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Subverting Immigrant Autobiography in the US

Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* and Louis Adamic

Enrico Mariani

Ca' Foscari University of Venice
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7006-8834
Email: enrico.mariani@unive.it

Abstract

This essay attempts to demonstrate how Louis Adamic's material and intellectual influence, as well as his textual model, contributed to the writing of the Filipino American foundational text, Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* (1946), a classic of Asian American literature. Starting with the renowned friendship between the two authors and emphasizing Adamic's support in guiding Bulosan through the ethnic expectations of the US editorial market – with the suggestion of the autobiographical genre –, this essay argues that Bulosan's employment and subversion of the immigrant autobiography was partly modeled on Adamic's semi-autobiography *Laughing in the Jungle* (1932), a heterodox European immigrant autobiography centered on class issues, social struggle, and the deconstruction of the American dream. The essay offers a brief comparative recognition of immigrant autobiographies written by European and Asian immigrants and their different canonical understanding through the classic works by William Boelhower and Elaine H. Kim. Then, drawing from archival materials and intertextual analysis, the essay argues that *America Is in the Heart*'s structure, the narrator's skepticism toward assimilation policies and his attachment to the country of origin, are indebted to Adamic's influence because of formal and thematic similarities with his semi-autobiography. Nonetheless, the US colonial history

of the Philippines and the author's background rooted in rural Pangasinan, set Bulosan's text apart from both the European American and Asian American autobiographical "traditions" and thus from the model of Younghill Kang – even though the two undergo the same racial prejudice by the editorial market. *America Is in the Heart* subverts the immigrant autobiographical genre by re-signifying the concept of "America," juxtaposing American ideals with the harsh realities of violent exploitation and discrimination experienced by Filipino migrant workers. In doing so, it reframes "America" as a symbol of solidarity between racialized workers against the fascist corporate manifestations that worried Adamic in the 1930s.

KEYWORDS

Carlos Bulosan, Louis Adamic, Immigrant Autobiography, Filipino Diaspora, Ethnic Expectations

Introduction

Filipino American literature's solid tradition, which today encompasses – to mention a few recent names – Jessica Hagedorn, Ninotchka Rosca, Gina Apostol, Sabina Murray, and Elaine Castillo, gained international recognition with the publication of two pivotal anthologies: *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (1974), and *Charlie Chan is Dead: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction* (1993). Both include, respectively, an excerpt and a posthumous short story by Carlos Bulosan (1913-1956), who is deemed as the forefather of Filipino American literature (Hagedorn 27). Even though Filipino literature in English started the decade after the US colonial occupation of the Philippines in 1898, Bulosan was the first to cover the Filipino migratory experience in the US with a semi-fictional autobiography – or semi-autobiography –, *America Is in the Heart* (1946). However, the absence of an autobiographical tradition of the Filipino diaspora in the US forced Bulosan to search for autobiographical narrative models among diasporic authors from other countries, such as Korean American Younghill Kang and the Slovenian American writer and activist Louis Adamic. After a brief examination of the European and Asian American immigrant autobiographical patterns, this essay will show how Adamic's material and intellectual influence,

as well as the model of his semi-autobiography, contributed to the writing of *America Is in the Heart*. Bulosan's meetings with Los Angeles writers in the 1930s led him to make the acquaintance of historian and attorney Carey McWilliams, who introduced him to Louis Adamic. It was ultimately Adamic who advised Bulosan to subvert the conventions of the immigrant autobiography from within. Moreover, the comparison between Bulosan's text and Adamic's semi-autobiography *Laughing in the Jungle* (1932) shows several intertextual similarities that suggest Bulosan's attentive reading of Adamic's work. *Laughing in the Jungle* is based on Adamic's own migratory experience from the province of the Austro-Hungarian empire and illustrates the pitfalls of assimilation into the US dominant culture, exposing the implicit power imbalances of melting-pot policies. In this sense, Adamic's text represented an anti-model of the European immigrant autobiographies in the US (Boelhower 49-56). The fictional device of the gap between author and alter-ego employed by both Adamic and Bulosan acquires political value, allowing for a reading beyond *America Is in the Heart*'s apparent assimilationist enthusiasm and showing a critical re-signification of the Filipino workers' aspirations in the US. This essay tries to deepen the analysis of the renowned friendship between the two authors, which has never led to comparative readings before. Michael Denning's compelling study *The Cultural Front* (1998), which analyzes both Adamic's and Bulosan's works as cultural emanations of the Popular Front, lacks a comparison between the two authors.

The Anti-Model of Louis Adamic

Bulosan's debt to Adamic can be found in chapter 38 of *America Is in the Heart*, where the narrator-protagonist Allos/Carlos[1] describes an

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[1] The narrator-protagonist is called Allos until chapter 17, where his older brother Macario calls him Carlos. The name change occurs in dire circumstances and symbolizes the initiation to the American experience: "*Carlos*! He had changed my name, too! Everything was changing" (Bulosan, *America* 130).

intense period of literary exploration that fueled his engagement in the struggles for Filipino workers' union rights. While in Los Angeles, he makes the acquaintance of the Japanese poet Yone Noguchi, as well as with John Fante, McWilliams, and Adamic. The latter, says the narrator, "because of his phenomenal success, overshadowed the others" (Bulosan, *America* 266). But there are other instances that show the profound influence of the Slovenian American writer. For example, in a 1942 manuscript entitled "In Search of America," which has been partly published posthumously with the title "My Education" (Bulosan, *If You Want* 15-20), we read this passage which was entirely edited out except for the last question:

> I was fascinated by Louis Adamic. Here was a pattern for me. As an immigrant he brought with him a well-defined political heritage, but when he wrote of America there was some note of detachment. Yet when he wrote of his native Yugoslavia there was a great feeling of attachment and joy. It was only when he had stayed long enough that he was able to assimilate the living spirit of America. Am I not an immigrant like Louis Adamic? (Bulosan, "Manuscript" 13)

Bulosan's admiration for Adamic stems from the latter's ability to "stay long enough" in the US to put on paper a critique of the specter of assimilation, which, for Asian immigrants and Filipino colonial subjects, often revealed the most violent outcomes. The key elements that Bulosan took from Adamic and employed in his work are a "well-defined political heritage," a veiled skepticism and "detachment" from America's deceptions, and a "feeling of attachment and joy" for his country of origin – even though both authors' rural provenance sparked off idiosyncratic feelings toward their countries. Adamic conceived a new transnational identity where his politically self-conscious narrator maintains a complex bond with the country of origin and is therefore less inclined toward accepting total assimilation – *i.e.*, Americanization – to a dominant culture that often enacted anti-immigrant policies. In the early 1930s, the immigrant protagonist as a detached exile was a relatively new subject for the European immigrant autobiographical tradition (Enyeart 29-31).

The previous decades saw the publication of several European immigrant autobiographies which embraced the great narrative of Americanization and could be considered *exempla* of more or less traumatic assimilation, such as those written by Jacob Riis, Mary Antin, Edward Steiner, Marcus Eli Ravage, Horace Bridges, Edward Bok, and Constantine Panunzio. These authors wrote for two implied readers: the dominant WASP society, to which they wanted to show their conformity, and the newly arrived immigrant (Sollors 42; 58; Boelhower 51; Smith and Watson 88-90). The autobiographical genre is especially prone to promote assimilationist narratives because it embodies the elements of *Bildung*, personality formation, and, in the above-mentioned authors, of national identity formation. On the epistemological level, the above-mentioned authors added both an ethnic dualistic element and the collective dimension to Benjamin Franklin's self-making model (Boelhower 35-45; Denning 274-77). As Paul J. Eakin claims, "identity formation [...] is socially and (more specifically) discursively transacted" (61-65), namely, the most effective way to claim the self is in relation to the other: the self is asserted – assimilated – if the others recognize it as such. Thus, the best discursive way to assimilate to a given society is to narrate the self in relation to that society: this also explains the US editorial market's interest in assimilationist immigrant autobiographies. Adamic's semi-autobiography is ingeniously structured as an immigrant autobiography, which granted the book a place in the publishing market and the author a Guggenheim Fellowship, but its discourse challenges the assimilationist narrative (Tuerk 114-37).

Adamic's career started with contributions to periodicals such as the socialist *Haldeman-Julius Monthly* and Henry Louis Mencken's *American Mercury*, but gained national and international attention with the publication of *Dynamite: The Story of Class Violence in America* (1931; 1934), a non-fiction book praised by Upton Sinclair and Sinclair Lewis.[2] Adamic's writing career was fostered by his activism for ethnic and racial equality, which sparked his founding of the Common Council for

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[2] Bertolt Brecht's poem "How the Ship Oskawa was Broken up by her own Crew" ("Abbau des Schiffes Oskawa durch die Mannschaft," *Svedenborger Gedichte*, 1939) was inspired by an episode narrated in *Dynamite* (Olivieri 17).

American Unity, whose literary emanation was the periodical *Common Ground*, first issued in 1941, which included contributions by Pearl S. Buck, Langston Hughes, and Eleanore Roosevelt (Enyeart 68). The author's seminal interest in the ethnic condition, however, must be found in his semi-autobiography. *Laughing in the Jungle* narrates the protagonist's childhood in Carniola (Habsburg Empire, now Slovenia), his oceanic travel to the US, his working and military experiences in the 1910s-1920s New York, Panama, and Los Angeles, and the parables of other Balkan immigrants that he encountered along his journey. Overall, the text conveys a precise message to the implied readers: "the whole American success idea [...] was headed, sooner or later, toward some such fate [...] – a crash in the dark" (Adamic, *Laughing* 329-30). This demonstrates the author's awareness of the assimilationist genre's propagandistic function, to which he provided a counternarrative: the narrator's experiences and the people he encountered show that "any effort to become an 'American' resulted in death" (Enyeart 29).

The same awareness can also be found in Bulosan's text, which conveys its own version of the Filipino American autobiography. Bulosan's alter-ego's political consciousness is formed in the US by a gradual acknowledgment of the racial discrimination of Filipinos in the US and by the realization that their condition has not improved from the feudal and colonial yoke they suffered in the Philippines. The text begins in Pangasinan, Northern Luzon, where the narrator's father retreated after the Philippine Revolution (1896-1898), and where his family lived "at the margins under American rule and Southern Luzon political might" (De Leon 203). Thus, the first fundamental difference in Bulosan's text compared to the European immigrant autobiography and Adamic's anti-model is that the narrator moves from the archipelago to the mainland within the same empire – an absolute novelty in the 1940s, even within Asian American writings. *America Is in the Heart* was the first major published semi-autobiography to narrate extensively the transnational migratory experience of an Asian colonial subject within US imperial structure.

Autobiography and Asian America

Bulosan was not the first US colonial subject – nor the first Asian immigrant – to write about the migratory experience, but it could be argued that he was one of the first to publish an (anti)assimilationist semi-autobiography, with few to no Asian American textual models.[3] For historical reasons, in fact, the autobiographies written by Asian immigrants took another trajectory compared to those written by European immigrants: the assimilationist narrative simply could not be easily employed by minorities that were not eligible for US citizenship for the most part until post-1945. Late nineteenth-/early twentieth- century Asian American autobiographical authors, such as Yan Phou Lee and New Il-Han, who Elaine H. Kim calls "ambassadors of goodwill," focused more on ethnographic descriptions of their own cultures to counteract the *Yellow Peril* stereotype, than on assimilation experiences (Kim, *Asian American Literature* 25-26). A closer attention to the assimilationist immigrant autobiography can be found in the works by Sui Sin Far (Edith Eaton), but her British descent on the mother's side and her cosmopolitanism prevented her from enduring the same discriminations experienced by most Asian workers (Smith and Watson 123). The first waves of Asian immigrants, in fact, came from rural classes who practiced literary forms related to folk oral traditions (Kim, "Defining" 94). Moreover, Asian American autobiographical writings in the US varied based on the power relationships between the US and the country of origin, which shaped the layers of assimilation and/or discrimination. In fact, given the peculiar colonial condition of the Filipinos, Bulosan's semi-autobiography can be distinguished from the contemporary Helena Kuo's *I've Come a Long Way* (1942), which still conformed to the "ambassadors" genre and sprung the subsequent stereotype of the "model minority" (Vastolo 39-41; Kim, *Asian American*

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[3] Even though the complicated notion of Asian America was born out of 1960s and 1970s activism (Nguyen 3-31), here, the references to an Asian American "tradition" and to its "textual models" allude conventionally to what Kim retroactively conceives as the literary corpus written by Asian immigrants in the US, specifically in the first decades of the twentieth century (23-57).

Literature 24-33). The first self-conscious work about the shortcomings of the melting-pot on the Asians came from Kang's autobiographical *East Goes West: The Making of an Oriental Yankee* (1937), which, as Sunyoung Lee points out, was not

> the candid account of a hardworking immigrant who, through his unwavering belief in the American dream, comes to attain it. […] The subtitle […] might read as an antiquated version of today's term 'Asian American,' but […] is in fact that process of deconstruction – of simplistic nationalism, of naive faith in America's gleaming promise, of a stable, color-blind identity – that is implicit in the construction of a new sense of home (368; 383).

Allos/Carlos praises Kang's work because of the insights into 1920s Korean resistance against Japanese colonization, which encouraged the narrator to fight for justice (Bulosan, *America* 265).[4] However, Bulosan is also aware of the class gap between him and Kang, as his alter-ego asks: "Why could not I succeed as Younghill Kang had? He had come from a family of scholars and had gone to an American university – but was he not an Oriental like myself? Was there an Oriental without education who had become a writer in America?" (265). In regard to this issue, Kim claims that "the similarities between the two men are not as important as the differences" (*Asian American Literature* 44): whereas Kang gradually becomes disillusioned with the state of his country of origin, distancing himself from the immediate fate of his compatriots while still praising them, Bulosan is aware that his own ideal of "America" is strictly linked to the fate of the rural classes in the Philippines and to that of the US Filipino workers (44). Moreover, while *East Goes West* focuses on the East Coast, *America Is in the Heart* is mainly set along the West Coast.

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[4] It is very likely that Bulosan is also hinting extradiegetically at his own moral support to the 1942 Hukbalahap rebellion against the 1940s Japanese occupation of the Philippines (San Juan Jr. 158-60).

(Inter)Textual Similarities and Urban Dwelling

Even though, for cultural, geographical, and historical reasons, Adamic's background is in no way closer to Bulosan's than Kang's, the protagonists of *America Is in the Heart* and *Laughing in the Jungle* share similar political attitudes and, most importantly, the texts share a similar overall structure and thematic features. Both texts are almost equally divided into a first portion, which covers the protagonists' childhood in the country of origin until the moment of departure for the US, with a frequent use of Slovenian and Ilokano words that gradually disappear in the second portion, which narrates about the protagonists' strong commitment to literature, experiences of exploitation, along with the torments inherent to the exiled, diasporic individual. Moreover, other conformities can be found when the texts narrate similar migratory patterns. In chapter 14 of *America Is in the Heart*, soon after Allos/Carlos' landing in Seattle, the protagonist is warned by Julio, a Filipino worker who had arrived before him: "all roads go to California and all travelers wind up in Los Angeles. [...] But not this traveler. I have lived there too long. I know that state too damn well. [...] It is hard to be a Filipino in California" (112). A similar warning is issued to the protagonist of *Laughing in the Jungle* by Peter Molek, a Slovenian return migrant: "America the jungle swallows many people who go there to work. She squeezes the strength out of them [...]. I was there too long, [...] I worked too hard" (17-18).

The weather conditions and circumstances in which the protagonists arrive in Los Angeles are also described in similar ways. In chapter 16 of Adamic's text, we read: "on arrival in Pedro, early in December, southern California was having a spell of so-called 'unusual' weather. [...] After the wind died down, it continued to rain" (*Laughing* 198). Bulosan opens similarly chapter 17: "I reached Los Angeles in the evening. An early autumn rain was falling" (*America* 127). Adamic's protagonist walks through Downtown in the evening as well: "toward evening I was walking down Main Street again, sniffing at the stew of human life [...]. I came to the Mexican quarter. I passed through Plaza Park [...], and across the street from it a Mexican barker shouted the virtues of an old Charlie Chaplin film" (*Laughing* 200). Bulosan's protagonist walks the same streets: "I went

to Main Street, turned to the north, and found the Mexican district. [...] In the old plaza [...] a shaggy old man was preaching to a motley crowd" (*America* 127). Both cross paths with a white-bearded old man: "an old man with a straggly white beard [...] handed me a printed invitation to the Midnight Gospel Mission located a few blocks away" (Adamic, *Laughing* 201); and here is Bulosan: "the church was empty. [...] I saw an old man with a white beard coming in the door, and I thought he saw me" (*America* 128). Both protagonists' arrival in Los Angeles is eventually met with a traumatic incident: Adamic's protagonist is beaten up and robbed in the bathroom of a restaurant, while Allos/Carlos witnesses to the shooting of a Filipino during a police raid in a poolroom. In both cases the unwelcoming incidents are never counterbalanced nor redeemed later in the book. These intertextual similarities also signal a shared narrative pattern of immigrant workers' urban dwellings, coping with the paradox of the LA streets as a place of estrangement, danger, and hopelessness, yet also the only ones they are allowed to inhabit. "Urban centers [...] served as recreational ports" (De Leon 183) for Filipinos coming back from the fields. In the cities they were confined to poolrooms, taxi-dance halls, and were exposed to the moral dilemma of gambling, which put them "in visual contact with other workers in Chinatowns and integrated them within a highly visible extralegal economy" (189). Similarly, recreational and extralegal activities are an integral part of the Balkan characters' lives in Adamic's book, such as Lenard Podgornik, who "spends his days in libraries [...], frequenting poolrooms and socializing with Wobblies", while delivering liquor for bootleggers to feed his family and pay taxes (Enyeart 31). In both texts, the characters' restrictive urban life constantly reveals the material, social, and cultural shortcomings – if not outright impossible applications – of melting-pot policies.

The Filipino Condition

Juxtaposing the two texts requires, nonetheless, clarifying the significant differences in the political status and sociocultural conditions of the two authors. The Philippines' colonial history and the racial discriminations

suffered by Filipino migrants are structurally inherent to *America Is in the Heart*'s diegesis, especially in the protagonist's education and political consciousness formation. Filipinos' political status in the 1930s was a legal peculiarity. Since 1902, when the Philippines became a US unincorporated territory, Filipinos were "wards" or "nationals," who could theoretically move freely in the US even though they were not recognized as having major rights. From 1935, however, when the Tydings-McDuffie Act granted the Philippines a limited governmental autonomy, McWilliams explains that Filipinos in the US "could not be deported because they had not entered as immigrants, nor could they be excluded. Yet they were not eligible for citizenship. But when they travelled abroad, they used United States passports" (x). This hybrid status had dire consequences not only on the legal side – they could not hold properties nor marry American citizens –, but also on Filipinos' fraught identities, causing disillusionment in those born under American rule who could not claim a US nor a Filipino national identity, especially for those – like Bulosan – coming from nonmetropolitan Northern Luzon.[5] Bulosan's alter-ego's constant swing between illusion and disillusion is the first step in the deconstruction of the assimilationist narrative, exposing in many ways the discrepancy between, as Epifanio San Juan Jr. puts it, the US *ideal* – "America, land of equality and prosperity" (138) – and its *reality* for Filipinos: "the social wasteland called 'United States'" (160). Finally, Bulosan himself talks about the disillusionment of the ideal on his arrival: "I did not know that I was coming closer to American *reality*" (*If You Want* 15; my emphasis).

This peculiar Filipino condition is reflected for the first time in the literary genre of *America Is in the Heart*. The Filipino literary tradition in English did not have a model for the autobiographical immigrant experience in the US: José Garcia Villa devoted himself to writing poetry, while Bienvenido Santos only started publishing in the 1950s. Bulosan underscored the absence of

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[5] For a general understanding of historical empire relationships between the US and the Philippines see Kramer. For a comprehensive understanding of the colonial "Filipino condition" and its legacies see Bonus and Tiongson Jr. For a reading of *America Is in the Heart* as a subverting text of the colonial and metropolitan commodified stereotypes of Ilokano people and Igorots, see De Leon 201-09.

this tradition on *The New Masses* in the 1942 article "Filipino Soul: Story of a Great Culture," where he reviews the last literary publications by Manuel E. Arguilla, Salvador P. Lopez, R. Zulueta da Costa, and Juan Cabreros Laya. According to Bulosan, these authors were representative of the leading role of Filipino intellectuals in a time of war and colonization, and he hoped that their work could ignite a cultural and political awakening in the Filipino people: "these are times when the writer must enrich his sensibilities with the terrible realities which are being laid bare for every man to see, and when the chaos is over he will have a storehouse of materials to fill the needs of a great cultural revival" ("Filipino Soul" 24). Despite Laya's and Arguilla's autobiographical instances, none of these authors wrote an immigrant autobiography in the US.

Editorial Ethnic Expectations

On the literary genre of *America Is in the Heart*, Kim claims that the text is "both less and more than a personal history: it is a composite portrait of the Filipino American community, a social document from the point of view of a participant in that experience" (*Asian American Literature* 48). With "social document," Kim is not referring to the text as a simple documentary chronicle, but to the inherent purpose of rousing sociopolitical consciousness. As already mentioned, the onlooker-participant perspective on a collective experience is also a feature in *Laughing in the Jungle*, as is the fragmentation of the text, a composite of previously published stories (Enyeart 29). The formal composition of *America Is in the Heart*, according to Bulosan's friend P.C. Morantte, is "30% autobiography, 40% of case history of Pinoy life in America, and 30% fiction" (31-32). Morantte claims that in the early 1940s Bulosan repeatedly defined himself as "essentially a fiction writer" (125), but he also wanted to write a "socio-political book" (126) in essay form, which never saw the light, so he blended both fiction and socio-political thought in his semi-autobiography. *America Is in the Heart*'s hybrid form is also partly due to a compromise with the US editorial market, as was often the case with so-called ethnic writers. As Morantte recalls, in 1943 "Adamic remembered Bulosan from Los Angeles [...], in whose

talent he had faith. Carlos told me once about Adamic: 'He [...] told me to keep on writing. He believes in my talent.' This faith in Carlos was what prompted Adamic to suggest Bulosan's name to [...] Maxim Leiber" (132). Then Morantte evokes a 1944 editorial meeting at the Harcourt, Brace & Co offices in New York City, in the presence of Adamic and Maxim Lieber, the agent for both Adamic and Bulosan, where they discussed the reviewing of *America Is in the Heart* and Lieber "cautioned [Bulosan] about trying to write as an intellectual" (144). Despite Lieber, Bulosan maintained both an intellectual attitude and a layered degree of fictionality in a text which, as mentioned above, was conceived in the early 1940s as a novel on the collective experience of Filipino workers in the US, as he writes in a 1941 letter: "I hope someday to write about Aurelio and my other brother [...]. I believe that the three of us live and are living a very tragic life. It is my responsibility to interpret this. It is also the life of every Filipino in the United States" (*Sound* 9). Bulosan, in fact, favored the fictional liberty and the collective dimension over the first-person narrative *Bildung* of the individual hero. As scholar Adrian De Leon explains, "Bulosan was a good listener. With Allos, Bulosan took on the many stories of his peers to tell a coherent story of Filipino America" (163). Yet, it was Adamic, again, who recommended Bulosan to write the book as an autobiography to secure a place in the publishing market (Kim, *Asian American Literature* 48).

The advice should not be interpreted as cynical marketing advice, but rather as a political strategy based on Adamic's experience as a published *ethnic* author and on his awareness of the ethnic expectations of the 1930s-1940s US editorial market. The editorial trends were in fact indicative of the fact that immigrant writers (or writers of immigrant descent) were often requested to write about their own experiences as *ethnic* subjects in the US. Thus, it was generally taken for granted that a literary work by an immigrant writer should always be factually autobiographical: it is precisely through this genre that, according to Adamic, the *ethnic* author should manifest his dissent and deconstruct both the genre and the assimilationist ideology from within, by exposing the racial structures and power dynamics which underlie the failures of melting-pot policies, as partly seen with urban ghettoization. One of the first to embody this misunderstanding was Kang who, according to Lee, "became an early victim of the still-prevalent

belief that the only contribution any writer of color could possibly have to make is the story of his or her own life" (368). Lee explains that these expectations were partly endorsed by his agent Maxwell Perkins, also the agent for F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and Thomas Wolfe (367). Even though both Kang and Wolfe were autobiographical writers, Perkins deemed Wolfe capable of a "transformative power of the imagination" (367), whereas his attitude towards Kang was "much more matter-of-fact" (367), an attitude resembling Lieber's warning to Bulosan not to "write as an intellectual." Editorial ethnic expectations, at that time, were not a prerogative of the writers of color, since they also shaped the literary careers of Bulosan's friends Adamic and John Fante (Bordin 167-77).

Subverting the Assimilationist Autobiography

By accepting the compromise to be identified as the factual protagonists of their autobiographical works, Kang, Adamic, and Bulosan ostensibly inserted themselves into the assimilationist narrative on a superficial level. But the fictional device of the gap between author and narrator, which is inherent in every autobiographical text, allows one to read beyond a supposed factual level in Bulosan's text: "the subject/narrator is a construction primarily because Bulosan himself did not directly experience all [the] events, although collectively his 'compatriots' did" (Alquizola, "The Fictive Narrator" 211). This gap makes it even more evident that what the naïve Allos/Carlos believes, hopes, and dreams, is in striking dissonance with Bulosan's detailed representation of the systemic exploitation of and racial violence against the Filipino workers (212-14). And yet, it is the narrator Allos/Carlos who counterbalances the naïve faith in US ideology with his final engagement in the struggle for Filipino US citizenship, which brings him to side with Communist militants and to praise dissident writers around the world, such as Maxim Gorki, Federico García Lorca, Nicolas Guillen, André Malraux: "from day to day I read, and reading widened my mental horizon, creating a spiritual kinship with other men who had pondered over the miseries of their countries. Then it came to me that the place did not matter: these sensitive writers reacted

to the social dynamics of their time. I, too, reacted to my time" (Bulosan, *America* 246). The dissident thought is also an integral part of *Laughing in the Jungle*'s narrator's intellectual formation, where he makes explicit and implicit references to the iconoclast, anti-establishment authors he read in the 1910s and 1920s, such as Upton Sinclair, H. L. Mencken, Theodore Dreiser, and Sinclair Lewis, who shaped his seemingly-nihilist perspective on the country: "Los Angeles is but a bigger and better Gopher Prairie. [...] And Los Angeles is America. A jungle [...] full of curious wild and poisonous growths [...] and wildcat business enterprises which, with their desire for quick profits, are doomed to collapse and drag down multitudes of people" (223-26). Adamic's radicalism grew during his 1932 trip to Yugoslavia, after the publication of *Laughing in the Jungle*, where he worried about the growing European fascisms and, back to the US, asked himself what the immigrant writers could do to prevent something similar in the US, as he argues in the much-discussed 1934 article "What the Proletariat Reads": "It seems to me that a few powerful revolutionary books about America, if not too long delayed, would do more to unfit large masses of the middle class for fascist movements than almost anything else conceivable" (322). With this article, maintains Enyeart, "Adamic suggested that immigrants and ethnics could appropriate the notion of 'American,' redefine democracy, and impede the spread of fascism before it moved beyond its embryonic phase in the United States" (52).

Subverting *America*: A Conclusion

The re-signification of "America" and the antifascist perspective animate several passages of *America Is in the Heart*. Throughout the text, in fact, "America" becomes an ambiguous signifier, "a word whose meaning (can one still doubt it?) is subject to constant renegotiation" (San Juan Jr. 140), that can be read by both assimilationist and radical perspectives:

> the reception of [Bulosan's] work as an assimilationist text is due partly to the surplus of meaning in the narrative; it contains a critique of both racism within American borders as well as colonialism outside

> its borders, in opposition to the affirmation of the American people themselves as vessels for American ideals. (Alquizola, "Subversion and Affirmation" 206)

In fact, in the controversial closing of the book it is not clear if the narrator is celebrating chauvinism or stirring social activism:

> It was something that grew out of the sacrifices and loneliness of my friends, of my brothers in America and my family in the Philippines – something that grew out of our desire to know America, and to become a part of her great tradition, and to contribute something toward her final fulfillment. I knew that no man could destroy my faith in America that had sprung from all our hopes and aspirations, *ever*. (Bulosan, *America* 327)

The generally positive reception after the publication of the book contributed to an enduring reading of this last passage, and by extension of the whole text, as an affirmation of 1940s Filipinos' goodwill – many of them enrolled in World War II US army – towards all-American values and peaceful assimilation. This, Alquizola points out, sounds quite paradoxical because embracing American values at that time implied supporting Manifest Destiny ideology, which was at the base of the US colonial occupation of the Philippines ("Subversion and Affirmation" 201-06). The radical thought and dissident writers that Allos/Carlos had praised up to that point in the narration make it difficult to interpret the closing statement as an uncritical acceptance of chauvinist values. The crucial point of the passage lies in the re-signification of the signifier "America," a new collective ideal that takes shape along the text. In chapter 19, after acknowledging the violence and legal racial discrimination perpetrated on Filipinos, Allos/Carlos says:

> I began to wonder at the paradox of America. […] 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, *America* 147; my emphasis)

The resolution of the paradox comes in chapter 46, where Allos/Carlos is educating cannery workers about US history with biblical analogies, concluding that "America" is an "unfinished dream" that will not be realized until all the ethnic workers gain equal rights and abolish classes (312). Again, in chapter 46, Allos/Carlos acknowledges that the cannery workers' oppression had a common denominator, the same that was shaking Europe: "it came to me that we were all fighting against one enemy: *Fascism*" (311). These idealistic echoes of the Popular Front 1940s progressive rhetoric should not elude the Filipinos' colonial past which informs Bulosan's text. Even though the Philippine-American War (1898-1902) is never mentioned in the text, and lacking an actual fascist regime in 1940s US, it seems plausible that the word "fascism" refers implicitly to something else: "the other name for US colonial violence is 'fascism,' and its genealogy includes Spanish Falangists and Filipino sympathizers, American racist vigilantes and police, and Japanese aggression – this last evoking what the text dares not name: US invasion of the islands at the turn of the century" (San Juan Jr. 143). The bitterness about the US colonial legacy is more visible in private, as in this 1948 letter: "I always write about that life [in the Philippines] beautifully, but when I take another background like the United States, I become bitter and angry and cruel" (Bulosan, *Sound* 59).

Interestingly enough, in Bulosan's text, the signifier "America" has some resonance with the signifier "Filipino," as in chapter 20: "it was not easy to understand why the Filipinos were *brutal yet tender*, nor was it easy to believe that they had been made this way by the reality of America" (*America* 152; my emphasis). Here, Allos/Carlos applies to Filipinos a similar oxymoron that he employed above to describe America: "kind/cruel" and "brutal/tender." America's contradictions are thus transferred on Filipinos' skin, and even the sound of the word "Filipino" becomes a painful reminder of colonial abjection for Bulosan during the composition of the text, as he points out in a 1942 letter to his friend Dorothy Babb: "when I say 'Filipino' the sound cuts deep into my being – it hurts. It will

take years to wipe out the sharpness of the word, to erase its notorious connotation in America. And only a great faith in some common goal can give it fullness again" (Bulosan, *Sound* 18).

The Filipino characters in Bulosan's text, in this sense, become symbolic commentaries of the shortcomings of US assimilationist ideology, the same way Adamic's narrator regarded the Balkan characters that crossed paths with him in the US. In the last chapters of *Laughing in the Jungle*, the narrator asks himself if they would have been safer had they stayed in the Old Country: "among my fellow workers I came upon men who interested me, at least temporarily; some of them as individuals, others as tiny organisms – victims of conditions, case histories [...] and symbols, which to me were acute comments on life in the Land of Promise" (266; 326). The "detachment" that Bulosan admired in Adamic when he talked about America, along with his "attachment and joy" when talking about the country of origin, are to be found in Bulosan's text in the greater collective ideal of America, which was not the same American ideal that led to Philippines' occupation. The skepticism toward assimilation to a definite American ideal is what, finally, renders *America Is in the Heart* not a "characteristically Asian American genre of autobiography or personal history dedicated to the task of promoting cultural goodwill and understanding" (Kim, *Asian American Literature* 47), but "a new genre, the antithesis to the quest for Americanization" (San Juan Jr. 138).

AUTHOR'S BIONOTE

Enrico Mariani currently teaches Anglo-American literature at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, where he has been a post-doc research fellow. He taught Anglo-American Literature at University of Naples Federico II and at Roma Tre University, where he earned his Ph.D. He has been a visiting scholar at John D. Calandra Italian American Institute (Queens College, CUNY). His Ph.D. dissertation has been awarded the Agostino Lombardo Prize (2024). He published contributions on John Steinbeck, Upton Sinclair, Gina Apostol, John Fante, and recently published the book *Americani di seconda classe. La dialettica del* melting pot *in Louis Adamic, Carlos Bulosan e John Fante* (Agorà & Co., 2025).

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