearly sixty years. It was a joy to include your piece on Bulosan and Filipino hip hop!

Mike, could you share some thoughts on the connection you see between Bulosan and the development of Filipino hip hop music? On Bulosan's continued relevance for young Filipino Americans?

**MJV:** Thanks, Jeff. Let me just say, your recent anthology on Carlos Bulosan as well as the special volume you edited with *Kritika Kultura* helps to center the Filipino/a immigrant experience for our sombering times providing an important opportunity for younger Filipino/a immigrants to revolutionize their collective memory. Your work in theorizing Bulosan's writings and life reminds me of what public intellectual Manning Marable once said, "You are not inventing models of social justice activism and resistance; others have come before you. The task is to learn from the strengths and weaknesses of those models, incorporating their anti-racist vision into the heart of what we do to resist global capitalism and the national security state." So I sincerely must say thank you for helping us to remember Bulosan so that we can radically build upon his anti-capitalist imaginary. In the piece that I contributed

to your book volume I placed Bulosan's socialist writings in dialogue with Filipino American hip hop artists of the early 2000s.

You and I have both stated that hip hop played a role in our politicization during the 1990s. Filipino/a American hip hop artists of our generation like Blue Scholars out of Seattle, Washington and the former duo Native Guns (Kiwi and Bambu) from California were making sense of their life experiences through spoken word and hip hop culture. I can't underscore the importance of Filipino/a American hip hop artists and cultural workers in nurturing a critical consciousness for myself and for our generation. It is exciting to see a new generation of Filipino/a American artists like Ruby Ibarra whose work conjure for me the sentiments of Amil Cabral who famously explained that "culture, as the fruit of history, reflects at all times the material and spiritual reality of the society." In light of the administration that occupies the White House at this moment, it is apparent that U.S. social relations have been mediated by the insatiable quest for profit and power. Hip hop certainly has played a role in reflecting this image of U.S. society. It presents an alternative image in honoring and borrowing from various sources to create new sounds and rhythmic compilations. I have said this before and I believe it to be especially true now that hip hop culture can offer us a window to a new culture that is struggling to be born. A culture that is the antithesis of American cultural imperialism, which appropriates and steals from various cultures of the world. It can reflect a language, culture, and struggle informed by larger objectives of realizing human needs and actualizing racial and social justice. Filipino/a American scholars and educators, like hip hop artists, are cultural workers and within our respective sites of the classroom and the academy we have a role to play in this collective project.

## PART 2

### Challenges and Possibilities of Filipino/a American Studies

**JAC:** While the field of Filipino American Studies is developing in new ways in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (in ways that connect Filipino American Studies

with other interdisciplinary fields such as Gender and Sexuality Studies, Performance Studies, American Studies, etc.), it seems that it is still in the process of becoming. What concerns me is the emergence of a sort of tension between the history of the inception of Filipino American Studies (rooted in the San Francisco State student strike for Ethnic Studies during the late 1960s) and the drive for institutionalization within the field. What I mean by the “drive for institutionalization” is the field’s burden of justifying its existence as a legitimate academic field within the U.S. academy. On one hand, the drive for institutionalization has provided the context for the production of a Filipino American Studies that produces nuanced cultural analysis and multiple perspectives on the intersection of race, gender, class, and sexuality within the Filipino American experience. On the other hand, class analysis and Marxist perspectives have been marginalized, silenced, read as reductive and economically deterministic. This is evident in the ways in which Carlos Bulosan is read in a particular way, marginalized, or silenced in contemporary Filipino American Studies. A pioneering and prolific scholar like E. San Juan, Jr. has been and continues to be marginalized within Filipino American Studies. This marginalization reveals the dominant class interests of the field itself... the class interests of the drive for institutionalization. The field may acknowledge and honor Bulosan but it remains to be seen whether the field will build upon and advance the contributions of Bulosan, San Juan, and other progressive Filipino intellectuals who laid the foundation for Filipino American Studies.

The drive for institutionalization begs the following question: for whom is Filipino American Studies produced? At its inception, Filipino American Studies (as an arm of Ethnic Studies) was envisioned as a field that would enable Filipino American students to “serve the people” (Omatsu “Four Prisons”). My concern is that the drive for institutionalization tends to privilege the professionalization of the field *at the expense of* honoring the liberatory goals of Filipino American Studies informed by the moral vision of Philip Vera Cruz—a vision that can be articulated by three keywords according to Glenn Omatsu: “compassion,” “solidarity,” and “commitment” (Omatsu, “Four Prisons”).

The drive for institutionalization within Filipino American Studies is symptomatic of the cultural turn within the U.S. academy which coincides with the dismantling of mass movements for social justice and the rise of neoliberal policies – a backlash against the gains of the various democratic movements for social justice in the United States (see Chomsky’s film *Requiem for the American Dream*). So it seems to me that the challenge of working within the field of Filipino American Studies today is engaging the tension between the field’s liberatory vision and the push for institutionalization within the U.S. academy. To engage this particular kind of tension requires that one operates beyond the confines of the conventional “academic” and engage a certain kind of praxis associated with the insurgent intellectual. We’re fortunate that we do have a tradition of insurgent intellectuals in various interdisciplinary fields that emerged from (or benefited from) mass movements for social justice during the 1960s and 1970s. To name a few who provide useful analytical tools for challenging the cultural turn and its various iterations (we’ve moved from postcolonial to transnational, from globalization/digital capitalism to planetarity), I’m thinking of the following: Teresa Ebert on post-ality in Women’s Studies, E. San Juan, Jr. on postcolonial approaches in Asian American Studies and Philippine Studies, Ellen Meiksins Wood on the retreat from class, and Vivek Chibber on the decline of class analysis in South Asian Studies as a result of the rise of postcolonial theory.

**MJV:** You are absolutely right. Insurgent intellectuals within the academy and beyond it can offer us conceptual and practical tools toward liberating ethnic studies and in particular Filipino/a American Studies from its confinement and containment within the academy. What you just shared reminds me of what the important Filipino historian Renato Constantino who said in *The Philippines: The Continuing Past*:

Activists have to be scholars and scholars have to be activists. Scholars can no longer be isolated and activists can no longer be untheoretical. Each must assimilate the virtue of the other in order to become more fruitful,

more creative. Only thus can they evolve a theory appropriate to our reality, and action appropriate to theory (290).

For Filipino/a American Studies to continue to evolve and grow we have to radically democratize it and consider ways to return its leadership back to the grassroots, youth, and immigrant organizations from which this field originally emerged. It was the leadership and praxis of radical youth and immigrant activists that created new terrains of possibility for teaching and learning within the North American university. As a result, our generation has greatly benefited in gaining wider access to historically exclusionary sites of higher learning and as a result a new breed of scholars (such as yourself as well as Robyn Rodriguez, Valerie Francisco, Amanda Solomon, Lorenzo Perillo, Daya Mortel, and many others associated with the Critical Filipino/a Studies Collective) have the ability to tell an important story of this country from the unique standpoint of the Filipino/a American experience. While we may have greater access to these institutions of knowledge production we certainly do not govern them. I believe that community power over the means of knowledge production, which includes our educational but also our media and cultural apparatuses, should be an objective for those who are invested in creating culturally relevant and radically humanized systems in which to learn, labor, and live.

**JAC:** Given the progressive history of Filipino American Studies and the rich body of work generated by artists like Bulosan, scholars like San Juan, and activists like Vera Cruz, Filipino American Studies has enormous potential to function in the following ways: 1.) repository of our collective memory of Filipino labor militancy; 2.) repository of our collective memory of the Filipino struggle for national sovereignty; 3.) vehicle for activating the collective agency of the Filipino Diaspora to address the racial-national subordination of Filipinos scattered across the globe; 4.) vehicle for enabling conscious (or “woke”) Filipinos to develop solidarity with other oppressed and exploited groups around the globe.

When we think of Filipino American Studies in this light, we realize that it's more than just a transgressive academic exercise to destabilize the academic industrial complex from within. In light of the four items I've inventoried above, we could shift our gaze from viewing Filipino American Studies as academic transgression to Filipino American Studies as a vehicle for social transformation. I'm encouraged by the work that you do with the Critical Filipina/o Studies Collective – engaging the tension between the liberatory vision of the field and the current pressures of institutionalization. This is why I was so happy to include your essay on Carlos Bulosan (co-authored with Valerie Francisco and Amanda Solomon Amorao) in a special feature for *Kritika Kultura* in 2014 (*Forum Kritika: Reflections on Carlos Bulosan and Becoming Filipino*). I wanted a piece that demonstrates a model of intellectual engagement informed by activist work with the Filipino American community at the grassroots. I think your joint essay with Francisco and Solomon Amorao provides an example of how to be located within and without the U.S. academy while, simultaneously, being informed by a larger commitment to a movement for Filipino self determination. I think the latter is key—being informed by and engaged with social movements for change provides fertile ground for creating intellectual work that moves beyond acts of academic transgression and into the realm of social transformation.

I'm reminded of Naomi Klein's interviews several months ago (on her recent book *No Is Not Enough*) where she explains that we must be able to envision a collective future beyond local forms of resistance within our current historical moment. She explains that she finds hope in the existence of various vibrant social justice moments (in which young people are at the forefront) —#BlackLivesMatter, #SayHerName, immigrant rights, feminist movement, LGBTQ movement, economic justice movement, environmental justice movement, etc. (For an overview of these moments see *When We Fight, We Win!*—a documentation of “twenty-first-century social movements and the activists that are transforming our world.”) These movements, according to Klein, are not going away anytime soon. The development of these movement for social justice may create a new conditions of possibility for interdisciplinary fields such as Asian American Studies and Filipino



American Studies to reclaim its moral vision of “compassion,” “solidarity,” and “commitment.”

**MJV:** I also think these U.S. movements you just mentioned are and must continue to be in dialogue with global movements abroad including the insurgent movement for lasting peace and popular democracy in the Philippines. I think it is important for Filipino/a American Studies to embrace and further theorize the connections for social transformation in the U.S. and the linked project for sovereignty in the Philippine homeland. The ideas you expressed for Filipino/a American Studies to be in intellectual and material solidarity with other oppressed groups around the globe makes me think of E. San Juan’s writing in his book, *On the Presence of Filipinos in the United States*, where he maintains, “ultimately Filipino agency in the era of global capitalism depends not only on the vicissitudes of social transformation in the U.S. but more crucially, on the fate of the struggle for autonomy and popular-democratic sovereignty in the homeland” (24). In light of this important discussion, I’m noticing one area we have not really touched upon and that is the matter of teaching! A question that we have not yet addressed is the actual challenges and opportunities of teaching Filipino/a American Studies?

### Filipino American Studies: Pedagogical Reflections

**MJV:** I must be honest. I can’t speak from my own direct experience of teaching a course dedicated in its entirety to Filipino/a American Studies. I find myself infiltrating the classes that I teach with Filipino/a American Studies content when the subject matter allows it, for instance, when I’m teaching a unit on globalization or immigration. Another way that I teach Filipino/a American Studies is to mentor students and collaborate with them in the development of workshops or particular projects. For instance, I’m working with a group of four graduating seniors at my institution to create an interactive exhibit that highlights Filipino/a American Radicalism from 1965 to present. Through oral histories of Filipino/a American activists and primary research we will tell “a story” about the presence of Filipino/a

Americans presence in U.S. social movements. Elements of our history that we will document in this exhibit include: the first wave of Filipino immigrants to the U.S. (e.g. Manong generation); the role of Filipino/a American immigrants in the California Grape Strike and United Farm Worker movement; the role of Filipino/a American college students in the formation of Ethnic Studies (e.g. Third World Liberation Front); the radical activism of the Union of Democratic Filipinos (KDP) against martial law in the Philippines and the Ferdinand Marcos Dictatorship; as well as the reestablishment of the national democratic movement in the United States during the 1990s and 2000s. It is amazing to collaborate with such dedicated and engaged students, yet they pursue this work as a “side hustle” alongside the various other responsibilities they must complete on the day-to-day such as work, taking care of family members, and completing the requirements of the formalized college curriculum. As my students near graduation, I sense a deep heaviness as they navigate a rapidly changing world burdened with college debt. While this is true for a great number of college students, my Filipino/a American students (often as the first generation to attend college) are also burdened with managing the expectations of their family to acquire high paying jobs in a landscape of economic precariousness as well as struggling to maintain their dignity through a climate of escalating intolerance and xenophobia.

**JAC:** The work that you do to integrate Filipino American Studies into your courses is inspiring! I love how you encourage your students to recover the history of Filipino American activism—as you eloquently state, “the presence of Filipino/a Americans in U.S. social movements” against racist exploitation in the United States and U.S. neocolonial control of the Philippines. I also integrate Filipino American Studies into my literary and cultural studies courses. Unfortunately, I don’t have many Filipino or Filipino American students on my campus. Over the past ten years, I’ve had the opportunity to work with only three Fil-Am students in the literary/cultural studies classroom. I do find, however, that Filipino American Studies (when situated within a larger global context) has the ability to speak to students from various racial and ethnic backgrounds. For instance, when I assign Bulosan’s *America Is in the*

*Heart*, I find that students are intrigued by the ways in which the narrative is informed by U.S.-Philippine colonial relations. Many of my students have never learned of the U.S. colonization of the Philippines at the turn of the century. I encourage them to see how the U.S. colonization of the Philippines is interconnected with the histories of other oppressed groups at the turn of the twentieth century: Puerto Ricans, Cubans, African Americans. I juxtapose our reading of Bulosan's texts with images from *The Forbidden Book*—political cartoons from the turn of the century that document the emergence of U.S.-Philippine colonial relations. Bulosan's text is also useful in introducing one of the major contributions of Filipino *Manongs* to U.S. history—a tradition of interracial working class solidarity and militancy. This framework enables non-Filipino students in the classroom to engage the text through a lens of interracial solidarity which is generated for us as readers by Allos's developing class consciousness throughout the narrative. When I center our discussions on Allos's evolving class consciousness (about various "isms" ranging from colonialism/racism to heterosexism), I find that a space is opened in which all students are able to engage with Bulosan's voice. These moments in the classroom always fascinate me because it challenges the notion that Ethnic Studies (in this specific case, Filipino American Studies) is only for students of color or that Ethnic Studies is based on the politics of exclusion. Our *Manongs* organized and developed a politics of multiracial solidarity with oppressed and exploited groups in the United States and abroad. I find that this historical framework as well Bulosan's eloquent and beautifully accessible language/writing both create a space that invites non-Filipino students to imagine how they're connected to the Filipino American experience. I've had several white students express interest in concentrating or majoring in Ethnic Studies, a program that is still in development on my campus.

### PART 3

#### Filipino/a American Studies: Diaspora and Social Transformation

**MJV:** I find it quite hopeful to be in conversation with you as I'm inspired by your commitment and imagination in teaching Filipino/a American

Studies and creating spaces for white students and a diverse many “others” to engage and feel connected to Filipino/a American experiences. It will take committed educators like yourself who continue to theorize as well as create the means to teach how global capitalism historically has fed upon and remains dependent upon racial oppression, making much more transparent what political power seeks to keep hidden.

**JAC:** I think there are hopeful signs for the future of Filipino American Studies. The requirement to teach Filipino American history in the educational systems of California (the 2013 passage of Assembly Bill 123 and the 2015 passage of Assembly Bill 7) introduces the contributions of Bulosan’s generation (the *Manongs*) to U.S. labor history. The growth of the Filipino American community in the United States (Filipino Americans are now the second largest Asian American group in the United States and the largest Asian American group in the state of California) will provide new opportunities in the future to develop and advance Filipino American Studies at a variety of educational levels—from PreK to Grad. I do think the liberatory potential of Filipino American Studies can be unlocked when it is situated within a particular framework that enables one to 1.) gain an understanding of the specificity of the oppression and exploitation of Filipinos worldwide (the racial-national subordination of the Filipino people) and 2.) grasp how our collective experience is interconnected with the experiences of other oppressed and exploited groups (politics of solidarity).

Here I’m thinking of a recent essay by E. San Juan, Jr. that examines the ways in which the concept of the Filipino diaspora could be productive for developing the future of Filipino American Studies. In *Gathering the Filipino Diaspora: ‘Over our dead OFW bodies’*, San Juan’s comments enable us to situate the growth of the Filipino American community within the ever-expanding Filipino diaspora—nearly twelve million Filipinos dispersed around the planet. Approximately three to four thousand Filipinos leave the Philippines each day as a way to survive the poverty of the Philippines. Between three to five Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) return to the Philippines in coffins. This traumatic picture of daily departures and returns of Filipinos is symp-

tomatic of the ways in which the intensified poverty in the Philippines is rooted within the unequal neocolonial relations between the United States and the Philippines. According to San Juan, the framework of Filipino diaspora enables us to do the following:

Reorient our vision/sensibility regarding our individual responsibility in society. It is to initiate a re-thinking about ourselves as a people and as citizens of a nation-state with a specific history. It is to rekindle a conscientization of our minds and *loobs/souls*.

**MJV:** In this particular moment of heightened xenophobia and barbaric expressions of white supremacy in the United States, Filipino/a American Studies can offer an important optic to understand the connections between racialized and oppressed groups and critically examine the historical specificity of Filipino/a American racial formation. The concept of racial formation that I have in mind also builds upon the work of E. San Juan—who I would argue intellectual-activists (or activist-intellectuals) must more sincerely engage and build upon his theoretical insights to advance Filipino/a American Studies as a relevant and transformative site of knowledge production.

For me it is exciting to read the work of E. San Juan whose work has helped me to understand the roots of our present conditions as racialized Filipino/a immigrants and project with theoretical soundness tangible possibilities for our future. His anti-racist writing while grounded in the historical, social, and cultural context of Filipino immigrants I am finding much alignment with a new breed of insurgent intellectuals whose thinking is informed by the experiences of African American and Native American radical activism and grassroots organizing. For instance, drawing upon the insights of indigenous social thought informed by the specific struggles within the Dene Nation to the recent mobilizations of Idle No More, Glen Coulthard in his text, *Red Skin White Masks* builds upon Marxist social thought (ranging from Karl Marx to Frantz Fanon) in arguing that “for indigenous nations to live, capitalism must die” (Coulthard, 2014). Likewise, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor in her important book, *From #BlackLivesMatter*

to *Black Liberation* extends black Marxist arguing that “without a struggle against racism, there is no hope for fundamentally changing this country.” She elaborates, to claim that racism is a consequence of capitalism is “not to deny or diminish its centrality to or impact on American society. It is simply to explain its origin and persistence. Nor is this reducing racism to just a function of capitalism, it is locating the dynamic relationship between class exploitation and racism oppression in the functioning of American capitalism” (Taylor 2015). These authors are all quite clear that realizing social justice and anti-racism requires much more than the production of radical, anti-racist scholarship. While certainly instrumental toward such a project, racial equality is an ongoing political project born of collective struggle. Our victories and successes for racial justice must enter into genuine dialogue with larger democratic and multi-sectoral organizing of historically marginalized peoples. The labor that intellectuals and educators create in their writing and within the walls of their classroom is a form of praxis that must be struggled for as our intellectual work is essential in constricting just as it may extend the possibilities for social change.

Of particular interest is E. San Juan’s dialectical articulation of state policies, discriminatory practices in civil society, and popular resistance to racist social policies and practices that foreground Filipino/as in the United States and across the global diaspora. E. San Juan argues that Filipino/a American history “and material conditions seem incommensurate with African American, Chicano, American Indian and so forth; or with our brothers and sisters in the Philippine neocolony.” What E. San Juan is saying here closely aligns with Constantino who argues “without understanding one’s own history and concrete realities” we Filipino/a Americans run the risk of “being mere copy-cats neglecting the duty to be creative and innovative for our own time” and societal context (*The Philippines: The Continuing Past* 286). I think E. San Juan and Constantino are important figures that can ground Filipino/a American Studies and offer both theoretical and practical tools toward aligning institutions of learning with larger societal goals of human and ecological liberation and radical social justice. Therefore, articulating Filipino/a American Studies through an interdisciplinary lens (that

must include historical materialist social thought) can offer not just analytical insights to what racial oppression looks like but also offers possible tools with which to understand how we can effectively combat it in the United States and throughout the Philippine Diaspora.

**JAC:** The framework of Filipino diaspora also enables one to develop an analysis of the construction Filipino gender and sexuality as they are situated within U.S.-Philippine relations—as is the case of sexual violence against Filipino women (both cis-gender and transgender) due to the U.S. militarization of the Philippines. An emerging terrain in Filipino gender and sexuality studies is the experience of LGBTQ OFWs—specifically the ways in which they not only create communal spaces for affirmation (see the film *Paper Dolls*) but also mobilize against racialized and sexualized exploitation of labor.

While the notion of the Filipino Diaspora might seem quite recent given the rapid proliferation of Filipino populations around the globe, the idea of a Filipino global consciousness is not necessarily new. A global consciousness and the idea of international solidarity with all oppressed peoples are both present in the work of Carlos Bulosan and the militant history of his generation—the *Manongs*. Perhaps Filipino Americans will be able to imagine new ways to sustain connections with several million Filipinos around the globe by reconnecting with our collective working class history in the United States. One of the devastating consequences of assimilation for Filipino Americans is a disavowal of our collective working class history. My father was named after one of his three uncles who were migrant farmworkers in the United States during the 1930s/1940s. The stories of these uncles, who were part of the *Manong* generation, were never really passed on to my father. He remembers receiving fragmented stories—that his eponym was constantly moving from one location to another in California as a migrant farmworker and would send money to the Philippines to support family. Now we're in the process of reconstructing their stories, which are part of my family's history and simultaneously integral to the collective Filipino diasporic experience.

Mike, it's uplifting to be in conversation with you—to be reminded of how Filipino American Studies has the potential to be a site of nurturing Filipino global consciousness grounded, as you mentioned earlier, in a historical materialist social theory. Thinking about Filipino American Studies in a way that moves beyond the confines of the academy, we're able to see how Bulosan, Constantino, San Juan, and Vera Cruz continue to be relevant for our lives especially at this historical moment in the United States and the Philippines where we are witnessing the emergence of anti-democratic neo-fascist rule and a vicious backlash against progressive nationalist democratic forces in the Philippines. These are times that demand our being firmly grounded in a politics of hope nurtured by creativity, intellectual and moral courage, and collective organizing. I look forward to continuing our conversation—our way of breaking bread (*pan de sal*) Fil-Am style... “breaking it down” (drawing on hip hop vernacular) in solidarity!



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