CARSLOS BULOSAN RESOURCE GUIDE

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AUTHOR: Dean, Kitty Chen
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AUTHOR: Campomanes, Oscar V.; Gernes, Todd S.
TITLE: Two letters from America: Carlos Bulosan and the act of writing. (Discovery: Research and Interpretation)
JOURNAL: MELUS, v15, n3 (Fall, 1988) :14 (32 pages) pages.

AUTHOR: Solberg, S.E.
TITLE: Bulosan - Theseus - Villa: a cryptography of coincidence. (Filipino American literature)
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AUTHOR: Chung, S.F.
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AUTHOR: Grow, L.M.
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ABSTRACT: Carlos Bulosan's 'The Laughter of my Father' is a compilation of short stories which is neither a mere collection of humorous tales nor a protest literature against the economic system during its time. A thorough analysis of the stories' characters, themes, plot patterns and tones would reveal that these are about surviving in an unfriendly environment. They also come up with a common theme, namely, that wisdom can win over any earthly power. Through phallic symbolisms, dark humor, sexual innuendos and social satire, Bulosan has succeeded in showing himself to be an angry, discontented man.
ARTICLE TEXT:

Even though, compared to other literary figures of Philippine origin, much as been written about Carlos Bulosan, in general, and The Laughter of My Father (hereafter referred to as LF), in particular, there is no consensus about its genre.

Although Arturo Roseburg flatly states that "Regardless of objections, the stories are humorous and should be read as such" (16), I conclude that LF is a handbook for peasant survival, since at best Roseburg does not do justice to the book's tonal and thematic complexities. For instance, the opening two paragraphs of the second LF story, "The Soldiers Came Marching," are:

I was a month old when the first World War was declared, but the sound of distant guns shook my childhood. I grew up quickly and found that my brother Polon was one of the 25,000 volunteers in the Philippine National Guard that fought in Europe. Suddenly the war came and suddenly it ended. Then my childhood was gone forever.

The soldiers were demobilized. Out of the eleven young men that volunteered in our town only three came back to live among us. One was dead in battle; two died of serious infection on the boat; three were injured and stayed in the city. The three who came back were always sitting on the lawn in front of the presidencia. They sat all day and part of the night without talking to anybody. (11)

This is certainly not humorous, and the story sustains a tone that is anything but comic: "They fought among themselves, cutting their faces and breaking their noses" (15), and "Don Rico became insane and hanged himself with a rope" (18). Perhaps we might think that Bulosan's humor is dark rather than hilarious. As E. Aguilar Cruz has put it, "Humorous stories about plausible people and situations, as far removed from O'Henry and Octavus Roy Cohen as the real laughter of our fathers is from Carlos Bulosan, are still being written by such before-the-war fictionists as Consorcio Borje, D. Paulo Dizon and C.V. Pedroche" (12). Similarly, Avelina Gil concludes, "Intended to be serious protest against the economic system of his time, The Laughter of My Father by Carlos Bulosan reveals a wry humor that verges on bitterness. But the hilarious, even grotesque, situations which Bulosan treats almost like vignettes mask the satire on Filipino poverty and ignorance" (61).

"Wry" does describe the sort of antics we get in "My Mother's Boarders": "I just sat in front row watching the bare legs of my teacher. When she saw me she raised her skirt a little higher. I threw my pencil under her table, but when I crept on the floor to reach for it, she got up suddenly and started writing on the blackboard" (LF 22). However, incidents like this are not mere horseplay. The story establishes, through context, the phallic symbolism of the pencil: "When I was five the town council decided to enlarge our school because the soldiers that came home from the war produced children left and right. We used to wonder how they performed the splendid job" (19). He will soon enough find out, since his education has already begun. One of the teachers "grabbed me and started swinging me around in her arms. My feet were several feet off the floor. I put my legs around her waist the way I put them around our carabao. It was not dancing,

but I felt good" (23). The sexual implications here serve a serious purpose, as we will see shortly.

It is unsurprising that the stories are serious, even bitter, since Bulosan intended them to be both, as he made clear in his outraged response to critics who construed him as a humorist:

I am mad because when my book "The Laughter of my Father" was published by Harcourt, Brace & Company, the critics called me "the manifestation of the pure Comic Spirit."

I am not a laughing man. I am an angry man. ("I am Not a Laughing Man" 143)

No precise source of the anger is specified; after indicating that "it [LF] started with the war" (143), Bulosan spends the rest of the article recounting his restless drifting from job to job. No doubt this vagueness is attributable to Bulosan's outrage over conditions of life in America in general - outrage which he expressed in print in a biographical piece in 1936: "'The McDuffie-Tydings law has affected us so much. It has thrown us into dungeons; it violated our rights and civil liberties. It is savager than the Platt Amendment of Cuba. Life for us here in California is very hard...'" (293).

This constitutes strong support for the likelihood that the LF stories have a double frame of reference: while they are set in the Philippines, they equally apply to oppressed and harassed Filipinos, like Bulosan, in America. Certainly, it is easier to account for the vehemence of Bulosan's reaction to being consigned to the "humorist" category on this assumption.

The seriousness in the LF stories, however, it is not entirely, as Gil would have it, "a serious protest against the economic system of his time," although, as Leonard Casper observes, "One sometimes senses a subtle complaint against the near-penal conditions of the economic structure" (68-69). The first LF story is a case in point of the collection's overall non-functionality as protest literature. In "My Father Goes to Court," a rich man brings a legal action against the narrator's family, on the grounds that the family has stolen the spirit of the rich man's wealth by smelling the man's food while it was being cooked. But the narrator's father fools the rich man by jingling some coins in his pocket and then claiming that the "spirit" of the money has compensated the rich man. The case is dismissed and the story ends with: "the laughter of the judge was the loudest of all" (10). The outcome here suggests that the system works; the rich aren't holding all the cards. The shrewd underdog can make the smart money hit the canvas, as Ralph Ellison would have put it.

Another reason to think that the significance of the LF stories goes beyond protest is that Bulosan's derision is aimed, if anything, more at the undisturbed folkways than at the practices of the ruling classes. In "My Mother's Boarders," for instance, he writes: "The children ran rapidly and stayed in the street, in the

way of carts and other vehicles, like their fathers who stayed out most of the night, shouting out loud at the presidencia and laughing hysterically at the wine store across from the church" (19). Again, in "The Capitalism of My Father," "...the farmers...were also expert in cheating and lying, but my brother was one rung above them. They cheated themselves when they could not cheat their neighbors" (53-54). Such depictions do not suggest that the peasants deserve better than they have, and, to be successful, protest literature must convince us that they do deserve better.

It is only by clever reversal of normal roles and values that the villagers in the LF stories can contend with the forces that threaten their survival. In "My Father's Political Appointment," for example, "the prisoners were already playing cards. Their families were outside waiting for their breakfast. They sat around in the hall with their steaming pots of rice. The dried fish in their baskets filled the place with smell. The guards were very polite to them, hoping to be invited to breakfast" (182). This role reversal is soon followed by a value reversal: "'I've a good son all right,'" Father said. 'He'll grow up to be somebody in the world. I don't know what just yet, but he'll be famous all right. His drinking habits alone indicate a promising and exciting future'" (185). This is not mere Aristotelian comedy via incongruity; LF, though certainly not in any direct sense "simply a collection of modernized folktales" (Bulosan in Daroy 194), has affinities with traditional folklore. Among them is their function as an instruction manual for survival in hostile surroundings. As Hosillos explains,

The direct ancestor of this realist literature, today emerging with revolutionary realism as its dominant feature, appears to be the Filipino of pre-Spanish times, even the Filipino whose mythopoeic consciousness already reacted to external realities in his struggle for survival.... Folktales...derived...their urgent realism from the immediacy of reaction to environment, natural phenomena, and everyday happenings.... This native realist tradition kept itself alive beneath the innocuous writings during the periods of foreign domination, deriving sustenance from life. (376-77)

In fact, Roseburg has identified a parallel between the LF tales and the Juan Tamad stories: "In a sense the stories of Bulosan are similar to the Juan Tamad stories. The good-for-nothing but lovable father, like Juan Tamad, is certainly lazy, shiftless but cleverly resourceful in inventing excuses to evade work" (17). San Juan goes beyond this surface similarity: "The archetypal figure of Juan Tamad has fixed the proverbial native indolence without diminishing its ambivalent potentialities for caricature, parody, or satiric extrapolations.... Indolence, however, can be a ruse to sabotage authority.... The Indio's cunning naivete in times of emergency or disaster affords him insight into alternatives and options accessible only in a comic or detached context" (335-36). As the sage Apo Lacay says in Bulosan's novel Power of the People: "'...laughter is double-

edged, cutting both ways, eliciting tears of sorrow and happiness at the same time. It is a weapon for those who know how to use it'" (329).

Morantte recalls Bulosan's acknowledgment that the stories' source was an old man in Bulosan's native village of Mangusmana, Pangasinan (37-38). Although we cannot, of course, know precisely which stories these were, we can be certain that no village storyteller's repertoire would lack the Juan Tamad tales and, even if such were the case, Bulosan certainly heard selections from the wider class of trickster tales of which Juan Tamad's form a part.(1) And even if the old storyteller turned out to be fictitious, Bulosan could hardly have avoided hearing these same stories as he participated in the "social interactions, including the performances of folk narrative" which Menez discusses. The "early immigrants [those arriving between 1910 and 1941! have close social ties dating back to their arrival in this country, and often to their places of origin in the Philippines." Menez's article, published in 1977, refers to then-current conditions; certainly the social ties and interactions she writes of were even closer between 1930, when Bulosan landed in the United States, and 1944, when LF was published, and we know from Morantte alone that Bulosan did interact with the Filipino community. But even more than thirty years after the appearance of LF, Menez found that "when interviewed informants could...supply episodes from the trickster cycles, e.g., Juan Tamad or Juan Pusong, usually in abbreviated capsule form..." (59-60).

But even without any identifiable source, we could explain the trickster motif on the basis of nearly universal dissemination, cf., the Uncle Remus stories of Joel Chandler Harris. Harris expresses "surprise when I began to receive letters from learned philologists and folklore students from England to India, asking me all sorts of questions and calling upon me to explain how certain stories told in the rice-fields of India and cotton-fields of Georgia were identical, or similar, or at least akin" (Qtd in Harris 162). Twentieth century critics have verified the specific link: that the rabbit, representative of the less powerful being in a hostile environment, symbolizes the need to use one's wits to best an opponent with physical advantages:

Brer Rabbit lives in a world of assault, beatings, and tortures in which the law of the jungle prevails; and resistance and subversion, not submission or accommodation, are basic to survival.... Brer Rabbit is the cagey and aggressive folk hero of the Negro slave.... (Bickley 90). What the rabbit exemplifies is the capacity to survive and flourish in a world in which society can be and often is predatory. (Rubin 166-67)

A striking example of San Juan's point about the "Indio's cunning naivete" is "Juan Tamad Goes A-Courting." Juan tries to woo Mariang Masipag, but the girl's mother orders him to "Be off with you and never set foot in our yard again!" So Juan Tamad, rather than protesting, departs silently but returns the next day with banana leaves, which he carefully places on the yard of Mariang's house.

When the mother upbraids him with "And didn't I tell you never to set foot in our yard again?" Juan responds, "I'm not stepping on any part of ground in your yard...for, as you can see, my feet touch only the banana leaves" (Arguilla and Arguilla 12). This situation resembles that of "My Father Goes to Court" in LF in that a technicality is found to subvert a powerful but unreasonable antagonist. The message is clear: outwit, rather than confront, an opponent wielding a bigger club. And other stories, in different ways, illustrate the same point. "Juan Tamad and the Flea-Killer" finds Juan in a double dilemma. He has dropped and broken the cooking pot which his mother sent him to buy. Using his wits, he grinds the remnants of the pot into fine powder and sells the powder to the townspeople as "flea killer." The next day the purchasers are furious about being hood-winked, but Juan escapes their wrath by explaining that it only worked if you caught a flea and put the powder behind its eyelids. The townspeople dissolve into laughter and let Juan Tamad go unscathed (Arguilla and Arguilla 7-8).

Is this the laughter of the book's title? I think that it is, even in a story like "The Death of My Father," which may at first seem to have purely domestic implications. After the narrator's father gives away the family home to cousin Porton and his new wife (the details of which constitute the plot of "The Gift of My Father," the immediately preceding story), the enraged mother takes the narrator's sisters and goes to live with the grandmother. The distraught father is advised by Uncle Sergio to fake his own death. Because, as Uncle Sergio claims, "Death softens the heart," the ruse works (LF 36). The father walks home and rejoins the family. The story's simple plot, however, is replete with wider implications, centering around the need for both physical vitality and mental astuteness if one is to survive in a harsh world. The father has given away the family home to a rich (thus powerful) man and his wife. This shows what a peasant stands to lose by being credulous and not shrewd. The point is subtly reinforced by the debate over the wife's nationality: americana and espanola designate the two powerful rulers of the Philippines over all but the World War II years since 1571. The wife is Mexican, but this only reminds us that Spain ruled via Mexico. In "The Gift of My Father," the narrator's mother locks the father out of what is left of their house (33). The father's handling of the lockout situation shows what happens when peasants are shrewd rather than credulous.

A sidebar to the plot involves the man who sleeps with Uncle Sergio's wife. The narrator routs the man from the house by ramming him with a pointed stick inserted through the bamboo floor slats. The obviously phallic character of this act is paralleled by ensuing incidents. When the man, still fumbling with his pants, pursues the narrator and comes across Uncle Sergio in the process, "My uncle pushed me away and beat the man with the dead cock. The head of the cock hit his forehead and fell on the ground" (38). Although Uncle Sergio seems more concerned with the man bringing him bad luck at the cockpit than about the man's

"wrestling" (as the narrator puts it) with Uncle Sergio's wife, when the narrator and Uncle Sergio return to the house, "His wife was still in bed. She was completely nude. My uncle threw the headless cock on her stomach. The blood dripped between her legs" (39). This is an earthy, perhaps even grainy, expression of vitality.

The phallic and other sexual innuendoes are not cheap sensationalism or salaciousness on Bulosan's part. They emphasize physical vitality as a requisite for survival, particularly when a people is faced by a hostile environment. They are like the fertility cults of ancient Greece, such as the Dionysus cult, which were, of course, a solemnity in the face of a high infant mortality rate, the hazards of childbirth, the loss of life in war, and the onslaught of disease.(2) All of these hazards, as well as those that come from being ruled by a foreign power, of course affected the peasantry Bulosan wrote about. The blood dripping the between wife's legs should be sufficiently self-explanatory as female symbolism. The dead cock ("cock" of course carrying the obvious load of double entendre) symbolizes the end to the adultery, as is indicated by hitting the man's forehead with it (he has the idea now) and throwing it on the wife's stomach (which will not now bloat with another man's issue). Uncle Sergio's vitality is intact; he needs no stand-in.

In striking contrast to the efficaciousness of sexual assertion as expression of vitality is the belief in rebirth, which can be viewed purely mythopoeically, but which can also be interpreted as ridicule of Christian myth. After Uncle Sergio throws the dead cock on his wife's stomach, he runs to the river: "Then he put his head in the water and his body lay motionless on the sand. His head was in the water a long time. He looked dead. Then he got up slowly and started to cry." The story concludes with the father helping to carry the empty coffin to the cemetery and then, "toward midnight" (39-42), walking back home. Neither Uncle Sergio nor the father has died - either literally or symbolically - so of course the "rebirths, bogus in any case, are absurd, perhaps pillorying the Easter story. The moral here is that vitality is in one's loins, not in one's prayers.(3) The shrewd father wins the day; the praying (hence credulous) mother is taken in by the "rebirth" scheme.

The next story, "The Tree of My Father," is a remake of "My Father Goes to Court. A scheming neighbor takes a court action to claim "the larger bangar tree that separated his land from ours" (45). After a session in the courtroom, the case is concluded at the site of the tree. The judge finds that the trunk of the tree is on the property of the narrator's father and thus belongs to him but that the branches, being on the neighbor's side of the boundary, belong to the neighbor. The plaintiff objects, but, before the now befuddled judge can rule on the father's intentions, the tree burns to the ground. Although technically the outcome is inconclusive, obviously the father has bested the greedy neighbor; again rapacity has been repelled.

The very prominence of "father" in the story titles is replete with generative import? "My Father Had a Father" develops the theme of durability as a survival value in several interlocking ways, the first of which is that four generations are involved in the plot. The narrator's father is visited by the grandfather, who in turn tells of the courtship of the great-grandfather. This by itself is evidence for survival over time, and, furthermore, the great-grandfather's courtship is obviously the cause of the existence of the four generations. In the particulars of the yarn, the durability idea is played out is small compass.(5) The great-grandfather is one of three brothers interested in marrying the same woman. He wins because his two brothers pass out in a drinking bout, thus enabling him to carry the woman home - which he literally does.(6) The message is clear: to succeed one must outlast others. At the end of the story the grandfather outdrinks the father, who retaliates by putting red pepper into the older man's bamboo tube, used for grinding chewing tobacco. This incident supports the father's apparently vain claim, upon awakening from his stupor, that "I'm not down yet" (74). The moral is not to give up; a person resourceful enough can still come out on top. The conclusion of the story finds the grandfather carrying the sleeping father to the house and the narrator remarking, "Then I knew why my brothers admired Grandfather. He was a man to the last ounce of his strength" (75). The value placed on endurance also explains the grandfather's approval of the small boy narrator's wine drinking: children need to develop survival techniques early:

"It's good to be a man, Simeon," he said. "You can stand by a fire at night with another man whose likes and dislikes are similar to yours, while a little boy sits and drinks with you all night long.... But the boys nowadays are spineless and soft." (LF 70)

The same elements of vitality and early practice of survival techniques can be found in "A Day with My Father." When the narrator's brother Berto suddenly announces that he wants to get married, Uncle Sergio's fighting cock, which the narrator has been holding, "flew off my hand and ran around the house." Then, "I chased the cock around the house. I was afraid it would get away. Father grabbed my leg. I fell on the floor. He sat on my body and pondered over the subject anxiously" (76-77). This phallic prelude leads to an interchange between Berto and the father:

"Do you think twelve years is old enough to have children," Father asked.

"It was old enough for you, Father," my brother said.

"It was old enough for me all right," Father said. "But I was a strong man." (77)

After a violent battle involving the brother, during which "the cock was pecking at his [Berto's] legs and scratching his face" (78), the family sets out to find Berto a wife. At the first house they come to, the woman is rejected by Berto; the father then asks her which of his five sons she would prefer. When she selects

Osong, the father nixes the arrangement, pointing out that this son is "vicious and lazy" (81). The narrator's brother Nicasio is interested but proves unsuitable, because he reads books and she eats tobacco and neither shares the other's interest.

At the next house the farmer's daughters are asked to choose husbands from the narrator's brothers. All five immediately pick the narrator, but the father says that he is too young. What finally deters the daughters, however, is the father's information that "He drinks wine like a horse" (83). Finally, the daughters draw straws; the youngest, who is fat, wins and picks the narrator's brother Polon. As the narrator's family leaves, the family reminds the father, "Don't forget to come back for the other girls!" (81).

This story complements the immediately preceding "My Father Had a Father" by treating courtship from the distaff perspective. The man who has one daughter can afford to let her be particular about whom she marries; the man with five daughters has the same problem that the fathers in Jane Austen's novels have. Again, there can be no mistaking the implication: daughters - economic liabilities - need to be married off (in this story the price is the deed to the farmer's rice land, which the farmer turns over to the narrator's father) if one is to subsist.

A close examination of the themes, tones, characters, and plot patterns of the LF stories reveals that the stories constitute a casebook on survival in a hostile environment. It is a testimonial to this idea - that sharp wit can defeat an enemy with superior firepower - that many readers have been fooled into thinking that LF is only an enchanting collection of short fiction. Each time that a reader misapprehends LF, thinking that it is merely a depiction of quaint tomfoolery, Bulosan has once again field-tested the book's unarticulated but articulate premise.

NOTES:

1. As Francisco explains, "Juan Tamad is a modern Tagalog adaptation of the Pilandok character" (521). The Pilandok is in Philippine lore a seahorse (Francisco 521), and its Malayan version a mouse-deer (Francisco 511), but these identifications are symbolic, not literal. Any physically overmatched animal, contesting with another, can be the Pilandok tale protagonist, and if a deer is a character it may be either the potential predator or the potential prey. Whatever the case, by using its wits the smaller/weaker/slower animal always triumphs over the larger/stronger/swifter one, no matter which animal initiated the story's action. For instance, a snail challenges a deer to a race. Whenever the deer calls out to see where the snail, another snail, pretending to be the challenger, and of course planted in advance, calls out from a few yards ahead. Finally, the deer faints from the exertion of the race (Francisco 515).

2. As Nilsson puts it, "The phallum was used in other fertility cults, especially in the festival of Demeter, but it was nowhere so conspicuous as in the cult of Dionysus" (36). Guthrie observes that fertility cults were not isolated developments: "...how common throughout the Greek world was the phenomenon of a deity worshiped with orgiastic rites and provided with a train of attendants of whom the Satyrs of Dionysus are the best-known example" (44).

This is to be expected, of course, on the assumption that fertility perceived (or intuited) by peasants as a survival mechanism is a universal human phenomenon. The LF sexual materials might also parallel the orgiastic cult rites of antiquity in their other survival implications, centered around social bonding to prevent dissolution or other destruction of the group. As Cornford long ago pointed out, human being and divinity are kept close by the fusing process of ecstasy (112-14).

3. Bulosan's conviction that Christianity was often exploited by venal clerics and others to further their own ends and that Christian beliefs frequently were used merely to gull trusting people perhaps finds its most eloquent expression in chapter twenty-four of The Power of the People. The educated Dante confronts the landlord/priest Father Bustamente with "Sure you have the right to exploit the peasants now by using the abracadabra of religion" (452), and the illiterate Old Bio generalizes this situation to the priesthood as a whole:

"When you are born you give money to the priest. When you get married you give him money. When somebody dies you give money. When you die you give him money. On top of that, between your birth and death, you give money every Sunday. Sometimes twice when he wants to add something to his rectory, or has taken a fancy to some good land. It seems that you are always giving from the very hour of your birth to the last second that you are buried in the ground. You never get anything in return. Never that I know of. I would have become a priest myself if I had known it is an easy life, eating the best food and drinking the best wine and wearing perfumed clothes. I would not have been a peasant, a small tenant farmer at that, working like a carabao in the heat of the sun and in the cold rain, if I had known there are comfort and leisure and pleasure in priesthood, if I had known you don't only get the best necessities of life but also the most desirable of woman and the money and handshake of the rich landlords and the influential politicians." (441-42)

If the priests are con artists and their activities are exposed through ridicule, the "rings within rings" situation of "trickster defeats trickster" is created. Thematically, this is a neat counterpart to the more physical episodes, since it suggests that peasants must use their wits against others' cunning as well as others' brawn.

4. Of the twenty-four titles, only three lack the word "father," and two of those, "My Mother's Boarders" and "My Uncle Manuel's Homecoming," contain

other familial references, leaving "The Soldiers Come Marching" as the one title with no such allusion.

5. "Yarn" not only because of the surface implausibility of the narration but also because of its background fairy tale components: three brothers and the "test of worth" - here wine drinking - to assure the mettle of the successful suitor.

6. It is predictable that the test of masculinity should be a drinking contest, if we press the similarity between the LF stories and the Cult of Dionysus, for it is literally textbook knowledge that

> The god himself was identified with vital force in wine and in all reproduction, and his excess of vitality was linked with water, blood, and sperm. Dionysus' initiation ceremonies, which included the use of intoxicants, were known for their orgiastic dances, loud cries, and wild ecstasies. (Nielsen et al. 70)

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