

***The American Paradox***  
***Discovering America in Carlos Bulosan's America is in the Heart***

**Dulce-Marie Flecha, McNair Scholar**  
**The Pennsylvania State University**

**McNair Faculty Research Advisor**  
**Jeanne Britton, Ph.D**  
**Post-Doctoral Fellow in 19<sup>th</sup> Century British Literature and Culture**  
**Department of English**  
**College of Liberal Arts**  
**The Pennsylvania State University**

*Abstract*

This essay examines the definition and various roles of the United States and its inhabitants in Carlos Bulosan's semi-autobiographical *America is in the Heart*, a classic work of Asian American literature. The myriad of American characters in the novel reveal a vast diversity in the American population. *America is in the Heart* charts the paradox of the United States in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; while there are Americans who do not succumb to the common racism of the day—there are, in fact, those who rebel against it—the grand majority of the protagonist's experiences with Americans, particularly those of the upper classes and those in law enforcement, project the darker aspects of their own desires and society on the 'Other'; some label minorities as sex-crazed deviants while simultaneously displaying a subconscious obsession with sexuality, others accuse minorities of infesting the nation with crime while consciously and unabashedly stealing from them. But despite the protagonist's seemingly constant contact with prejudice, he is also met with kindness from Americans throughout his travels and has reason to believe that this is a nation where equality is possible, even if it was not practiced. The conflicting nature of Americans throughout the novel reveals a degree of uncertainty, from both Americans and foreigners, as to what the word "American" actually means.

Introduction

Carlos Bulosan's *America is in the Heart* is deservedly well remembered for its insight on the immigrant experience within the United States. But if Bulosan's audience focuses purely on this facet of Bulosan's work, though it is certainly extremely significant, they risk doing themselves a great disservice. Bulosan's *America is in the Heart*, in addition to shining light on the Filipino-American lifestyle in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, also shines light on the United States itself. *America is in the Heart*, which leans heavily on Bulosan's own personal experiences within the United States, provides readers with a snapshot of the United States from a perspective not usually explored when attempting to define the word "America": the perspective of an American immigrant.

*America is in the Heart*, Bulosan's best remembered work, is a semiautobiographical novel with especially strong ties to Bulosan's own experiences—these ties are so strong that the novel is occasionally referred to as an autobiography. Bulosan himself was born sometime between 1911 and 1913 in Binalonan, a Filipino city on the island of Luzon, to a working class farming family. He spent his childhood doing manual labor in the Philippines until his late teenaged years, when he decided to leave the Philippines for the United States. He arrived in Seattle, Washington in 1930 and would never return to his homeland. Upon arriving in the United States Bulosan resumed the life of a poor laborer; he worked several odd jobs under the stress of poverty and discrimination until the fatigue and stress of a migrant and difficult life wore him down physically and he found himself in the hospital with tuberculosis. During his three year tenure in the Los Angeles County Sanitarium Bulosan had the opportunity to delve into the world of American literature; he claimed to have read a book a day for at least the grand majority of his stay, and he certainly took advantage of his newfound time to evolve intellectually. After being released from the hospital Bulosan went on to become a social presence on behalf of working class immigrants on the West Coast; he spoke out on behalf of unions and was blacklisted by the FBI for socialist leanings. He also discovered a penchant for creative writing and would become an accomplished poet, novelist, and essayist. He died in Seattle in 1956 due to advanced lung disease and is now celebrated for giving a post-colonial outlook on Asian-American involvement in the labor movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The plot of *America is in the Heart* parallels its author's personal experiences. The protagonist, who is also named Carlos (though he goes by the nickname 'Allos' when in the Philippines and tells others to call him 'Carl' while in the United States) is a young boy working with his father on their farm in the Philippines at the book's opening. After a period of working throughout the island of Luzon Carlos immigrates to the United States, where he continues to work as a migrant laborer until he realizes he is capable of writing in English and pledges to bring his family members back to life through the written word. He also often uses literature to connect with the United States itself; Carlos reads classic American authors like Whitman and Melville in an attempt to discover and understand a side of the United States far removed from the prejudice and pain of the American society he found himself in.

On one occasion Carlos and some acquaintances were attacked by a group of white men for no reason other than their race, only to be greatly aided by the white men and women working in a hospital.

Walking down the marble stairway of the hospital, I began to wonder at the paradox of America. José's tragedy was brought about by railroad detectives, yet he had done no harm of any consequence to the company. On the highway, again, motorists had refused to take a dying man. And yet in this hospital, among white people-- Americans like those who had denied us-- we had found refuge and tolerance. Why was America so kind and yet so cruel? Was there no way to simplifying things in this continent so that suffering would be minimized? Was there no common denominator on which we could all meet? I was angry and confused, and wondered if I would ever understand this paradox. (Bulosan 147)

The word "paradox" perfectly summarizes Carlos' experiences in the United States. Like Carlos searched for America through the works of great American authors, the reader can look through Bulosan's work and glimpse at an early 20<sup>th</sup> century America in conflict with itself. The

United States, which had just entered the long years of the Great Depression when Carlos arrives in Seattle, is revealed in the novel as consisting of two very different halves, and Carlos is constantly vexed by the inconsistent nature of the United States. In America Carlos experiences both great kindnesses and great cruelties, often within the same moment, and this strange combination often drives Carlos to tears. He experiences no shortage of prejudice in the United States, and the results of these prejudices range from verbal slights to severe physical and sexual abuse. Yet despite the many hardships and prejudices Carlos faces, he comes to think of America in a very positive light—the kindnesses he benefits from in the United States combine with a more intangible sense of hope in the potential of America. Within Bulosan’s work the reader finds tropes that should sound familiar to anyone who has taken elementary school American history classes; there is assurance and a faint tint of pride in the possibilities of America; by the end of the novel Carlos has faith that this is a nation where great things can and do happen, and he ends the novel by stating that nothing will ever take this faith from him again.

By recognizing the two halves of this paradox and forgiving the United States for its ruthlessly conflicting nature, Bulosan shows a growth in the understandings he comes to with his various inconsistent childhood and adult perceptions of America. His ability to not only make these understandings but allow them to evolve throughout his time in the United States makes Bulosan a credible and fascinating source of information on the America that he lived within and further complicates the already tangled and wide-ranging opinions of what the word “American” should mean at all. By allowing his audience to peek into his experiences through his protagonist and namesake, Carlos Bulosan shows how America both defines and is defined by the masses who venture onto its shore in an attempt to find the lives they were meant to live.

#### The First Half of the Paradox: American Brutality and Patriotic Brutes

The United States that Carlos Bulosan describes in his novel is unquestionably a brutal world for immigrants to inhabit, and almost every facet of an immigrant’s lived is tinted with a shade of violence. The vast majority of this violence is rooted in racism. Throughout the novel Carlos has a myriad of racist experiences in the United States, the first of which occurs before he so much as steps in the country—he is called a savage by a white American for the first time on the boat that first brings him to Seattle—and the novel ends with no hope of these occurrences ever coming to an end. The worst of these racist encounters were those that escalated into violence—and this, unfortunately, was not at all uncommon. Carlos finds himself physically abused by both civilians and law enforcement officers throughout his life in the United States, and one of these attacks left Carlos with a hurt knee that never recovers. The racist incidents in the novel tend to be brief and are not described with much detail. The racists in the novel often only appear in one quick scene and usually go nameless, only serving as an example of the frequency and popularity of this racist mindset.

The racism of the novel is often shown in conjunction with hypocrisy; many of the justifications for prejudice on the part of these racist white Americans are rooted in perceived flaws within the minorities that are palpable within American society. The most obvious of these is the complicated relationship between American racism and sexuality. In the novel Filipinos are often derided for being blatantly sexual beings—in Carlos’ first encounter with racism on his voyage to the United States a teenage girl tells her companion to “look at those half-naked savages from the Philippines...! Haven’t they any idea of decency?” (Bulosan 99). And yet the

Americans that Carlos encounters display a certain fascination with sexuality of their own. The teenage girl who derided Carlos was wearing a bathing suit that he describes as “brief” (Bulosan 99), and as a working child in Binalonan notes that the American tourists were only interesting in taking pictures of “young Igorot girls with large breasts and robust mountain men whose genitals were nearly exposed, their G-strings bulging large and alive” (Bulosan 67). Racism is used as a justification for attacking minorities, exploiting minorities, and allowing minorities to continue to live in squalid and unfair conditions, and when these presumptions are challenged the American racists react strongly; one affluent white man tells Carlos that “you,” which is here used to collectively refer to all minorities suffering from the effects of gambling and opium rings, “brought this on yourself” and is infuriated when Carlos attempts to argue that many of these gambling rings are actually run by aristocratic white Americans in the area (Bulosan 163). The hypocrisy of many of the racist statements in the novel reflects a projection of subjects and habits that white Americans consider indecent or uncomfortable within society onto a vulnerable population of immigrants that cannot effectively defend themselves.

The America of *America is in the Heart* is not only brutal, it effectively brutalizes the majority of its inhabitants; it twists the initial outrage and disappointment of the downtrodden into something significantly nastier and more violent. Bulosan’s works are so saturated with distinctive phrases and concepts that it seems curious to refer to a cliché. But when Alfredo justifies his new career as a pimp with the well-worn “Open your eyes, Carlos. This is a country of survival of the fittest” (Bulosan 170) he accurately summarizes the evolution of a mindset within many of the immigrant class. The tragedy of the immigrant in *America is in the Heart* is not merely embedded in the brutality of the United States; it is in the unquestionable ability of the United States to expose and nurture brutality in its inhabitants. It is a phenomenon perfectly personified in Max Smith, the small Filipino who Carlos encounters at the height of his own stint with brutality. Max Smith is particularly interesting for two reasons: first, he went by a purely American name, which Carlos acknowledges as strange, and second, he purposefully and purely maintains this brutality for his own safety: “Max pretended to be bold and fearless, but his bravado was a shield to protect himself, to keep the secret of his own cowardice” (Bulosan 164). Max’s illusion of cruelty is a specific kind of reaction to his surroundings; he is not pushed to the point where he wishes to resort to violent means, but he perceives that these violent means are necessary for survival in the United States and has no moral concerns about maintaining a negative and stereotypical image.

But the reader is introduced to the concept of brutalization in the United States long before they are introduced to Max Smith; in fact, the novel introduces its reader to this brutalization before Carlos so much as sees the boat that would bring him to the United States and the rest of his life. Bulosan describes two Filipinos “bitter and confused” (Bulosan 83) by their experiences in the United States: his English teacher in the Philippines, an unabashed man who never quite managed to forgive fate for the death of his father during his fifteen year stint as a houseboy in the United States, and a peasant who had attended college in the United States and returned to lead the violent Colorum Party in several revolts throughout the Philippines. These two characters are noteworthy because they brought this bitterness back to the Philippines and their anger taints the actions they take towards fellow Filipinos—people who are in no way responsible for the treatment they received or the hardships they faced in the United States. This suggests that these two men are not merely driven by some need for revenge—if it was, one would imagine their anger (and, more importantly, the actions rooted in their anger) would be

directed at the American and European tourists that descend upon the Philippines throughout the first half of the book. Their personalities were very genuinely and very negatively affected by their times in America and their anger wound up channeled in their returns to the Philippines. Though it is only fair to note that, while both react to negative experiences in the United States after their return to the Philippines, the nature of these reactions are different. Regardless of how one feels about his methods, it is safe to assume that the leader of the Colorum party intends to channel his American experience into some good; the revolts are started with the intent to help the peasants of Luzon. The English teacher, on the other hand, does not take much action as a result of his experiences; while he, like the Colorum Party's leader, does tend to direct his bitterness towards the upper classes-- specifically the hacenderos, or land-owning classes, of the Philippines—his most rebellious act recorded in the novel is giving Carlos the answers to a nation-wide test.

America's tendency to brutalize its inhabitants is not restricted to those who managed to return to their native country; Carlos documents the 'brutalization' of several of those close to him. Among the best documented of these brutalizations takes place within Carlos' brothers Macario and Amado, in whom Carlos notes several changes after they reunite in the United States. Carlos first notices Amado's "Americanization" in Amado's speaking patterns. After Amado's years in the United States, Carlos notices Amado's swifter, cleaner English and he also takes note of—and is often bothered by—his brother's calling him by his Christian name (Carlos) rather than the common nickname with which he is introduced to the reader (Allos). But Amado's changes run deeper than his improved grammar and diminishing Filipino accent. When they first reunite Amado does not recognize his younger brother and nearly stabs Carlos as a result. "I wanted to cry because my brother was no longer the person I had known in Binolan," Carlos reflects as he leaves Amado for Los Angeles shortly after their first American reunion. "He was no longer the gentle, hard-working janitor in the presidencia. I remembered the time when he had gone to Lingayen to cook for my brother Macario. Now he had changed, and I could not understand him anymore" (Bulosan 125-6). Carlos immediately recognizes a newfound aggression in Amado's personality, an aggression that unnerves Carlos so greatly that he nearly cries and asks God not to allow the same to happen to him.

Despite this prayer, Carlos too succumbs to this instinctive brutality when his frustration at the unfair circumstances that he can never seem to escape from in America is compounded by a personal tragedy (like his former English teacher, the news of the loss of a parent signifies the moment Carlos surrenders, however temporarily, his belief that one can live decently in the United States).

I had tried to keep my faith in America, but now I could no longer. It was broken, trampled upon, driving me out into the dark nights with a gun in my hand. In the senseless days, in the tragic hours, I held tightly to the gun and stared at the world, hating it with all my power. And hating made me lonely, lonely for beauty and love, love that could resuscitate beauty and goodness... But I found only violence and hate, living in a corrupt corner of America. (Bulosan 164)

After the death of his father Carlos essentially agrees to live by the standards set for poor minorities in a racially prejudiced society. He does exactly what the racist characters of the novel would expect a Filipino immigrant to do: during this period Carlos repeatedly commits petty theft from whoever has the misfortune of being conveniently close by, he makes his living

almost exclusively through gambling and spends a significant fraction of his winnings on alcohol, and seriously plans with Max Smith to murder both a security guard and a bank owner en route to robbing the bank itself. The disturbing part of this period in Carlos' life is how he channeled his energy into this vicious and degraded mentality with such ease. The bank robbery was Carlos' brainchild, and he admits that the idea drove him "like a marijuana addict when it seized my imagination" (Bulosan 165), he tells Max Smith his idea with neither hesitation nor guilt, and his excitement over the idea inspires him so greatly that he "stopped to catch [his] breath, so great was the idea, so breathtaking and courageous!" (Bulosan 165). But while Max Smith turns to the illusion of brutality to protect himself, Carlos' brutalization is a shade deeper. Carlos considers the bank robbery to be more than a method of survival; he takes genuine pride in it, a far cry and disturbing opposite from earlier in the novel when Carlos considered defending a French-American employer and his family the only courageous thing to do and was deeply upset with Julio for pulling him away.

If America fosters a brutality in men, it grows a tendency for manipulation in women. There are several females in the novel who attempt to coerce a male into marriage, but Carlos never witnesses one of these ventures succeed until he reaches the United States, when LaBelle attempts to use her pregnancy to legally ensnare Conrado and instead is awarded the good-looking Paulo for her efforts. There are a few factors that could explain why LaBelle succeeded where a number of others had failed. In the Philippines every young man accosted by a female manages to escape by escaping to a different city, a feat that Conrado neither has the time nor the presence of mind to attempt. But some credit should go LaBelle herself, who planned her attack with much more foresight than any of her contemporaries in the Philippines, and certainly goes about it with a touch more bluntness and a cruelty of her own. When a girl in the Philippines tries to find a husband in Carlos, she approaches his mother and plays with his baby sister. LaBelle greets the man she hopes to marry by throwing water on his face and asking "Are you going to marry me or not?" (102). Rather than merely trying to talk her way into a marriage, LaBelle uses her newborn—a child that Carlos and all of his coworkers were positive was not fathered by any in the group-- and a company official to attempt to force her will on Conrado. LaBelle takes a law intended to protect her and twists it in her favor. The only female in the Philippines who comes close to this level of manipulation is Veronica, and her level of destruction in Carlos' life could very well have been accidental—the reader can assume that the landlady told Carlos to flee because Veronica had fingered Carlos as the father of her child, but is no proof in the novel strong enough to indict her. But LaBelle is not the only one who uses a cruel manipulation to her advantage. Helen makes a career of it by sabotaging worker's unions throughout the West Coast, justifying her actions with racism. There are more examples of racism in this account than one can count, but the vast majority of those examples are initiated by men. Of the women who actively expose themselves as racists, Helen is the only female in the novel to direct her racism into some ongoing and palpable action—her work with the company owners is based in her ability to lie her way into the inner circles of Unions and manipulate a targeted member to suit her means.

Helen and LaBelle both thrived by the manipulation of relationships, but they would not have been successful if relationships between the poorest of the United States not been so strained and desperate in nature. Many of the poorest in the novel react to the constant brutalities of life in the United States by banding together, but these bonds are clearly influenced and strained by their difficult life. While in the Philippines, Allos copes with his family's poverty in

part by relishing in the strong bonds he has with his family; he says of one night he spent speaking with his family and fellow villagers that "it was inspiring to sit with them, to listen to them talk of other times and other lands; and 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 the green earth" (Bulosan 10). While life was difficult in the Philippines, there was also a sense of genuine goodwill and community, and Carlos often recalls moments of bonding with all but one of his brothers (the sole exemption being his eldest brother, who briefly reappeared in Carlos' life when he was young and who Carlos did not speak to again after that reencounter). Relationships in the United States, in contrast, tend to be rooted in something much more fraught. Carlos notices that his brother Amado's group of friends were bonded by a shared desperation; "what mattered to [Amado] was the pleasure he had with his friends. There was something urgent in their friendship, probably a defense against their environment. They created a wall around themselves in their little world, and what they did behind it was theirs alone. Their secrecy bordered on insanity" (Bulosan 170). Even the relationships Carlos had with his brothers suffered after their move to the United States. Carlos repeatedly regrets their refusal to acknowledge him by the nickname he was known by in the Philippines. In the Philippines, Allos' older brothers took on a nurturing role, often caring for him through various injuries and illnesses. In the United States this does not end completely—Macario does care for Carlos after Carlos is released from the hospital—but the stresses of difficult lives take a toll on their relationships. While all three brothers separate on a friendly note, they get into several conflicts of their own, the worst of which turning for the dangerously physical.

#### The Second Half of the Paradox: A Place Worth Hoping For

As easy as it is to wrap oneself entirely in the cruelties of the United States in *America is in the Heart*, Bulosan's America is much more than a collection of sorry and pitiless people committing sorry and pitiless crimes against one another. Bulosan reveals a side of America that inspired the phrase "land of the free". Arguably the most important facet of the positive side of the United States of Bulosan's novel is the people who make up the nation itself. While the novel certainly features more than a fair share of violent, brutal, and racist characters in America, it also portrays characters that, for whatever reason, avoid the brutalizing effect and racially based hierarchy of the United States. There are an array of minor characters who ignore the tradition of racial prejudice and treat Carlos with the same kindness they would treat any other American.

A significant portion of these minor characters are female. If we can divide the brutality of American women into two categories (those who restrict their brutality to dialogue and those who go a step further and those who channel that brutality into action) we can effectively do the same for the America women defined by kindness (those whose kindnesses are short-term and those whose kindnesses are long-term). The women of the former category only represent the most fleeting experiences in Carlos' life—most are not given a name, let alone a description longer than a few words. The longest of these spontaneous and transitory interactions is the two or so days Carlos spends with Lily and Rosaline in Oregon. The women who grant Carlos some short-term act of kindness are not contained into some easily defined group; they can be of any race or socio-economic background—Lily and Rosaline are both Caucasian-Americans who come from fairly comfortable backgrounds, but Carlos also recalls with gratitude a working class Korean immigrant who fed him on multiple occasions while he is trying to reunite with his

brothers and is stunned by the stark contrast of the cruelty of his multiple physical attackers with the warmth of the nurses who were charged with cleaning his wounds. This diversity is one of this group's great strengths; Carlos may be confronted with prejudice everywhere he turns, but he also trusts that he can find some grains of genuine goodwill, and he can occasionally rely on these fleeting kindnesses to provide great needs (for example, the Korean immigrant fed him during a period where Carlos could not afford food) in times of greater instability.

The women who provide long-term kindnesses to Carlos are both less numerous and less diverse. There are three women who assume the role of caretaker in Carlos' life—two, Marian and Eileen Odell, do so in the United States and the last, Miss Mary Strandon, in the Philippines. Marian, who Carlos stumbles upon just after he is physically assaulted and sexually abused by a group of white men, only lives to spend a short time with Carlos but makes her intentions clear almost immediately.

I'll help you. I'll work for you. You will have no obligations. What I would like is to have someone to care for, and it should be you who are young. What matters is the affection, the relationship, between you and the object. Even a radio becomes almost human, and the voice that comes from it is something close to you, and then there grows a bond between you. For a long time now I've wanted to care for someone. And you are the one. Please don't make me unhappy. (Bulosan 212).

Here Marian reveals that native-born Americans are not exempt from the loneliness that haunts Carlos during his darkest days in the United States, she admits to needing an object for her care so badly that even an inanimate object can be bonded with when no other options are available. But, rather than allow the loneliness to dominate her psyche, Marian recognizes her desire and uses it to justify a positive action—she forms a relatively healthy (if entirely spontaneous) connection in a society and class system where connections tend to parallel the desperate clinging relationship of Amado's group of roommates. Where Amado and his friends attach to one another as a means of survival, because they need one another in their lives, Marian attaches herself to Carlos simply because she wants another person in her life. This difference reveals America as capable of forming relationships based on nothing more than a series of positives: the desire to do good, the human need for companionship, a mutual trust that bypasses race and economic background.

Eileen Odell is noteworthy because of both the length of her association with Carlos—their friendship spanned several years and is among the longest of Carlos' non-familial relationships—and the less particularly comfortable nature it assumed. Of the three American "caretakers" in Carlos' life, Eileen was the only one who could be called a friend; she cries at his bedside while he was in the hospital suffering from tuberculosis and engages him in conversations about the literary world he is discovering through his three year span in hospital care. Carlos accepts that his close relationship with Eileen is due to his need for a source of warmth; he admits that his "hunger for affection, because of a lack of it in America, drove [him] towards Eileen" (Bulosan 236) but their relationship is neither defined by her tendency to care for him nor by their equally difficult and poverty-stricken pasts. Carlos says of Eileen: "She was undeniably the America I had wanted to find in those frantic days of fear and flight, in those acute hours of hunger and loneliness. This America was human, good, and real" (Bulosan 235). In Eileen, Carlos finds more than a continuous source of food and books, he finds the meaningful



and lasting companionship that eluded him in the United States, and with it he finds an America capable of something beyond the debilitating loneliness that defined Marian's life and the majority of his.

Mary Strandon's assumes the role of caretaker in a much different way; her role as an employer sets a different collection of rules and social standards in her relationship with Carlos. But Mary Strandon's role in Carlos' life was beyond the mere title of employer; the housework and menial labor Carlos completes is complimented by the opportunity to learn English from Dalmacio. Under the employment of Mary Strandon Carlos was also given a job in the library and, by extension, both a constant source of reading materials and ongoing intellectual stimulation for the first time in his then-short life. "I found great pleasure in the library," Carlos recalls. "...I was slowly becoming acquainted with the intricacies of the library. Names of authors flashed in my mind and reverberated in a strange song in my consciousness. A whole new world was opened to me" (Bulosan 70). It is clearly one of Carlos' most cherished working experience and, more importantly, it was the most significant childhood literary experience of a man who would grow to use language to both connect to the people of his second home and attempt to change that home for the better.

Mary Strandon did not introduce him to the concept of the United States—that honor belongs to his family—but she did introduce him to Abraham Lincoln, which proved to be just as important of a moment. The story of the poor boy who became president and died "for a black person" (Bulosan 70) captivated a young Carlos. Mary Strandon made a significant first impression for her homeland on Carlos. She established the United States as a nation where obstacles such as poverty could be overcome; where race is only a barrier to those ignorant or complacent enough to allow it to be; where Carlos' future was not necessarily restricted by his past. It is impossible to accurately speculate as to who or what Carlos would have become without this first impression—as it were, it took a significant portion of time for the brutality of a poor immigrant's life in the United States to wear Carlos' sanguinity into a cynicism and brutality, and even that needed to be compounded by the death of his father and only managed to be temporary. Bulosan does not mention Mary Strandon again after this first encounter, but her memory does stay with Carlos throughout his travels. After he is a published author Carlos remembers Strandon's hometown and visits it after her death, stopping to donate a copy of his first book to the local library. There is a reason Carlos remembered Mary Strandon after all those years, and a reason why it would do well for the reader to do the same. Mary Strandon was first to introduce Carlos to an America worth believing in. If Eileen was the America that Carlos was searching for, Mary Strandon was the first to teach Carlos that such an America existed. This is especially important when one considers the man who Carlos becomes in America; he would not have worked so diligently for labor unions if he believed he was in a nation that could never change.

The significance of possibility is arguably America's greatest quality in this novel. When Carlos first arrives in Seattle he believes that America is has been hidden just beyond the reach of immigrants, and if he would like to become an American he would have to find it. Despite the brutal habitat he discovers upon his immediate arrival into the United States, Carlos states that finally being in America made him feel "good and safe". "I did not understand why... I wanted to see other aspects of American life, for surely these destitute and vicious people were merely a small part of it. Where would I begin this pilgrimage, this search for a door into America?"

(Bulosan 140). He trusts that the America he heard of as a boy in Binalonan already exists in a fully evolved and final form. Bulosan's American experience in *America is in the Heart* is marked by the realization that, through the power of the effort of those who are willing to fight for it, the United States can evolve. After several years in the United States Carlos no longer believes that America had been finalized; the America Bulosan knows at the conclusion of the novel is in the process of being transformed. He states that they "must not demand from America, because she is still our unfinished dream. Instead we must sacrifice for her; let her grow into bright maturity through our labors. If necessary we must give up our lives so that she may grow unencumbered" (Bulosan 312). Here the United States is presented as neither a haven nor a hell; it is a work in progress, the responsibility of all those who call it home. America's streets are not paved with gold, but they could be.

The America of this novel could be whatever its people chose to make it. There is a reason that Carlos does not merely note how wonderful and exhilarating it feels to be a part of something vitally alive, but "to be a part of something vitally alive in America" (Bulosan 226). The United States offers Americans an incredible strength. It offers them the ability to morph their nation into something greater than themselves; the "bright maturity" that Carlos speaks of is the culmination of the efforts and sacrifices of hundreds of people over hundreds of years. It is what Abraham Lincoln died for and each of the authors Carlos read wrote of. This is why the question of citizenship is a recurring theme in the social campaigns Carlos' and his contemporaries wage against a prejudiced American government and system—the act of being American and contributing to this ongoing evolution is not considered a privilege to be taken lightly—and what some of the appeal of joining the American army at the outbreak of aggressive American involvement in World War II is rooted in.

A noteworthy aspect of this possibility is the intellectualism which seems to grow so easily within the United States. America is linked with education early in the novel, before Carlos has so much as considered leaving his first home, when he remarks upon the positive influence of American education on the Moros population:

"When Macario went to teach in Mindanao, the Moros had not been entirely pacified. But some of their young men and women were already absorbing Christian ideals and modes of living. In fact, the better families were sending their children to America for a liberal education. The sudden contact of the Moros with Christianity and with American ideals was actually the liberation of the potentialities as a people and the discovery of the natural wealth of their land" (Bulosan 47).

This is the most significant of several examples of the United States' positive and civilizing influence on others. Indeed, the supposed enlightenment and modernity of the United States stands in sharp contrast to the Philippines and its people, which Carlos repeatedly describes as "backward and underdeveloped" (Bulosan 24). Macario's education, which Carlos's family sacrificed so heavily to maintain and rested all of their hopes upon, is also linked with the United States—Macario "was being educated in the American way" (Bulosan 20) and the educational system which they hoped would allow Macario to thrive only exists in the Philippines because of the United States' involvement after the conclusion of the Spanish-American War. Carlos' own sporadic education is also heavily influenced by the United States. During the short time he spends receiving a formal education he is a particular favorite of his

aforementioned English teacher, who spent a period of over ten years living and working in the United States.

Carlos' informal education often comes through the influences of America and Americans as well. His employment by the American Mary Strandon leads to a myriad of opportunities for Carlos; outside of his occupation at Strandon's library, which allows Carlos to further deepen his connection with literature, Carlos' connection with Mary Strandon lead to his meeting Dalmacio and learning the English language for the first time. Later in his life, during his three year stint in a California hospital, Carlos connects with the United States through language and literature—he reads hundreds of novels, many authored by famed canonical American literary names along the lines of Herman Melville and Walt Whitman, in an attempt he calls his “discovery of America” (Bulosan 252). Even after he has lived in the United States long enough to experience the variety of brutalities that it has to offer, Carlos continues to associate America with intellectual and literary traditions and hopes that the knowledge he gains in the United States can one day be brought back to the Philippines and used to change the nation for the better. Through the power of knowledge Americans can chose to make the reality of America match the America of their dreams. America truly is in the hearts of Americans.

## Conclusion

So if America truly is in the heart of its people, we can never know it without first knowing the people in question. What is an American?

It is a question that the United States has struggled with throughout its history and continues to struggle with now. If the word “American” is considered to be the sole right of legal citizens, then the term has only really existed since 1783, when the Treaty of Paris was signed and the military phase of the American Revolution came to an end. The legal definition of the word “American” has been subjected to an innumerable amount of edits and abridgements over the United States' relatively short life, usually following the model and tides of xenophobia as it evolved to meet the immigration patterns and social standards of the day. Throughout history, there have been a countless number of attempts to identify the “real” Americans from the “fake”. These attempts, which include everything from the immigration quotas of the 19th and 20th centuries to Arizona's controversial 2010 immigration law, usually work to exclude certain people or groups from becoming Americans.

Immigrant quotas—the restriction which stated that only a certain specified number of immigrants of a certain ethnic group would be allowed to legally enter the United States—were prevalent in the United States for over a century and only removed from officially American policy in 1965, which means immigrants could be refused entry into the United States based on prevalence of their particular ethnicity as recently as fifty years ago (Immigration Support 1). During World War II, the American government was so enthusiastic to defend itself that then-President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who is often remembered for his swift and effective policies to help the United States recover from the throws of the Great Depression as one of the greater minds to ever occupy the American presidency, signed an executive order which

imprisoned over 120,000 of Japanese ancestry—a significant portion of whom had been born in the United States and were thus American citizens in the eyes of the 14th Amendment—in 10 “isolation recreation centers” throughout seven states (National Park Services 1). The Arizona law in particular is one of many designed in the latter half of the previous decade; approximately 300 immigration-related bills were proposed in 2005; approximately 600 in 2006; over 1500 in 2007 and approximately 1500 in 2009 (CNN.com 1). Recently, illegal immigrants have been blamed by politicians and various public figures for everything from the poor job market to a recent wave of Arizona wildfires (CNN.com 2). The American people are much more concerned with detailing what they are not than describing what they are.

There is, of course, one important exemption to this observation: the ratification of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution, which banned slavery, granted citizenship, and made it illegal for a man to be denied the right to vote based on race or former status of servitude, were by far the most significant inclusive laws concerning the definition of the word “American”. The 14th Amendment in particular instantly changed the legal status of millions from property to citizens and intended that the rights of these new Americans be protected; it stated that

No state shall make any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or the property, without due processes of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the law. (Zinn 198)

This is a clear attempt on the part of the amendment’s authors to make the men and women who are anticipated to benefit from this change in the Constitution “Americans” in the fullest and most ideological sense of the word. While the Reconstruction era after the American Civil War is best and fairly accurately remembered for its failure to effectively and fairly reunite two halves of a broken nation while delivering on the promise of the full benefits of freedom in America—and reconstruction certainly did sacrifice the enforcement and development of equality for African-Americans in an attempt to finally bring an end to a difficult and destructive period in the history of the United States—the 14th Amendment does not merely state that all those born and naturalized in the United States are legal Americans, but it legally protects their rights to the intangible elements of being American. Guarding one’s right to avoid unpaid servitude is much more straightforward and clear of a task than guarding one’s “life” and “liberty”. In the 14th Amendment, the United States offers the same life and liberty that its Declaration of Independence demanded just under a century earlier.

But despite the great promise of the 14th Amendment, anyone who is at all familiar with American history should know how the legislation was reacted to and how it was manipulated by the vast majority of the American politicians and public. Even the very best of intentions can be fairly easily navigated by the clever and the cruel. Through manipulating the interpretation of the Amendment based on fault-finding and diction—the presence of the word “state” in the Amendment allows for some to refute the federal government’s ability concerning the rights of colored Americans because it can be interpreted as solely a state’s right to determine and answer questions of race and civil liberties—many managed to successfully avoid keeping any promises of racial equalization and it would be another century before the Civil Rights movement made

the idea of racial equalization truly realistic. Now, of course, on the bicentennial of the outbreak of a war that began with slavery and ended with millions of lost lives, the idea of denying a man or woman citizenship purely on the basis of race is not only heavily frowned upon by the majority but illegal in the eyes of the government.

So it seems that the people of the United States are a population that, despite all their great achievements and their stature as the beneficiaries of a wonderfully modern and global nation, has gotten caught up in an identity crisis. It does not know what it wants, only what it believes it cannot allow, and the latter category—which is so feverishly fought over—is subject to inevitable and never-ending change. Is there any fair definition for the term “American?” Is there absolutely any way one can reasonably summarize a people so diverse and rich that they are routinely baffled by the task of defining themselves?

Though the title of the novel says differently, Carlos seems to believe that Americans are in the hands. He repeatedly associates Americans as laborers—poor men, like the Mexican workers Carlos lectures to as an adult or the seemingly mythical President Abraham Lincoln Carlos first hears of as a child. Both Abraham Lincoln and the immigrant workers of the novel live through the land before they can move forward in their lives and continue their education or work elsewhere. Carlos tells these Mexican farmers that “we who came to the United States are Americans too. All of us were immigrants—all the way down the line. We are Americans who have toiled for this land, who have made it rich and free” (Bulosan 312). The young Carlos who first heard of Abraham Lincoln was not merely amazed because a white man would die for the African-American population, he was amazed that there was a place on Earth where a poor boy who spent his childhood living off of farm work could evolve into an American hero and respected social presence. The greatest Americans in Carlos’ eyes are those who work on and work for America; those who believe in the value of honest work deserve to wear the term, and—with luck—they, like Lincoln, will be rewarded for their efforts.

The title of Bulosan’s novel derives from a specific passage in the book, an address from Macario to their small group of friends. America, Macario says, is

...not a land of one race or one class of men. We are all Americans that have toiled and suffered and known oppression and defeat, from the first Indian that offered peace in Manhattan to the last Filipino pea pickers... America is not merely a land or an institution. America is in the hearts of men that died for freedom; it is also in the eyes of men that are building a new world. America is a prophecy of a new society of men: of a system that knows no sorrow or strife of suffering. America is a warning to those who would try to falsify the ideals of freemen.

...We are all that nameless foreigner, that homeless refugee, that hungry boy, that illiterate immigrant and that lynched black body. All of us, from the first Adams to the last Filipino, native born or alien, educated or illiterate—We are America! (Bulosan 189)

Here Macario manages the daunting and summarizes the concept of America into one concept: America is nothing more than its people. It is the manifestation of the hopes, dreams, and efforts of Americans. America is Americans. Without the people who believe in it enough to

fight for its future and tolerate its intolerances, the word “America” would mean nothing. This is a line of thinking that should resonate with anyone who is proud to wear the term “American”—it is something that children in the United States are taught from a young age. America is a haven; America is possibility; America is the land of the free and the home of those brave enough to find freedom. This is the America celebrated every Fourth of July. The American people have no trouble at all agreeing on the intangibles—it is simple to say that America is life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It is the specifics that continue to elude. America may be an American, but can America be measured in a law?

There is an infinite number of facets that must go into that decision. But Carlos Bulosan and *America in the Heart* make wonderful work of emphasizing two points that should always be considered when trying to determine the meaning of the word Americans.

First, that defining the term “Americans”, whether in informal or in legal terms, is and will probably forever continue to be an imperfect art. This nation is nothing if not impossibly diverse—Carlos, who had never so much as seen a person of color before his immigration to the United States, associates with a vast myriad of different cultures and people once he arrives in America, from African Americans to French to Mexicans to Koreans, from those whose families have lived in the United States for generations to those who have only recently found the means to journey to America. The United States is also a nation persistently evolving; there is no aspect of American life that is always changing, but there is always some aspect of American life undergoing change. This is a result of the people themselves—as long as there is someone with the will and means to make this country greater, someone like Carlos, who trusts that there is something special and “it was an exhilarating feeling—being a part of something vitally alive in America” (Bulosan 226), the United States can never remain in rest for long. America may never become perfect, but it certainly will not be for a lack of effort on the part of its people. The greatest strength of this nation is its ability to inspire.

Second, the inspiration the United States is continuously able to provide is more than strong enough to travel beyond the boundaries of the nation itself. In the last impression the reader is given at the end of the novel, Carlos describes America with both a sense of hope for its future and a genuine affection for it in the present.

I glanced out of the window again to look at the broad land I had dreamed so much about, only to discover with astonishment that the American earth was like a huge heart unfolding warmly to receive me. I felt it spreading through my being, warming me with its glowing reality. It came to me that no man—no one at all—could destroy my faith in America again... I knew that no man could destroy my faith in America that had spring from all our hopes and aspirations, ever. (Bulosan 326-7)

Carlos meets an outstanding number of difficulties in the United States. He acknowledges that he is living in which citizens can very successfully “work as one group to deprive Filipinos of the right to live as free men in a country founded upon this very principle” (Bulosan 287); he is repeatedly verbally, physically, and sexually abused; he works in a myriad of employments which are just as difficult, if not more so, as the work he did as a child in the Philippines; he is denied and punished for desiring the basic rights he believed were given to all who entered the

United States. Despite the uncountable number of hardships that meet Carlos throughout his life as an immigrant in America, he ends the novel marveling at the wonders of life in the United States. The freedom the United States of *America is in the Heart* offers is intensely difficult to obtain. The fact that the last words of *America is in the Heart* were dedicated to singing its virtues says something incredible about the United States itself. It says that, regardless of the United States' injustices and ugly flaws, the nation as a whole is still worth knowing. It is still a beautiful country. It is still capable of beautiful things. Carlos was not born an American but he managed to become one. He, like the American authors and historical figures he spends three years absorbed by, was inspired.

In *America is in the Heart*, Carlos Bulosan does not provide an effective blueprint of the United States. One would imagine that Bulosan, as great an author as he may be, could not manage the feat even if he wanted to. If a reader is to take anything from the portrayal of America in this novel it is that America is in the hearts, minds, and dreams of Americans, and Americans are those both capable of and willing to give life to their dreams.

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