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# Collaborative Ethnic Studies: Reference, Influence, and Comparison of Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* in Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart*

Timothy Rowan

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. We are all that nameless foreigner, that homeless refugee, that hungry boy, that illiterate immigrant and that lynched black body. (Bulosan 189)

[T]he mainstream of American culture, whether the fact was widely recognized or not, had always been significantly black and southern, bearing the clear inflections of African American language and creativity in popular as well as high culture. (Sundquist 3)

In *Writing Between the Lines*, Aldon Nielsen theorizes a birth of racial intertextuality in the United States: as African slaves are forced to abandon their native African languages and begin to communicate in the language of their oppressor, both with their slave masters and especially with other slaves, English becomes “a first site of African resistance, the birthplace of African-American meaning and culture” (5). This resistance leads to an inevitable “sort of linguistic blowback in the mouths of the masters as they overhear, repeat, and misconstrue the signified figures of the Africans they have brought into their midst” (6). These signifiers would be borrowed and reborrowed, each time undergoing “a sea change” (7), conveying new and often vastly different meaning; the African spiritual becomes the

black-faced minstrel carol, becomes a means of critiquing racism, and so on.<sup>1</sup> Both Nielsen's narrative and the second epigraph above, from Eric Sundquist's *To Wake the Nations*, place the impact of the African American literary tradition on what has been perceived as an exclusively white American literature and culture practically from its inception.

African American preeminence in American literary history, which Nielsen and Sundquist each support, suggests that in order to achieve a better understanding of American literature as a multifaceted and interconnected whole, texts of different races and ethnicities must be read not in isolation, nor in isolated groups, but as interacting dialectally, especially across racial lines. The challenge is to avoid both compartmentalizing literature into neatly discursive and non-interfering spaces and to avoid speaking about non-white literatures predominately as "marginal" or exclusive to a particular cultural minority. In *To Wake the Nations*, Sundquist's analysis of the writing of W. E. B. Du Bois can be read as a call "for interpretations [of literature] that must account for the effect, and finally the value, of contending cultural languages and figurative systems . . . and the host of implied questions about cultural origins, historical memory, and racial assimilation" (5). Nielsen makes a similar point with a more sharply political tone when he writes that

refusing to read black texts as texts, refusing to admit blacks access to the category of the literary, is mirrored in a concomitant refusal to read the blackness of the American text, an unwillingness to undertake the fuller reading of American writing that would take into account and perhaps account for the seemingly undeniable black presence in white writing. (10)

In addition to forming a more complete picture of American literature, interracial comparative study does political work against both an exclusively European American literary canon and broader white hegemonic oppression. Sundquist and Nielsen each draw attention to the indebtedness that "superior" and traditional canonized works

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1 The mention of African American spirituals here is borrowed not from Nielsen but Sundquist who discusses them at length, but it provides a good illustration of Nielsen's point. The idea of minstrelsy becoming a critique of racism is my addition.

have to African American language and culture, and by doing so, undercut racist assumptions that frame African Americans as inferior or disadvantaged and thus incapable of producing literature.

While Nielsen and Sundquist each have done important work in comparing African American and more traditionally canonized literatures, one shortcoming of their respective projects is that each uses the term “race” narrowly, referring only to blackness and neglecting a whole host of other literatures such as Chinese American, Native American, and Jewish.<sup>2</sup> Not to mention that Chinese Americans, Jews, and others can hardly be considered races; rather, the term “ethnicity” would be more accurate. If African American writing has played a pervasive and formative role in the development of American literature and its historically canonized texts, then likely other racial and ethnic literatures have played a role as well. Furthermore, expanding interracial comparative study to include other racial and ethnic groups creates the potential for studying “non-white” literatures in conversation with one another in a way that can vary considerably from a “black-versus-white” comparison and casts each group’s literature with greater dynamic rather than simple as a reaction to “white” canonized literature.

Carlos Bulosan, a Filipino American, and Richard Wright, an African American, are well situated for comparative study because their respective literary projects are so similar. As Helen Jaskoski points out, both wrote about their experiences with harsh and often violent racial oppression in the United States during the 1920s and 1930s—oppression that

was not only legal but actually prescribed by law. Jim Crow segregation laws were most extreme in the South. Throughout the country federal immigration law denied naturalized citizenship to Asian immigrants, and the West Coast states restrictive covenants and anti-miscegenation laws underlay the

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2 While Sundquist acknowledges this limitation in his study and gives a brief nod to Native American literatures, Nielsen’s only mention of non-white, non-black cultures is to suggest how much better situated for an interracial intertextual reading African America is because it has been more strongly accused of being incapable of producing literature (9).

same discriminatory practices that Southern segregation laws supported. (234)

But Bulosan himself also prompts the comparison. In constructing *America Is in the Heart*, Bulosan not only draws heavily from Wright in his depictions of white mob violence, but also, in the text, deliberately names Wright as an influence when he cites Wright's experience of being denied access to books from a Memphis library because of his skin color and compares it with his own early library experience. By directly naming Wright as an influence, Bulosan is indirectly suggesting that his text should be interpreted in dialogue with Wright's. Bulosan thus prompts a comparison of the two texts—their narrative and stylistic elements as well as common social and political conditions. This comparison bolsters his agenda and influences the interpretation of the text that influenced him, emphasizing or revising in Wright's text particular elements present in both.

Both Bulosan's and Wright's writing depict the brutalities of racism and attempt to instigate political change, which may account partly for why Bulosan drew heavily from Wright in constructing his narrative. Bulosan forms with Wright what Tracy Mishkin argues for—"admiring or respectful relationships between writers and their precursors" (3–4). Commenting on Jaskoski's study, Mishkin points out that Harold "Bloom's notion of [an author's] deliberate misreading [of his precursor's work in order to validate his own] is not evident, perhaps because Bulosan does not perceive himself to be competing with Wright" (12). Jaskoski compares the two authors in her essay "Carlos Bulosan's Literary Debt to Richard Wright" to find instances where Bulosan drew upon Wright. Jaskoski identifies passages from Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* and Wright's *Black Boy* that are surprisingly alike, and she partially attributes those congruities to the similar social and historical contexts from which both authors wrote. But she missteps when she argues that Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* drew heavily from Wright's *Black Boy*. Her claim that "some of the episodes in *America Is in the Heart* are clearly shaped or even imported wholesale from *Black Boy*" (239) is more difficult to accept considering that *America Is in the Heart* was published in 1946, only one year after *Black Boy* which was published in 1945.<sup>3</sup>

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3 P.C. Morantte's biography describes Bulosan submitting the manuscript

As will be demonstrated later, Bulosan was influenced by Wright's collection of long stories *Uncle Tom's Children*, published in 1938, and by his essay "Ethics of Living Jim Crow" which first appeared in 1937 in *American Stuff: WPA Writers' Anthology*; it has usually been included in *Uncle Tom's Children* since its second edition, published in 1940. "Ethics of Living Jim Crow" features roughly ten autobiographical vignettes, most of which appear in *Black Boy* word-for-word, though in expanded form. One of these vignettes is among Jaskoski's strongest examples of similarity between Wright and Bulosan: a dangerous encounter with naked white women. Another is Wright's library experience that Bulosan cites, which does not appear at all in *Black Boy*.

While taking direction from Jaskoski's essay, the present essay instead compares two scenes from *America Is in the Heart* where Bulosan clearly had Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* in mind: Bulosan's direct reference to Wright's library experience and his depiction of when he and his companions were brutally beaten by white men for their participation in a labor strike. By clearly referencing and drawing from *Uncle Tom's Children*, Bulosan creates a sense of collaboration with Wright in a way that bolsters both authors' efforts to resist racism. But Bulosan's attempt at collaboration is undercut by each author's portrayal of communism, one of many tropes that appear prominently in both texts. Communism is an instance in the text where Bulosan is less conscious of Wright; thus, comparing how it is portrayed in both texts emphasizes differences between the two authors more than their similarities. While both authors portray communism positively as an effective means of uniting oppressed peoples and resisting racism, Bulosan departs from Wright with his lack of conviction in communist organizations, and Wright, by portraying the unity communism inspires as only between white and black peoples, resists the interracial collaboration Bulosan desires to establish.

Bulosan's citation of Wright comes early in *America Is in the Heart* when he relates his experience of working in an American library in the Philippines and encountering books for nearly the first time. Bulosan comments on Wright's difficulty in accessing library

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of *America Is In the Heart* to a publisher in 1944, though afterward it was heavily revised.

services: “I was fortunate to find work in a library and be close to books. In later years I remembered this opportunity when I read that the American Negro writer, Richard Wright, had not been allowed to borrow books from his local library because of his color” (71). In this basic comparison between his experience and Wright’s, Bulosan portrays racism and injustice while simultaneously describing his indebtedness to libraries and books and their influence on him. Once introduced to libraries by his American employer, Miss Mary Strandon, Bulosan has free access to libraries, whereas, in “Ethics of Living Jim Crow,” Wright is denied access because he is black but is able to borrow books by using a white co-worker’s library card and forging a note specifying the books that he wants. For Bulosan, libraries and books are enlightening and empowering; they open a door to assimilation into American culture. For Wright, libraries are evidence of institutional racism, and books are a medium of resistance. Both authors credit white Americans for providing them access to the library, but Wright’s white benefactor is likewise oppressed by a violent hegemony—as a Roman Catholic in the South he is “himself an object of hatred” (20). On the other hand, Bulosan’s white benefactor represents the quintessential American—Miss Mary Strandon comes from a small Iowa town and her father was a U.S. soldier killed in action. She also represents American imperial influence. In addition to providing him with books, she instills in him a variety of American values. Through his work for her, he learns American-style cooking and housework. When she tells him about Abraham Lincoln, he learns the values of human equality and the nobility of pursuing, and even dying for, a righteous cause. By emphasizing that his white benefactor was also oppressed, Wright differentiates the white co-worker from his white oppressors to whom he offers no redemption—they would oppress anyone who is different, whether in terms of race, religion, or otherwise, and they would never help a black person. Bulosan, while condemning the racial violence and oppression of the rebellious slave-holding south described by Strandon, maintains a belief in the inherent goodness of “America” and of particular Americans. But by invoking Wright’s experience, *America Is in the Heart*, Bulosan is able to portray both his own hopeful perspective and Wright’s damning one—gratitude

to American influence and ideals and opposition to American institutional racism. Thus Bulosan's reference serves the objectives of both authors. For Wright, it amplifies his effort to expose racial oppression; his account of it is represented in not only another text (Bulosan's) but another literary tradition (Filipino American). For Bulosan, the reference functions as a foreshadowing of the racism and inequality that he encounters later in America. And it bolsters his effort to expose racism as well, but in a different way: Filipinos are not the only ones who are subjected to racism in America, and the degree to which they experience racism is comparable to African Americans, who were once subjected to slavery. Bulosan creates a collaborative relationship with Wright even as his comparison reveals the differences between the two experiences.

In addition to citing Wright's "Ethics of Living Jim Crow," Bulosan also draws heavily from *Uncle Tom's Children* in constructing his encounters with violent posses of white men. One example occurs during a short visit to San Jose, when Bulosan and his friend José thwart attempts to stop a Filipino labor strike by persuading laborers imported from Mexico to join in the strike. In response, they are abducted by white men and are taken out of town to a nearby wood and are brutally beaten. In "Fire and Cloud," the fourth story in *Uncle Tom's Children*, Reverend Dan Taylor is abducted by white men, taken out of town to a nearby wood, and whipped for his possible involvement with communists in an impending protest march. Bulosan's abduction and beating also incorporates elements from other stories in *Uncle Tom's Children*, especially "Big Boy Leaves Home." While captive in a car being driven out of town, Bulosan considers attempting to escape from the moving vehicle but worries about getting shot. His conclusion, "It was better to die trying to escape than to wait for death" (207), reflects Mann's conclusion in "Down By the Riverside," who, while awaiting execution for killing a white man, in self-defense, and attempting, out of panic, to kill the white man's family, is killed while attempting escape. Prior to the attempted escape, he concludes that "he would die before he would let them kill him" (122). Once his captors begin beating him, Bulosan longs for a weapon to retaliate against his white attackers: "If only I had a gun! Or a knife! I could cut these bastards



into little pieces!” (207). In “Big Boy Leaves Home,” Big Boy similarly longs to make armed defense, “Yeah, ef pa had only let im have tha shotgun! He could stan off a whole mob wid a shotgun. He looked at the ground as he turned a shotgun over in his hands. Then he leveled it at an advancing white man. *Boooooom!*” (56). But Bulosan’s Wright-like rhetoric in both of these instances does not carry through to his actions—he does not attempt to escape until after the beating is over and his captors have turned their attention to drinking. Incidentally, Bulosan is actually given a knife, which he uses to cut the ropes that bind his hands and feet. Then he immediately escapes, never considering that he could attack his drunken and probably increasingly incapacitated attackers. The disconnect between rhetoric and action suggests that rather than recounting the event as it actually occurred, Bulosan’s depiction of the event in *America Is in Heart* is constructed, influenced by reading Wright’s stories.

More similarities between this episode in *America Is in the Heart* and “Big Boy Leaves Home” further indicate strong influence from Wright in Bulosan’s writing. While lynching does not occur in either narrative, it is represented symbolically by the image of rope. In both texts, the rope is used to bind the victims, but dialogue between the attackers emphasizes its presence: from Bulosan, “You have the rope, Jake?” (207); from Wright, “Ah got a rope fer im!” (60) as well as the image of white men with “coils of rope slung over shoulders” (59). Both Bulosan and Big Boy watch as their friends, respectively José and Bobo, are tarred and feathered. Bobo is then burned to death; Bulosan worries that their attackers might light José on fire. Here, Bulosan includes dialogue between the attackers that is more characteristic of Wright’s writing style than his own and exhibits significant similarities to “Big Boy”:

“Shall we burn this yellow belly?”

“He’s gone.”

“I’d like a souvenir.”

“Scalp him!”

“What about the other bastard?”

“He’s gone, too.” (208)

The attackers call José “yellow belly,” a racial pejorative similar to the “Big Boy” mob’s use of “BLACK BASTARD” to refer to Bobo (60). The mention of souvenirs—severed body parts of the Filipino victim (such as the scalp)—resembles a disturbing moment when Big Boy hears one of the mob shout “LES GIT SOURVINEERS!”, and subsequent shouts narrate the action that follows: “Look! Hes gotta finger!” and “Hes got one of his ears, see?” (61–62), all while Bobo is still alive. The repetitious “he’s gone” is used to suggest that the Filipinos are incapacitated and resembles a comment from one of the mob about Bobo’s imminent death, “. . . don worry, when the fire git thu wid im hell be gone. . .” (63), and in both texts, it marks the end of the beating. Bulosan’s attackers then return to their car for alcohol, reminiscent of a comment from a “Big Boy” attacker, “Chris, Ah wished Ah had a drink” (60). The style of the dialogue that Bulosan uses here consists of short, simple, unattributed statements that do little to characterize any particular participating character; any statement could have been made by any member of the seemingly homogenous posse. Each member is identified only by his white skin color and the violent, racist speech and actions of the group, as if to suggest that individualism dissolves in mob mentality where motive and guilt are shared, regardless of whether participants are committing violent acts or merely watching. The mob never speaks to the victim, but it talks about him as if he is too inferior to understand what they are saying. This style of dialogue appears in three other instances in *American Is in the Heart*—two of which involve violence perpetrated by white men.<sup>4</sup> In *Uncle Tom’s Children*, Wright employs this style of dialogue in every story, more commonly between white men and women about a black person whom they are attacking.

When constructing this scene, which is among the most brutal in *American Is in the Heart*, Bulosan draws heavily from one of the

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4 Bulosan is arrested, harassed, and beaten by white police officers in Oregon (156–157). Bulosan and José host a political rally in Oxnard that is ambushed by a white mob (196–197). Describing a meeting with Filipinos about difficulties faced in California, Bulosan uses the same kind of unattributed dialogue that Wright uses in his stories. Here, it works in the same generalizing way but, more positively, for discussion among Filipinos (268–269).

most brutal instances of violence in *Uncle Tom's Children*—the mob scene in “Big Boy Leaves Home”—which suggests that it is calculated to shock readers in its attempt to expose racism and violence. In addition to heightening its impact, Bulosan's borrowing from Wright suggests that Bulosan is further striving to unite his project with Wright's and, by extension, their respective ethnic groups. The borrowing corroborates the sense of collaboration between Filipino Americans and African Americans that Bulosan attempts to create by indirectly asserting that both have been similarly victimized by a common oppressor, thus implying that each should unite in resistance. Unlike putting two different experiences equally at play in the text by direct reference, like Bulosan does when he cites Wright's library experience, the act of deliberate borrowing emphasizes similarities between the two ethnic groups, at least in how they experience racism and violence as represented in each text.

Through consciously referencing Wright and borrowing from him, Bulosan attempts to build a collaborative relationship between the two authors and the racial identities they represent. But the project of inter-ethnic collaboration is undercut by a more general similarity between Bulosan's and Wright's texts; communism is a trope that appears significantly in both texts, but neither Wright nor Bulosan seem to imitate or influence each other in their discussion of it. Though the two texts share many tropes, communism functions importantly for both as another method of resisting racism. While Bulosan and Wright both find value in communism, they approach it very differently. In *Uncle Tom's Children*, Wright seems to consider communism the answer to combating racial oppression in the South—the successful demonstration, which Reverend Taylor leads and which frightens the white mayor, businessmen, and police officers into providing food for the hungry black people, is organized by communists. Furthermore, communism unifies blacks with willing or oppressed whites—Hadley is a white man “willing to fight for [black] people's rights” (170) and the blacks in the march are joined by “over three thousand of the poor white folks” (171), creating a sea of “white and black marching” (209). Communists, or “Reds,” first appear in *Uncle Tom's Children* in “Fire and Cloud” with Hadley and Green waiting in Taylor's Bible room. They are

the perfect Communist Party advocates, having done “all [they] could” to mobilize the march, distributing 15,000 leaflets (168), and later becoming martyrs for their cause—beaten and unjustly thrown in jail. Their complaint against Taylor seems to represent what Wright sees as a major obstacle for communism among African Americans in the South: “The rest depends on the leaders of each group. If we had their active endorsement, none of us would have to worry about a crowd tomorrow” (168). In other words, if leaders of African American communities—particularly spiritual leaders—would openly support communist movements, the majority of African Americans would follow their example and communism would become an effective means of instigating political change.

In “Bright and Morning Star,” communism is given an almost religious status, supplanting Christianity. Through typology, it becomes “A new and terrible vision. The wrongs and sufferings of black men had taken the place of Him nailed to the Cross; the meager beginnings of the party had become another Resurrection” (216). The story’s protagonist, Sue, long a devout Christian, was persuaded by her sons to adopt instead a faith in communism. The struggle for freedom that communism embodies becomes her new hope that gives her courage to stand up against the “cold white mountain, the white folks and their laws” (215). African Americans act as a type of Christ earlier in “Fire and Cloud” in the similar image of “the figure of Christ on a huge snow-white cross” in Taylor’s church (173). Wright’s portrayal of communism as a more productive replacement for Christianity implies that Christianity is another stumbling block to the efficacy of communism, in part because it teaches believers to respond passively to oppression. “To [Sue] that white mountain was . . . a part of the world God had made in order that she might endure it and come through all the stronger, just as Christ had risen with greater glory from the tomb” (215). Christianity asks believers to simply “endure” their suffering rather than attempt to change or fight against it. The days when Sue sang hymns as a Christian “were the days when she had not hoped for anything on this earth, the days when the cold mountain had driven her into the arms of Jesus” (244). Christianity is a method of coping with racism that does not focus on life “on this earth” but on the afterlife. Thus, Christianity is

escapist, preventing African Americans from facing racism. Wright's effort to portray "the sufferings of black men" and the rise of the Communist Party as Christian types suggests that perhaps traditional and devout Christians are hesitant to give up their faith in Christianity for a faith in typically atheist communism. Wright's typology is an effort to show that Christians do not have to give up their faith in Christ, but rather simply change the terminology from the sufferings of Christ to the sufferings of African Americans.

In *Uncle Tom's Children*, Wright views the Communist Party practically as the savior of racially oppressed African Americans and believes that its members would be effective in creating political change if only community leaders would be brave enough to endorse it and if only devout Christians would channel their faith into it. Bulosan's critical portrayal of communist organizations and their members suggests that Wright's portrayal is a bit idealistic for Filipinos. In *America Is in the Heart*, Bulosan finds communist thinking to be exciting and enlightening. But though committed to communist ideology and convinced that it is the way to successfully fight for Filipino rights, Bulosan is reluctant to align himself with a particular communist organization. When Bulosan is asked about his involvement in the Communist Party, as alleged by a newspaper, he is adamant that he is not involved in the party: "You are greatly mistaken," he replies (279). Earlier, when confronted by a Filipino Communist about joining the party, Bulosan says, "I didn't come to join the Party . . . I am in favor of unity" (267). Bulosan's devotion is not to communism but to his people and his interest in the Communist Party goes only as far as its potential to serve Filipino needs. He and his companions seek to unite Filipinos; they worry that the Filipinos might not accept communism, so they determine to look for a "broader, more democratic, all-inclusive organization around which [they] could rally [their] forces" (268). Though Bulosan finds communism appealing for its potential to unite his people in political activity, always his adherence to a communist organization is differential—"if it's [what] our countrymen want" (269–270).

Another reason for his reluctance toward institutionalized communism is that Bulosan sees incompetence among Party ranks. Where Wright's communists (Hadley, Green, and Sue's son Johnny-Boy) are

perfectly capable and dedicated, Bulosan harshly criticizes the leaders of the Filipino front of the party: “I can say now that communism among Filipinos had a false start. It was propagated by stupid little men, anti-Filipino” (293). With this accusation of incompetence and lack of commitment to Filipino interests, Bulosan is referring to Filipino delegates Lacson and Rios, whose pretensions make them very difficult to work with. But he could easily also be referring to the unnamed Filipino communist from Boyle Heights who leads the Filipino arm of the party. Not only can he hardly speak English but he cannot speak “principal Philippine dialects” (267), thus appearing incompetent to English and Filipino speakers alike. And he seems only interested in increasing Party enrollment and obedience, distrusting Bulosan for giving priority to his people rather than to the Party. Bulosan is also critical of Lucia Simpson who takes control of the CPFR and who he accuses of using her interest in the party as a pretense for her “insatiable thirst for the company of men” (292).

Bulosan, like Wright, also refers to communism using religious terms. When Bulosan sees Filipinos warming to communism, he excitedly wonders, “What was going on among the Filipinos? Was everyone moving toward a faith strong enough to blast away the walls that imprisoned our life in America?” (280). This reference to communism as a “faith” echoes Wright’s assertion that communist political work would be so much more effective if zealous religious devotion were channeled into it. But among Filipinos, Bulosan does not see Christianity as an impediment to communism—he uses stories from the Bible to teach his progressive politics to Filipino and Mexican sugar beet workers in Betteravia.

Like Wright, Bulosan also sees communism as a way to achieve interracial unity—he and his companions appreciate that the party seems to share their goal of achieving “the unification of the minorities so that they might work effectively with the progressive organizations and the trade unions toward a national program of peace and democracy” (267). When Bulosan speaks of communism’s power to unify different races, he is referring to “minorities”: racial and ethnic groups he encounters in *America Is in the Heart*—Chinese, Japanese, Mexican, African American—who also experience racial oppression in America. Conversely, the communist unity that Wright portrays

is only between blacks and whites. *Uncle Tom's Children* makes no mention of other racial or ethnic groups.

The differences in portrayal of communism between *America Is in the Heart* and *Uncle Tom's Children* undercut Bulosan's effort to create collaboration between his work and Wright's because they exhibit conflicting ideas about communism's obstacles. This is not unnatural since Bulosan and Wright each come from different cultures. Furthermore, Bulosan's efforts at collaboration are one-sided; Wright's lack of non-black, non-white ethnicities implies an unwillingness to collaborate. The comparison of communism in each text emphasizes differences between the authors and, by extension, between African American and Filipino American experiences, largely because neither author is particularly conscious of the other. Thus, the act of comparison has the potential to teach readers something of the culture of each ethnicity, as it is constructed by the authors. According to depictions in both texts, Christianity during the 1930s and 1940s operated differently in African American culture than in Filipino American culture. Competent leadership among African Americans was more easily found among its more stable communities in the South, communities largely based on Christian thinking that made African Americans reluctant to adopt a more progressive ideology like communism. Filipino Americans across the West Coast lacked a sense of community and centralized leadership that could act as a base for either Christianity or communism.

Like Sundquist's and Neilson's comparative studies between African American and traditionally canonized "white" texts, the comparison of Bulosan with Wright augments an understanding of American literature, which both authors and the traditions they represent are components of. Comparing these texts also does political work that allows ethnic groups to resist racism through a collaborative relationship. But each interaction in the intertextual dialogue shared by these two authors also introduces problems either for ethnic identity or for the project of resisting against racism and oppression. Where Bulosan is conscious of Wright, he strives to create a collaborative relationship between African Americans and Filipino Americans that resists racial oppression, but this political work comes at a cost. Inter-ethnic collaboration occurs only

where similarity between the ethnicities exists and where it can be constructed. Attempts at identifying and creating similarity risk oversimplifying each ethnic identity, dissolving the discursive differences that distinguish one from the other. Inversely, areas where neither author is conscious of the other serve more to emphasize the differences between the two ethnicities—differences that help to define identity and highlight uniqueness. More than preserving cultural identity, this kind of comparison underscores how each literary tradition is unique and individual. But the comparison also distances the two ethnicities from each other by implying a need for each to confront issues and challenges that are unique to each ethnicity, thus mitigating their potential to work together. However, Bulosan's direct reference to Wright, where the author himself initiates the comparison, suggests a solution to this problem. Bulosan represents differences between their experiences, each of which show differences in their cultural interaction with and their response to American imperialism, while operating collaboratively to show oppression and the means of resisting it.



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