

# ASIAN AMERICAN

## L I T E R A T U R E

Reviews and Criticism of Works by  
American Writers of Asian Descent

pt. 1

Lawrence J. Trudeau, Editor

with advisors

David Henry Hwang, Ravindra N. Sharma, Kenneth Yamashita



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DETROIT • LONDON



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## PREFACE

**A** *Asian American Literature (AAL)* was created in response to suggestions by the staffs of high school, college, and public libraries. These librarians observed a need for a volume that assembles critical commentary on acclaimed Asian American writers in the same manner as Gale's *Black Literature Criticism (BLC)*, *Hispanic Literature Criticism (HLC)*, and *Native North American Literature (NNAL)*, which present material on writers of specific ethnic descent. Although Asian American authors are covered in such Gale literary criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, and *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*, *Asian American Literature* directs more concentrated attention on these literary figures than is possible in the more general Gale series.

### SCOPE OF THE VOLUME

In determining which authors to include in *Asian American Literature*, the field was broadly defined. Writers in a variety of genres were sought, as were authors from as many historical periods as possible. Therefore, *AAL* includes poets, novelists, playwrights, essayists, memoirists, and short story writers. The volume also covers pioneering writers such as Edith and Winnifred Eaton as well as emerging authors like Chang-rae Lee and David Wong Louie. In defining Asian American literature thus broadly, it was decided to include writers with Canadian backgrounds as well. As demonstrated by the example of the Eaton sisters—both of whom lived for periods in Canada as well as the United States, and both of whom are honored in both countries—the cultural as well as the political borders between the two nations are very porous. Therefore, the Canadian writer Joy Kogawa has been included in *Asian American Literature*. Her novel *Obasan* is often examined and discussed alongside works by Maxine Hong Kingston, Hisaye Yamamoto, and other American writers, and has become a significant voice in the discourse of Asian America. The inclusion of a wide range of such voices (whether harmonious or discordant together) was an overarching concern in the compiling of the entries in this volume.

*Asian American Literature* is intended for students. By collecting and organizing commentary on Asian American writers, *AAL* will assist students in their efforts to gain insight into literature, achieve better understanding of the texts, and formulate ideas for papers and assignments. The variety of interpretations and assessments that is offered allows students to pursue their own interests and promotes awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

### ORGANIZATION OF AN AUTHOR ENTRY

Each author entry contains the following elements:

- The **author heading** consists of the writer's most commonly used name, followed by birth and death dates.
- The **Introduction** encapsulates background information to familiarize the reader with the author and the critical response to his or her works.
- The list of **Major Works** is organized chronologically by date of publication.
- **Reviews and Criticism** offer the reader in-depth discussions and analyses of the literary merit of the author's works. When necessary, essays are carefully excerpted to focus on the writer or work under consideration; often, however, essays and reviews are reprinted in their entirety.
- As an additional aid to students, the critical essays and excerpts are prefaced by **explanatory annotations**. These notes provide information on the scope and significance of the criticism that follows.
- A complete **bibliographic citation**, designed to help the interested reader locate the original essay or book, precedes each piece of criticism.
- The **Sources for Further Study** at the end of each entry comprises additional materials pertaining to the writer.

## OTHER FEATURES

- An **index of titles** lists in alphabetical order the works discussed in the criticism contained in *AAL*. Each title is followed by the author's name and the corresponding page number(s) where commentary on the work may be located. The titles included in the index are set in boldface type where they appear in the main text.
- In some cases, a **portrait** of the author is provided.

## A NOTE TO THE READER

When writing papers, students who quote directly from *Asian American Literature* may use the following general formats to footnote reprinted criticism. The first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to materials reprinted from books.

<sup>1</sup>S. E. Solberg, "Sui Sin Far/Edith Eaton: First Chinese-American Fictionist," *MELUS* 8, No. 1 (Spring 1981), 27-39; excerpted and reprinted in *Asian American Literature*, ed. Lawrence J. Trudeau (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Research, 1999), pp. 71-6.

<sup>2</sup>Amy Ling, *Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry*, (Pergamon Press, 1990); excerpted and reprinted in *Asian American Literature*, ed. Lawrence J. Trudeau (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Research, 1999), pp. 438-44.

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# CARLOS BULOSAN

## 1903-1956

### INTRODUCTION

Bulosan is best remembered as the author of the memoir *America Is in the Heart* (1946) and other works that address the class oppression and racism encountered by Filipinos who immigrated to the United States between 1930 and 1950 in search of the American dream. *America Is in the Heart* details the harsh circumstances of Bulosan's early life in the Philippines as well as the hardships he endured as a migrant worker in the western United States during the Great Depression. In the words of Oscar V. Campomanes and Todd S. Gernes, "The act of writing for Bulosan is revelation, an expression of kinship and community, a gesture of autobiography, and an act of breaking silence, of bearing witness to the strengths not merely of the Filipino but of all oppressed peoples in America striving for liberty, autonomy, wholeness, and self-worth."

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### REVIEWS AND CRITICISM

#### *The Christian Science Monitor* (essay date 1946)

SOURCE: "The Back Door to America," in *The Christian Science Monitor*, 14 March 1946, p. 20.

[In the following favorable review of *America Is in the Heart*, the critic declares that "after his appealing and beautifully written account of life on Luzon, [Bulosan] certainly persuades his reader that he is a sincere and truthful witness of the terrible events he portrays."]

While the Statue of Liberty beckons graciously at the front door of the Union, Mr. Bulosan tells us of things less gracious, less reassuring, occurring at the back door. The back door is not intended as a geographical term. It happens, in the case of this strange human document, to denote the West Coast. That is where Carlos Bulosan, author of *America Is in The Heart*, as a refugee from feudal oppression in the Philippines, made contact with the land which to him had been the symbol of freedom and soaring ideals.

But freedom raised no hand to welcome this gentle, little farm youth from Luzon, who came with no money and little education, because all his father's resources, including his farm, had been thrown into the money-lender's hands to pay for an older son's college education. After landing at Seattle, with an indentured labor group, he was shipped up to the Alaska fish canneries and paid the sum of \$13 net cash for the whole season. So he wandered hungry, home-

less, and ailing down through California, an appealing little waif who would arouse the compassion of any good-hearted American.

But no one took in the wanderer. He found that he and his race were regarded as outcasts from white society. Binalonan, for all its poverty and primitive living, was a paradise compared with the brutality and wretchedness that greeted the Filipino on the West Coast. So degrading are the scenes the author lives through that one would part company with him at the outset were it not for the feeling that such conditions, if they are as depicted, must be generally known about to be stopped. Moreover, the author's touching determination to rise above the surrounding brutality encourages one to continue with him.

"I tried hard to remain aloof from the destruction and decay around me. I wanted to remain pure within myself," he explains, and surely one would have to search far into literature for a hero saddled with a more disheartening task. We find all accommodation is closed to the penniless Filipino immigrant, except among the dregs of humanity, around the haunts of crooks and gamblers, and in districts of ill-fame. We see Filipinos living in a state of suspicion and fear, liable at any moment to face violence from bands of whites, or police, or deputy sheriffs descending upon them and beating them up or shooting them with no visible pretext. We find the Filipinos themselves in desperation turning to violence and debauchery.

Occasionally, Mr. Bulosan, under extreme provocation, confesses to leaving the straight path. But he finds his way again, and with a little help—from Harriet Monroe, friend of the poets, and others—gains sufficient command of literary English to write poetry himself. At the same time, he begins to see the real meaning of America through all the dross piled up around him.

To most Americans, the conditions that the author describes must seem incredible. But, after his appealing and beautifully written account of life on Luzon, he certainly persuades his reader that he is a sincere and truthful witness of the terrible events he portrays.

#### Max Gissen (essay date 1946)

SOURCE: "The Darker Brothers," in *The New Republic*, Vol. 114, No. 12, 25 March 1946, pp. 420-22.



[In the review below, Gissen finds that Bulosan's restrained style lessens the impact of *America Is in the Heart*.]

This reviewer has heard Carlos Bulosan's story from other Filipinos. Told, not written, and not so well understood, but the same in its essentials of color discrimination, economic persecution and ceaseless battering down of human dignity. Like many others, he left the Philippines and the slow starvation to which feudal land laws consign thousands of Filipinos. What he tells of those early years [in *America Is in the Heart*] will be a shock to any number of people who have always imagined a land of little, happy, brown brothers being helped toward independence by handsome Americans like Paul McNutt and Douglas MacArthur.

Like the others, Bulosan knew America first as a dream. The reality is one of the most sickening social truths confronting a minority in the United States. Bulosan didn't miss a step in the whole routine, from being shanghaied to an Alaskan fishery and cheated out of his poor wages to a beating by sadistic cops. Year in, year out, up and down the West Coast, it was the same dreary round of seasonal crop-picking for starvation wages, odd jobs in restaurants, if you were lucky, and no housing except in Chinese red-light districts. It is easy enough to understand his astonishment when someone told him, "It is hard to be a Jew!"

Bulosan fought back through the labor movement at a time when Filipinos were being killed for merely talking union. All he got was a bad beating. With no education to speak of, he made himself a writer of some charm in an alien language. He tells all this quietly, almost shyly, and the impact is not up to the possibilities of the material. But I hope it is read by all the people who have a lot to learn about the Philippines and America.

Petronilo Bn. Daroy (essay date 1968)

SOURCE: "Carlos Bulosan: The Politics of Literature," in *St. Louis Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 2, June, 1968, pp. 193-206.

[In the following essay, Daroy discusses the political aspects of Bulosan's works, particularly emphasizing his identification with the struggles of the working class.]

When he began writing, he was already consumed with disease. And if we are to believe the chronology in *America Is in the Heart*, it was the imposed leisure and immobility of his illness that prompted him to go into literature. He did not cultivate writing as a vocation. "I don't care what some writers in the Philippines think of me," he wrote Florentino Valeros, "... But I care about what they write: for or against war, for or against life" [*Sound of Falling Light: Letters in Exile*, ed. Dolores S. Feria, 1960]. He therefore did not bother with form. He wrote as he had lived: recklessly, utilizing available forms for what he wanted to say. When it fitted his mood, he would even turn to those tech-

niques which modern writers had already discarded. He was not beneath resorting to the anecdote or the folktale when it suited him to turn to these forms. There was something desperate about his writing, not in the tone he employed, but in the uncritical resort to established literary types.

For that matter, Bulosan introduced no innovation in Philippine literature, unlike Jose Garcia Villa. Neither did he create a definitive canon for his political and social ideas, unlike Rizal or Arguilla. Formally, Bulosan was a traditional writer and, sometimes, as in his poetry, an incompetent one. He employed a directness in his poetry which made it sentimental or, as in the case of *Voice of Bataan*, platitudinous.

Yet, Bulosan is one of our most important writers. He is not singular in our literature in dealing with the peasants and proletariat and in expressing his social concerns through literature. But Bulosan is alone in fully grasping the impact of industrialism upon the consciousness and life of the poor. He is the only Filipino writer, too, who has given us the brutal details of the drama of Filipino workers in the United States. *America Is in the Heart* is not only an important poignant personal record of the life of the Filipino worker in the United States during the depression, but it is also a significant book in the present body of our literature. It is political not in the nationalistic sense, unlike the novels of Rizal, but in its affirmation of the working class and in its faith in the possibility of the rectification of the social disequilibrium that industrialism had created. And, in spite of his lack of innovation, his satisfaction with traditional forms, Bulosan is contemporary.

*The Laughter of My Father*, the first of his works to be translated into several European languages, was, in his own words, simply a collection of modernized folktales. He was to change his mind about it later, writing a friend that he meant the stories in the book as satire. Actually, he had a very simple intention in writing these stories: he meant them to be more than a re-creation of Philippine folktales. The inspiration for this book came to him after a reading of the *Arabian Nights*, Grimm's *Fairy Tales*, Andersen's *Tales*, Aesop's *Fables*, and Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*:

These books stimulated me to go back to the folklore of my own country. I discovered with amazement that Philippine folklore was uncollected, that native writers had not assimilated it into their writings. This discovery gave me an impetus to study the common roots of our folklore, and upon finding it in the tales and legends of the pagan Igorots in the mountains of Luzon, near my native province, I blazed with delight at this new treasure. Now I must live and integrate Philippine folklore in our struggle for liberty!

I believe that Bulosan failed to make a successful modern adaptation of these tales in *The Laughter of My Father*. But the intention accounts for what is not original in the stories. There is something haphazard, too, in the ordering of the book and in the adaptation of folk motifs in the

stories. In general, however, the book is contemporary in the way that *The Decameron* is contemporary: it is irreverent toward social conventions and it perceives how the incongruity between social sanctions and wishes or personal motives creates an absurd situation for man. *The Laughter of My Father* is also important in the sense that, in the overall canon of Bulosan's created work, it indicates a significant direction of what he really wanted to do.

Bulosan is an autobiographical writer, the way D. H. Lawrence is. His works are not only closely based on the events of his life, but are also proximate to his social and political views. His autobiographical work, *America Is in the Heart*, may be impugned for his attempts to present as literal facts what he simply conceived as relevant to his intention, namely, to reconstruct the lives and plight of the working class, particularly of the Filipino worker in America. He claimed as his own experience what he had observed was happening to others, so that in *America Is in the Heart* the misery of the workers rings with the authenticity of his voice and is pervaded with his personal emotions. This is how we are, he seems to be saying; all these things happened; I was there. This act of personal appropriation of the experiences of the underprivileged is everywhere in his writings, even in the most explicitly fictional ones, like the stories in *The Laughter of My Father*. Indeed, it even misled his publisher into admitting that the Bulosans themselves are the chief protagonists in these stories [publisher's note in *The Laughter of My Father*, Bantam Books, 1944].

Bulosan's identification with the working class was a deliberate decision, not a condition of his birth. Bulosan literally revised his biography to accommodate this decision. In *America Is in the Heart*, he declares himself a peasant and made his family appear as toilers in the feudal communities in Central Luzon. He speaks of his house as a "little grass hut" and of his family as very poor and, afterwards, forced to desert each other because of poverty. The facts, however, contradict all these assertions. The "little grass hut" is actually a huge wooden house, definitely of the provincial middle class. His brothers, whom he presents in *America Is in the Heart* as hardworking, stupid, and, later on, as dissipating their time in vices and crimes in the United States, were actually of the hardworking, honest, provincial and, as with one in the United States now, bourgeois types. One became a town mayor; another one was a schoolteacher. The facts of his autobiography contradict his assertions about himself; and even where he admits certain aspects of the facts, he deliberately distorts their implications.

In writing about himself, Bulosan meant to imply the condition of the working class, so that what happened to him must be understood as a particular instance of the general pattern of events in a worker's life. The tendency to generalize from concrete situations is perceivable throughout *America Is in the Heart*. His brother's flight from home after a quarrel with his father was to him a "running away from the cruelty of our hard peasant life." When he lunged at an American with a knife after he had been insulted, it

#### MAJOR WORKS

- Letter from America* (poetry) 1942
- The Voice of Bataan* (poetry) 1943
- The Laughter of My Father* (short stories) 1944
- America Is in the Heart* (memoir) 1946
- Sound of Falling Light: Letters in Exile* (correspondence) 1960
- The Power of the People* (novel) 1977
- The Philippines Is in the Heart* (short stories) 1979
- If You Want to Know What We Are* (short stories, essays, and poetry) 1983

was an initial violent gesture "at the white world." In another passage, he says:

... the revolt in Tayug made me aware of the circumscribed life of the peasants through my brother Luciano, who explained its significance to me. I was determined to leave that environment and all its crushing forces, and if I were successful in escaping unscathed, I would go back some day to understand what it meant to be born of the peasantry. I would go back because I was part of it, because I could not really escape from it no matter where I went or what became of me. I would go back to give significance to all that was starved and thwarted in my life.

Although Bulosan's works are autobiographical, they are a reconstruction not of his personal life, but of the general condition of the working class.

Bulosan's identification with the working class took a political formulation in the United States. However, it was not mere intellectual sophistication that led him to view society in terms of the disequilibrium between the opportunities and the status of classes. In Binalonan, he observed the harsh life of the working class. He personalized this collective experience and presented its truth in terms of his "autobiography." Through the autobiographical "I," Bulosan was able to render the drama of the working class with a coherent continuity. Although he perceived the life of the peasantry in the Philippines in relation to the superior technology of the colonial regime, he refused to admit the ensuing problems in simple nationalistic terms. Rather, he saw the crisis of the working class as cutting across national implications but, at the same time, deriving from a universal condition of all societies.

At first, Bulosan's sense of the poverty and misery of peasant life sprung from his understanding, like that of any peasant's, that poverty derived simply from the peasant's inability to control natural contingencies: the rainy season which spoils the corn before it can be harvested; the floods;

the laziness of work animals, which prevents the plowing of the field on time; or simply bad luck. His later experience rectified these fatalistic notions. He realized that the prevailing system of relationships in Philippine society limited the opportunities of the working class, however hard they struggled to earn a living. Labor was the instrument of society to maintain the status of the upper and middle classes.

This realization by Bulosan, however simplified it is, provided him a more realistic viewpoint in the examination of human affairs. The stories in *The Laughter of My Father*, for all their folkloristic quality, depict a more proximate picture of Filipino peasants and of their rural life. Unlike N. V. M. Gonzalez, Bulosan did not entertain a "mystique" of the conditions of the peasantry. His stories present objectively the relationship between man and nature. They do not commit the pathetic fallacy of rendering nature in anthropomorphic disguises. Nature is there, neither cruel nor benevolent, and not even indifferent, because she has no power of dispensing justice. Before her unregistering gaze, man can neither be absurd nor grotesque. The absurdity derives rather from the discrepancy between the logic of conventions and the normal inclinations of man. These conventions, as Bulosan shows in "*My Father Goes to Court*" are almost always qualified by economic motives.

N. V. M. Gonzalez's acceptance of a "mystique" of poverty prevented him from understanding the situation of the peasantry. In his stories, nature is pervaded with evil, which is presented as incomprehensible. Bulosan refused to grant any metaphysical symbolism to the reality of evil. He saw it as principally social in nature, a consequence of the causal relationship of forces generated by the interests or motives of social classes. He perceived it as the result of an economic system realizing its intentions in politics or in ideology.

Elaine H. Kim (essay date 1982)

SOURCE: "Carlos Bulosan: A Filipino American Community Portrait," in *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context*, Temple University Press, 1982, pp. 43-57.

[In the excerpt below, Kim surveys Bulosan's career.]

Carlos Bulosan was born in a small village in the Philippine Islands in the same year as Younghill Kang. Like Kang, he sought entry into American life and, like him, was often frustrated and disappointed. It was Kang's writings, as a matter of fact, that encouraged Bulosan to produce his own books:

... it was his indomitable courage that rekindled in me a fire of hope.

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 is he not an Oriental like

myself? Was there an Oriental without education who had become a writer in America? If there was one, maybe I could do it too!

[*America Is in the Heart*]

But the similarities between the two men are not nearly as important as the differences. Kang was an aristocrat of sorts, certainly a man of letters. Bulosan was from a poor peasant family. While Kang writes of his native Korea as an individual rebelling against a land offering little opportunity to the free spirit he considered himself to be, Bulosan remains keenly aware of what feudal and colonial practices—sharecropping, land seizure, and exploitation of peasants by church and absentee landlordism—have done to his motherland. For Kang, the homeland is the "planet of death" from which he must flee to survive; for Bulosan, memories of the Islands never cease to offer inspiration for a continued struggle for a better future. Where Kang speaks chiefly for himself and the members of his elite, Bulosan consciously strives to give voice to thousands of agricultural and menial laborers of Asian America:

What impelled me to write? The answer is—my grand dream of equality among men and freedom for all. To give literate voice to the voiceless one hundred thousand Filipinos in the United States, Hawaii, and Alaska. Above all and ultimately, to translate the desires and aspirations of the whole Filipino people in the Philippines and abroad in terms relevant to contemporary history [quoted in *Twentieth Century Authors*, ed. Stanley J. Kunitz].

Bulosan shares with Kang a "gigantic dream to know all America." But Kang's desire is to gain personal admission into the existing charmed circle, while Bulosan wants to contribute towards the fulfillment of America's promise of democracy and equality. Therefore, while Kang's narrator moves ever farther away from his own exiled compatriots, Bulosan's faith in the working man and in justice for the exploited as the key to American fulfillment turns him towards fellow Filipinos, since true democracy in America would have to mean acceptance of Filipinos into the pattern of American life.

We must be united in the effort to make an America in which our people can find happiness. . . . 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 in the hearts of men that died for freedom. . . . America is a prophecy of a new society of men. . . . America is also the nameless foreigner, the homeless refugee, the hungry boy begging for a job and the black body dangling on a tree. America is the illiterate immigrant who is ashamed that the world of books and intellectual opportunities is closed to him. . . . All of us, from the first Adams to the last Filipino, native born or alien, educated or illiterate—we are *America!*

There had been Filipino characters in the writings of Peter B. Kyne, Rupert Hughes, William Saroyan, and John Fante,

although they were never as grotesquely omnipresent in American culture as Chinese and Japanese caricatures had been. Bulosan believed that he would be best able to portray "Filipinos as human beings."

Bulosan became one of the best-known Filipinos in the Western world. A prolific writer, his published works include poetry, fiction, and essays. Within two years after his arrival in Seattle in 1930 at the age of sixteen, Bulosan had published several poems in poetry magazines. According to his brother Aurelio, as early as 1932 he was one of two Filipinos listed in *Who's Who*; the other was Carlos Romulo. By 1940, Bulosan had been published in journals such as *Poetry*, the *Lyric*, *Frontier and Midland*, the *Tramp*, and *Voices*. But it was during the war years that he attracted nationwide attention for his literary efforts: *Letter from America* (1942), *The Voice of Bataan* (1944), *Laughter of My Father* (1944; a collection of short stories first serialized in the *New Yorker*), *The Dark People* (1944), and *America Is in the Heart* (1946), the "autobiography" that has been considered his key work. Bulosan's book of stories about the Philippines, *Laughter of My Father*, was broadcast to the American armed forces around the world during the war in an attempt to encourage sympathy for American allies in the Pacific. His essay, "Freedom from Want," in the *Saturday Evening Post* (March 6, 1943), which had been inspired by President Franklin D. Roosevelt's January 1941 speech on the "Four Freedoms," was illustrated by Norman Rockwell and displayed in the examination room of the Federal Building in San Francisco as an example of an immigrant's faith in American democracy. *America Is in the Heart*, which emphasized the promise of democracy against fascism, was translated and sold in Sweden, Denmark, Italy, and Yugoslavia.

By 1947, Bulosan was recognized as one of the most prolific writers in America. His face appeared on covers of national magazines. *Look* hailed *America Is in the Heart* as one of the fifty most important American books ever published.

Bulosan's popularity waxed and waned with the political climate. Carey McWilliams notes [in "Exit the Filipinos," *The Nation* 141, 1935] that during the war, when Bulosan's reputation was at its apex, "this country was quite Philippine-conscious; the word 'Bataan' enjoyed a splendid resonance. . . . Most Americans seemed to be touched by the loyalty of the Filipinos who in turn, seemed to be grateful to us for helping them." But the final decade of Bulosan's life was a decline into poverty, alcohol, loneliness, and obscurity. Too frail and weak to work at strenuous labor, he had undergone eleven operations, some for lung lesions and others for leg cancers, before he died in 1956. One kneecap had been removed, and he walked with great difficulty. He drank heavily, especially with the white woman who lived with him for five years and had left him before he died. Finally, he collapsed in a Seattle street and apparently died of exposure.

According to Norman Jayo [in "The Letters of Carlos Bulosan, 1937-1955," *Amerasia Journal* 6, No. 1, May 1979],

Bulosan was filled with a sense of foreboding and despair after the bombing of Hiroshima. He feared that the human race was entering a new, atomic, and nuclear era which he and his fellow travellers might be unable to "cope with." Another factor that contributed to his decline was a plagiarism charge brought against him late in 1946 by Guido D'Agostino, who accused Bulosan of copying his "The Dream of Angelo Zara" (*Story* magazine and *The Best American Short Stories of 1945*) and publishing it in the *New Yorker* under the title "The End of the War" (1944). Although the case was settled out of court and he was posthumously vindicated by the *New Yorker* editors, the publicity aroused by the case was extremely damaging to Bulosan, who subsequently had difficulty finding anyone to publish his writings. Also disheartening to him was the adverse criticism he was subject to from intellectuals in the Philippines, many of whom gloated over the plagiarism case, red-baited him during the cold war period, and delighted in pointing out the various inconsistencies in his autobiography. They assailed him for exaggeration, pointing out discrepancies between representations in the book and the actual facts of his life.

Because of *America Is in the Heart*, for example, Bulosan is believed to have been a menial laborer who arrived in America illiterate and who educated himself in a convalescent hospital. This is only partially true. Bulosan has been described [by John Fante in his introduction to *America Is in the Heart*, 1973] as "an outstanding child-man," artistic, sensitive, and driven by loneliness and an intense desire "to make others happy":

A tiny person with a limp, with an exquisite face, almost facially beautiful, with gleaming teeth and lovely brown eyes, shy, generous, terribly poor, terribly exiled in California, adoring Caucasian women, sartorially exquisite, always laughing through a face that masked tragedy. A Filipino patriot, a touch of the melodramatic about him, given to telling wildly improbable stories about himself, disappearing from Southern California for months at a time, probably to work in a Seattle or Alaska cannery, showing up finally at my home with some touching gift, a book of poems, a box of Filipino candy. . . . If I were a good Christian, I think I might label him a saint, for he radiated kindness and gentleness.

The son of a small farmer in Central Luzon, Bulosan had almost completed secondary school in the Philippines before he accumulated enough money for the steerage passage to follow his brothers, Aurelio and Jose, who had left for America two years previously. Bulosan had already shown interest and ability in writing in high school, where he worked on the school literary journal. After he was admitted as a tuberculosis patient at Los Angeles County Hospital in 1936, he was befriended by two liberal young literary women, and, during the two years he spent convalescing, he read a book a day, he says, from among the various literature classics brought to him by Dorothy Babb. To this extent, he was self-educated.

Unlike the narrator of *America Is in the Heart*, Bulosan did not work for extended periods of time in the fields and



canneries. From the beginning, his health was fragile, and one of his legs was two inches shorter than the other. Barred like other members of his race from all but the most menial labor and barred from that by his disability, Bulosan did undertake occasional work as a dishwasher or bakery employee, but he made his living largely from literary and union activities and was supported financially by friends and his brother Aurelio. When Bulosan met labor union leader Chris Mensalvas, who is represented in *America Is in the Heart* as Jose, and other Filipinos who were trying to organize Filipino cannery and packing-house workers during the Depression, Mensalvas encouraged Bulosan to write for the union papers. For a time, he edited a cannery workers' union publication: Bulosan helped found the UCAPAWA (United Cannery and Packing House Workers of America) between 1934 and 1938, but he was a writer rather than a cannery or packing-house worker. Mensalvas had arranged to have him hired as a UCAPAWA yearbook editor in 1952, and Bulosan lived on that income until he died four years later.

Bulosan addressed his writing to an American audience in an attempt to win better treatment for his compatriots: "[I]t has always been my desire to make [lots of people] cry anyway, and to make them feel the very depth of our sorrow and loneliness in America. I have always wanted to show them our capacities for love, our deep spiritual qualities, and our humanity" [*The Sound of Falling Light: Letters in Exile*]. *America Is in the Heart* is in many ways part of that inclusive and characteristically Asian American genre of autobiography or personal history dedicated to the task of promoting cultural goodwill and understanding. Many Filipino writers felt that they should address an American readership, because of the unintelligibility of the forty-odd Filipino languages, because publishing facilities are thought to be better in America, and because many Filipino writers felt in the past that "the most effective way to put our nation on the cultural map of the world is to have excellent works of Filipino writers published in America . . . the cultural center of the world" [P.C. Morante, "The Problem Facing the Filipino Author," *Philippines* 1, No. 5, June 1941]. Similar arguments held for the writing of personal histories. In most of Bulosan's short stories about Filipino American life there is a first-person narrator that could represent Bulosan himself, and though *America Is in the Heart* describes Filipino American life in California in a general way, it is presented as personal history so that its veracity and impact might be strengthened and so that it might have more market appeal. In fact, P. C. Morante [in an interview with Norman Jayo on 3 July 1980] recalls that Louis Adamic recommended to Bulosan that he write the book as an autobiography or personal history because it would sell best that way.

Most American critics and readers valued *America Is in the Heart* primarily as a personalized social document. Max Gissen classified the book with "the growing literature of protest coming from dark-skinned peoples all over the world" ["The Darker Brothers," *New Republic* 114, No. 12, 25 March 1946]. Another reviewer [*U.S. Quarterly Book List* 2, No. 2,

June 1946] asserted that the book is important because it is "the kind of 'life history' document which provides the flesh for the bones of social theory"; that it is "life history" makes it credible. A third critic wrote [in the *Christian Science Monitor*, 14 March 1946] that since the conditions described in the book are "so degrading" that they are "almost incredible," the reader is tempted to put down the book but for the compassion he feels for the narrator and his "touching determination to rise above the surrounding brutality." The presence of the narrator is critical: Bulosan is "an appealing little waif who could arouse the compassion of any good-hearted American" long enough to finish the book.

During his union organizing assignments, Bulosan witnessed, heard about, and in some cases experienced some of the events and incidents so vividly described in his "autobiography" and in his short stories. According to his brother Aurelio, Bulosan "used to mingle with the ordinary Filipinos, talk with them, and act like them. But they didn't know that Carlos was gathering materials from them. You see, when you write something about the people you have to be among them. You must feel every word you write" [quoted in Christopher Chow, "A Brother Reflects: An Interview with Aurelio Bulosan," *Amerasia Journal* 6, No. 1, May 1979]. What seems quite clear is that Bulosan, like the narrator in "The Thief," viewed his life and his spirit as being essentially at one with the life and spirit of the compatriots who people his autobiography and his stories:

He started to tell me about his life, and for the first time I began to understand him. I tried to piece the fragments together, and suddenly I discovered that I was also piecing the fragments of my life together. I was then beginning to write, and I felt like writing the complete story of his life.

Bulosan was primarily a fiction writer, and *America Is in the Heart* 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. According to Ruben R. Alcantra, all students of the Filipino experience in America should "start with the assumption that Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* is a required text. In that concrete and sensitively written account of what it meant to be a Filipino in America before 1946, Bulosan set forth the primary themes in the Filipino-American experience" [review of *America Is in the Heart*, *Amerasia Journal* 4, No. 1, 1977]. Another Filipino American scholar, Epifanio San Juan, Jr., asserts that the book "has become an identity-defining primer" for a million Filipinos in the United States ["Introduction," *Amerasia Journal* 6, No. 1, May 1979]. According to Carey McWilliams:

One may doubt that Bulosan personally experienced each and every one of the manifold brutalities and indecencies so vividly described in this book. It can be fairly said . . . that some Filipino was indeed the victim of each of these or similar incidents. For this reason alone, *America Is in the Heart* is a social classic. It reflects the collective