Historical reinterpretations of race: breaking stereotypes, creating archetypes

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Historical reinterpretations of race:
breaking stereotypes, creating archetypes

by

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This is to certify that the master's thesis of

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has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
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PREFACE

"We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves."
— Langston Hughes, The Negro Artist and The Racial Mountain (1926)

When Ralph Ellison wrote, "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me" he was not vocalizing the complexities of the Asian American experience (Ellison 3). Rather, his intent was to vocalize the complexities of the black experience in America. Yet, his words resonated with a profundity by articulating the shared feelings of non-existence in the midst of the predominantly white environments I had grown up in. My experience as an Asian adoptee in a European American family, as well as the invisibility of persons of color within my environment, prompted me to embrace the white identity that continually surrounded me both culturally and socially. While Ellison's metaphor of invisibility describes the devaluing of African American humanity, it also describes a literal exclusion of persons of color (in general) from our society's cultural productions including our interpretations and representations of history, literature, the media and so forth.

While certainly the changing dynamics within our society (since Ellison wrote his novel, Invisible Man, in 1947 or even my teenage years in the 80s) have increased visibility of persons of color, the implications from a history of exclusion remain pervasive. Implicitly, an ideology of white superiority and nonwhite inferiority has been reinforced implicating nonwhites into devaluing their own humanity. And so for personal and political reasons, I am driven by a desire to speak for those who have been (and continue to be) historically silenced. I am driven by a sense of responsibility to remember those who have sacrificed their lives to help build this nation amidst oppression and exploitation.

Ellison was only one among the many African American authors whom I began to discover spoke of "my" experience. I say this to notice how a construct of race has complicated our perceptions of literature where books written by black authors are presumed to appeal to the experiences of only a black audience, Asian authors to an Asian audience, whereas the experiences of whites are deemed "universal" assumedly transcending racial boundaries. I am interested in rethinking this mythology by examining our historical interpretations of nonwhites in America within the context of multiculturalism.

The rubric of multiculturalism has us assume that each group within America has their own histories specific and separate to their particular group. While it is not my intent to dispute this idea in its entirety, my aim is to re-examine multiculturalism as a function of our
society's interactions and constructions of groups in relation to each other rather than in opposition to or in juxtaposition of each other. Ronald Takaki observes while the emergence of multiculturalism—in an effort to include more voices within American history—created "a proliferation of seminal works," he observes that these works created a "fragment[ed] American society" (Takaki 6). He argues, "While scrutinizing our specific pieces, we have to step back in order to see the rich and complex portrait they compose. What is needed is a fresh angle, a study of the American past from a comparative perspective" (Takaki 6). Similarly, I am interested in alternative interpretations of American history for the purposes of empowering marginalized groups to find shared experiences that have historically united them in various ways.

I want to clarify that my aim in writing this thesis is not intended to destabilize nonwhite identities into a monolithic "nonwhite" identity. My intention, however, is to look at other ways of empowering these identities through historical reinterpretations seeking to recognize histories of mutuality—with special attention to resistance—despite coming out of specific traditions. In so doing, it is necessary to recognize that history has always been interpreted. Howard Zinn argues that the perspective (or what he calls "distortions) of a historian places emphasis on what is needed most to meet a particular purpose "where any chosen emphasis supports (whether the historian means to or not) some kind of interest, whether economic or political or racial or national or sexual" (Zinn 8). Thus, as he observes that historical interpretations are subjective and dependent upon the motive of the historian, I am interested in a notion of historical reinterpretations as a mode of empowering those whose histories have been silenced and/or distorted. While time limits me to analyze the relational histories of all people of color, I have chosen to focus on the experiences of Asian Americans and African Americans—although I will have just scratched the surface—by comparing the experiences of Carlos Bulosan (an Asian American author) with Richard Wright (an African American author).

I have chosen Carlos Bulosan as the central focus of my essay for several reasons. First, I am interested in the explicit attention given in documenting America's racism towards Asian Americans in his autobiography, *America Is in the Heart*. My initial reaction of this book was an affirmation of the racism (directed toward Asian Americans) experienced within my own life (although not nearly to the same degree) that I had not previously observed within literature. It was liberating.
Second, I am interested in Bulosan for the plurality of his identity where his roles as an author, a poet, and an activist merged with his identity as an immigrant, Filipino American, and Asian American articulated a responsibility toward his community that manifested within his writing. In Bulosan's words, "I hope it [America Is in the Heart] will help arouse the consciousness of other Filipino writers toward social realities" (Morantte 150).

Third, I am interested in the criticism that surrounded (and continues to surround) Bulosan's America Is in the Heart (and Richard Wright's Black Boy) as a "fictitious autobiography." I am interested in investigating reasons behind Bulosan's and Wright's decisions to include other voices amid their own. I argue that this amalgam of experiences aims to move towards a unified and stable, collective racial identity—evident within contemporary racial discourse of "Asian Americans" or "Asians" and "African Americans" or "Blacks"—amid a diversity of cultural experiences. I assert that Bulosan's and Wright's intent to articulate a "Filipino" and "Negro" experience—consequential to challenging the objectification of Filipinos and Negroes—foreshadow a notion of "identity politics" and the assumption that speaking through a unified voice has more political leverage if there is an "experience" connected to an identity. While this may be unsettling for many within contemporary society who reject a notion of lumping people together solely on race, it is significant to recognize that Bulosan and Wright were challenging the "power" of a stabilized, white identity that carried such political and ideological magnitude that it became synonymous to an "American" identity, thereby excluding all others.¹

A final reason I am interested in Bulosan and especially America Is in the Heart is the book's historical context. It provides for the 21st century eyes a glimpse into the "heart of America's" most profound moments of contradictions: the legacy of a racist legal system of immigration restrictions, miscegenation laws, and dejure and de facto segregation laws. Bulosan's work articulates not only the racial injustice towards Filipinos, but also towards other nonwhites based solely upon the systematic ideology associated with race in America. His arrival onto American shores introduced him to explicit racial segregation impacting not only how he saw others, but also how he saw himself. While Bulosan witnessed firsthand issues of racial injustice (toward himself and other Filipinos), as a prolific reader, he was also introduced to racism in America by reading the works of such authors as Richard

¹ In Thinking Orientals, Henry Yu explains that "American" is understood to have a particular connotation signifying a "white American." Therefore, to say white American, is to be "semantically redundant" (Yu 63).
Consequently, I have chosen Richard Wright's *Black Boy* as the counterpart of my comparative analysis of reinterpreting the historical relationship between Asian Americans and African Americans. By embracing the role of "representative" for Asians and Blacks, Bulosan and Wright intended to reclaim the humanity of those who were historically objectified and stripped of their humanity through stereotypes within the dominant society. Both Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* and Wright's *Black Boy* sought to articulate how they perceived themselves rather than how they were perceived by society. Thus, I view *America Is in the Heart* and *Black Boy* as creating prototypes or "archetypes" that reveal recurring themes of not only oppression but also of those resisting oppression, aiming to resignify what it means to be Asian and Black within American society.
NOTES ON TERMINOLOGY

A point of clarification needs to be made regarding the selected racial terminology used within this thesis. While neither the term "Negro" nor "Oriental" are acceptable within contemporary society, historicizing the labels places them within the proper context.¹ While "persons of color" is perceived to be more affirmative within contemporary racial discourse, I also use the words "nonwhite" and "minority" interchangeably and frequently. My intent, however, is not to posit the "white experience" as more valuable than others, as might be perceived by using "negative" identities, but is intended to parallel Judith Butler's notion of "resignification."² In Butler's view, gender is not biological but has been socially constructed, perpetuated through the performance of our roles as "men" and "women" (Butler 43). Thus, persons have the power to redefine or "resignify" the limitations of gender categories by creating their own meaning rather than accepting what has been constructed by the dominant society. Similarly, my use of the terms "nonwhite" and "minority" is intended to recognize how persons of color—implicated by race—often deny their own identity, wishing to be white (Reflected in my own experiences as an Asian adoptee living within a predominantly white environment—see Preface). By "resignifying" these terms, I am seeking self-affirmation (rather than the perceived self-negation) by rejecting a desire to be white and, simultaneously, choosing to isolate myself from the dominant society who has historically instigated so much pain and suffering among persons of color.

² In Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, Judith Butler writes, "If there is something right in Beauvoir's claim that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, it follows that woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification" (Butler 43).
INTRODUCTION

"Asian American viewers absorbed the steady diet of demeaning caricatures with embarrassment and shame. Many wished, as youngsters, to be another race, to be anything but the images that dominated them. The media portrayals were reminders of the ridicule they encountered from childhood, of closed minds of people who saw Asians in narrow, proscribed ways—the outsider, the foreigner, the gook."


In the 1960s, a group of Filipino American students at the University of Washington, "radicalized by the antiwar and civil rights struggles," rediscovered the works of Carlos Bulosan—a forgotten Filipino American author and poet (San Juan 1). But despite their efforts to make him visible, Bulosan remains invisible to many. In this thesis, one of my aims is to increase the visibility of Carlos Bulosan by recognizing that his works and perspective should be respected and valued as an integral part of American literature. In so doing, I hope to challenge the perception of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners that continues to exclude them from full participation within American society.

In February of 2002, a sports headline for *The Seattle Times* (coincidentally the location where Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* was republished) read "Hughes Good As Gold: American Outshines Kwan, Slutskaya in Skating Surprise." The headline was a patriotic celebration during the 2002 Winter Olympics of the figure skating victory of Sarah Hughes (the "American") against the non-Americans, Irina Slutskaya (a Russian skater) and Michelle Kwan. However, the problem with this headline is that Michelle Kwan, born and raised in Torrance, California is also an American. This seemingly harmless "mistake" by the news reporter triggered outrage—leading to nationwide protests—within the Asian American community because it so profoundly articulated what it means to be Asian in America. To the news reporter who selected the headline, the assumption that Kwan was not American (based upon her "racial" appearance), juxtaposed with the image of Hughes, crystallizes a historical legacy that justified the incarceration of Japanese Americans during WWII under the similar assumption that persons of Asian descent are not (and never will be) fully "American."

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This was the second time a headline identifying Michelle Kwan as "non-American" appeared. Rene Astudillo writes, "In 1998, American figure skater Tara Lipinski beat fellow American Michelle Kwan to capture the gold medal at the Nagano Winter Olympics. A headline announcing the upset victory on the MSNBC Web site read, "American Beats Out Kwan." Four years later, in Salt Lake City, Kwan—again favored to win gold—loses out to fellow American Sarah Hughes and Russian skater Irina Slutskaya. History is repeated, and I'm not just talking gold medals. The day after the women's figure skating finals in Salt Lake City, *The Seattle Times*' sports page ran a controversial secondary headline on its lead story about the gold-medal skating performance of Sarah Hughes. It read, 'American outshines Kwan, Slutskaya in skating surprise.'"
This episode describes not only the little progress that has been made but also underscores the contradictory rhetoric of an American society that celebrates the uniqueness of its diversity yet is still dominated by the image, language, and ideology of European America. It is also for this reason that it is essential in making visible the images and contributions of Asian Americans (like Bulosan) as vital contributors to our American society so that we may attempt to reverse these assumptions.

But what further complicates matters is the question of whether or not Bulosan should be included within a diasporic Asian American identity or as E. San Juan—a leading scholar on Bulosan—argues that the life, works and experiences of Bulosan should be exclusive to the Filipino American experience. He contends:

Given the genuine historical, political, and cultural differences between people of Filipino ancestry and other Asian ethnic groups, together with the current interrogation of the hegemonic claims of a unitary 'American common culture,' I propose that Filipinos and their practice of cultural production should now be appraised as a force in its own right, in its difference and integrity, and in its complex dialectical relationship with the distinctive histories of other peoples of color in the United States, with the dominant consensus, and with the power alignment within the present world system. (San Juan 1)

It is significant to recognize, however, that the Filipino students—essential in rediscovering Bulosan—were a part of a Filipino movement influenced by the ideology of a much larger Asian American movement (originating at San Francisco State College and the University of California, Berkeley) whose rationale of a unified identity aimed at countering the objectified image of persons of Asian descent as "Orientals." Similarly, it was the influence of other minority groups within America seeking to vocalize their outrage at a racist system that inspired these Asian American students. According to William Wei, groups such as the Black Panther Party, the ideology of Malcolm X, and unity for Third World liberation became the catalyst among these young Asian American students reawakening them with a call to action (Wei 15). The shared experiences of racism united not only Asian Americans but also other marginalized Americans. Their urgency to reclaim their humanity resulted from an American culture that consistently dehumanized them by objectifying or rendering them invisible within the ideologies of Eurocentrism. In The Asian American Movement, Wei explains:
The underlying impetus for the Asian American Movement was the search for identity and the creation of a new culture. Unlike European Americans, who could incorporate their ethnic identity into their sense of being American, Asian Americans had to create an entirely new identity: the Asian American. They resolved their "identity crisis" by directly challenging the distorted images that have diminished them as individuals and degraded them as a group, replacing them with more accurate ones based on historical knowledge about themselves, and creating a pan-Asian counterculture that reflects their values and experiences. (Wei 70)

In the passage above, Wei explains that the result of the struggles towards self-affirmation by persons of Asian descent became the formation of a collective "Asian American" identity. In addition, students who were a part of the Asian American Movement and other self-awareness movements demanded the restructuring of racist power structures within their universities by seeking tangible changes. Among these changes was an ethnic studies program (beginning at San Francisco State College and the University of California, Berkeley) that would reinterpret and challenge the racist assumptions endemic within Eurocentric curricula and maintained by a tradition of a literary canon (Wei 15). In Growing Up Asian American, Stephen Sumida articulates the impact such changes would have toward his perception of self:

Reading poems and stories from Asian America and working in a community of Asian American historians, artists, and writers, I felt both comforted and empowered. The affirmation of my perceptions of racism made me feel strangely at ease. The literal and literary presence of other Asian Americans enabled me to explore my concerns in a validating way. (Sumida 15)

The comfort that Sumida articulates not only is the comfort he finds in shared experiences but also in the "racial" identity as an Asian American. Similarly, in an essay entitled On Being South Asian in North America, Chandra Talpade Mohanty affirms, "Once I was able to 'read' my experiences in terms of race, and to read race and racism as it is written into the social and political fabric of the U.S., practices of racism and sexism became the analytic and political lenses through which I was able to anchor myself here" (Mohanty 338). Mohanty describes the significance of how race has historically shifted from a demarcation that systematically excluded nonwhites from American society to becoming a political and
social weapon. We would be mistaken, however, to think that race has moved away from its negative connotations into only forms of empowerment. Clearly, the headline "American Outshines Kwan" in the year 2002 reminds us of the current racial implications resulting from a history of racial exclusion.

While I agree with San Juan that America Is in the Heart clearly documents a "Filipino" history in America, I assert that the strength of Bulosan's autobiography is to recognize that it also demonstrates the formation toward a collective Asian identity (discussed in Chapter One). Furthermore, I am concerned about the implications of destabilizing an Asian American identity by interpreting isolated histories. In order to establish a visible identity within America, we need to evolve into a unified voice that will make ourselves visible within a society that incessantly exists through a construct of race. The lumping together a heterogeneity of cultures is a part of the historical process of how race has been constructed within America. This process of homogenizing clearly is not unique to Asians but describes the historical evolution of such nomenclatures as Whites, Blacks, Hispanic/Latinos, and American Indians—all of which share the same "lumping together" of various ethnicities. Despite this collective identity, groups are still able to celebrate and maintain their specific traditions. My interest in Bulosan speaks of my interest in the history of any Asian American who paved the way for persons who look like me through their sacrifices and struggles within a racist nation.

Nearly seventy years before the headline "American Outshines Kwan" would appear in a Seattle newspaper, Carlos Bulosan stepped onto the cities shores with the hopes and dreams of success that accompanies most immigrants. While there are no accurate records regarding Bulosan's birth, he was born between 1911-1914. Similarly, Bulosan is listed as having entered the U.S. between 1930-1931 and because of the discrepancy in birth dates, he has been observed to have arrived somewhere between seventeen and nineteen years of age. While Bulosan came to America to pursue a career in writing, Tim Libretti observes

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2 In The Racial Contract, Charles W. Mills writes, "race' is the common conceptual denominator that gradually came to signify the respective global statuses of superiority and inferiority, privilege and subordination. There is an opposition of us against them with multiple overlapping dimensions: Europeans versus non-Europeans (geography), civilized versus wild/savage/barbarians (culture), Christians versus heathens (religion). But they all eventually coalesced into the basic opposition of white versus nonwhite" (Mills 21).

3 P.C. Morantte writes, "And there is the matter of the date of his birth. Prof. E. San Juan in his book Carlos Bulosan and the Imagination of the Class Struggle quotes him as saying: 'I was born November 24, 1913 in Binalonan, Pangasinan, Philippine Islands.' And there are other sources giving 1913 as the year of his birth. But in the Current Biography of Authors, 1946 edition, and also in the First Supplement of the Twentieth Century Authors 1955, edited by Stanley J. Kunitz, Carlos himself wrote down 1914 as the year of his birth" (Morantte 32).
Bulosan was an enormously popular writer in the 1940s in the United States and even abroad. His 1944 collection of short stories, *The Laughter of My Father*, was a bestseller. He was featured on the covers of several major national magazines, and his writings appeared in such magazines and journals as the *New Yorker, Harper's Arizona Quarterly, and the Saturday Evening Post*. *America Is in the Heart* was translated and sold in Sweden, Denmark, Italy, and Yugoslavia. *Look* magazine voted *America Is in the Heart* one of the fifty most important books ever published....His blacklisting in the 1950s, however, has erased much of his achievement from the pages of the United States literary history. (Libretti 22)

But it was not only the blacklisting that "destroyed" Bulosan's career but also, as Elaine Kim observes, the critical reception directed toward an essay published in the *New Yorker*, entitled "The End of the War," which was met with accusations of plagiarism (Kim 46). While she explains that the case was "posthumously vindicated by the *New Yorker* editors, the publicity aroused by the case was extremely damaging to Bulosan" (Kim 46). Furthermore, Kim observes that the "adverse criticism" he received for his autobiography by critics "assail[ing] him for exaggeration, pointing out discrepancies between representations in the book [*America Is in the Heart*] and the actual facts of his life" was also essential in the downfall of Bulosan's writing career (Kim 46). Thus, my interest in investigating reasons behind Bulosan's decision to "exaggerate" stories led to a comparative analysis of Carlos Bulosan and Richard Wright reflected in Chapter Two. Although Bulosan achieved his dream of becoming an accomplished writer in America, he would quickly be forgotten (until the re-discovery of his works by students from the University of Washington). He died in 1956 from tuberculosis.

The first chapter, "The Emergence of a Collective Asian Identity," focuses on the formation of Bulosan's racial identity. I am not as interested in this chapter in the authorial intent of *America Is in the Heart* as I am in how we can acquire meaning from the text (although Chapter Two discusses at great length the significance of authorial intent). While I do not deny that Bulosan primarily intended for *America Is in the Heart* to articulate the struggles of Filipinos, I argue that his "fictionalized autobiography" is significant because it reveals the emergence of a collective Asian identity (reflected within contemporary racial
discourse) consequential to the interaction and construction of race within American society. I observe that Bulosan, as the protagonist of *America Is in the Heart*, undergoes a transformation from embracing only his Filipino identity to also embracing an "Oriental" identity. The first part of his transformation is revealed through his introduction to a notion of race in the Philippines after America's emergence, resulting from the victory in the Spanish-American War. While he does not identify himself as a racial subject until he arrives in the United States, he experiences a physical separation (in appearance) from white Americans and himself. Second, I observe ways in which the perceptions of "Filipinos" (in America) psychologically implicate the protagonist, causing him to internalize a notion of inferiority. And finally, I observe how his racial identity influenced by authors and activists seeking societal change, impact Bulosan's perceptions into a collective Asian identity.

Chapter Two, "Locating Resistance and Mutuality in the Histories of Asian Americans and African Americans: An Analysis of Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* and Richard Wright's *Black Boy," is a comparative analysis of Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* with Richard Wright's *Black Boy*. I attempt to articulate my interpretation of why Bulosan and Wright constructed their autobiographies that led many to question the veracity of their writings as "personal histories." I suggest it is their desire to express as many perspectives as possible which led them to construct an autobiography that meshed the experiences of others with their own. An example of this perspective can be read in Bulosan's words:

‘The question is—what impelled me to write? The answer is—my grand dream of equality among men and freedom for all. To give a 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.'

‘Yes, I have taken unto myself this sole responsibility.' (San Juan 216)

Thus, I argue that the significance of Bulosan and Wright is for readers to recognize that the construction of their autobiographies and their decision to posit themselves as representatives for their race has an immediate correlation in understanding the formation of contemporary group identities, (i.e. African Americans, Asian Americans, American Indians, etc.). In emphasizing this historical reinterpretation, I am hoping to capture mutuality in the histories of Asians and Blacks within America.
While Chapter One focuses on the racial formation of Carlos Bulosan, I begin Chapter Two by investigating the racial formation of Richard Wright for the purposes of articulating the impact Wright’s life (as revealed through *Black Boy*) had on Bulosan. In addition, I observe the parallels not only within their autobiographies but also within their lives as marginalized men, implicated by race. Second, I examine *America Is in the Heart* and *Black Boy* as instruments of resistance. In so doing, I discuss how both Wright and Bulosan’s shared feelings of alienation and objectification within their environments triggered similar critical perceptions of America, leading them to consciously deconstruct the limited representations of Blacks and Asians through their writing. Finally, I explore the criticism surrounding the two texts by contextualizing Wright and Bulosan’s construction of their autobiographies. I discuss how their authorial intent parallels (and foreshadows) the formation of contemporary identities and the ways in which these identities position themselves politically within a notion of "identity politics."
CHAPTER ONE

The Emergence of a Collective Asian Identity

"Why could I not succeed as Younghill Kang had? He had come from a family of scholars and had gone to an American university—but was he not an Oriental like myself?"

— Carlos Bulosan, America Is in the Heart

According to L.E.A.P. (Leadership Education For Asian Pacifics, Inc.), the Asian American identity encompasses over fifty different ethnicities. Amid this heterogeneity of cultures, many argue that there is little that links (or can link) together such diversity. For example, in his book, The Accidental Asian, Eric Liu argues that our perception of what is viewed as "Asian culture" such as "Zen Buddhism, feng shui, karaoke bars...are ethnic in origin, not 'Asian.'" In his view, "What's missing from Asian American culture is culture" (Liu 79). Thus, he refutes an Asian American (specifically an APA—Asian Pacific American) identity, for he is interested in "something deeper than a mere label" (Liu 80). He further argues, "My objection is not only to the APA label; it is to the labeling mind itself..." (Liu 80-81).

While I certainly can appreciate the perspectives of Liu and those who disprove of being lumped within an encompassing label that does not speak to the complexities of their experiences, I argue that we need to rethink an Asian American identity not as a limitation but rather as a mode of unification, resistance and political force.¹ In achieving this perspective, I suggest that a return to history—via Carlos Bulosan's America Is in the Heart—illuminates not only the reasons behind racial categorizations within contemporary society but also provides a foundation in predicting racial constructions in the future.

In this chapter, I examine the construction of self (or the identity formation) of Bulosan, the protagonist, (who represents not only Bulosan's "personal history" but also a "collective history" of Filipino immigrants within America) of America Is in the Heart whose perception of self transforms from first identifying as only a Filipino to later identifying himself with other "Orientals."² I want to clarify, however, that I do not assert that he sees himself as less Filipino in the wake of his "Oriental" consciousness. In fact, I observe that his transformation impacts not only a collective awareness of being "Asian" but also heightens

¹ Liu does include historical reference to the formation of an Asian American identity (Liu 67-69).
² Timothy Libretti observes, "America Is in the Heart charts the life of the narrator, Allos (Bulosan's persona)" (Libretti 21). Similarly, Helen Jaskoski writes, "...Bulosan identifies his persona first as "Allos" and then as "Carlos," the name he wrote under" (Jaskoski 239). In this chapter, I refer to the protagonist in America Is in the Heart as Bulosan for the sake of clarity.
his awareness toward his Filipino heritage. Similarly, I want to clarify that the intent of this chapter is not to assert that embracing an Asian American identity implies excluding other aspects of one's sense of self (i.e. ethnic-specific and/or multiracial identities, etc.).

My intent is simply to contextualize the emergence of a collective Asian identity within America as revealed through the histories of earlier Asians prior to (but foreshadowing) the emergence of an Asian American rubric.

First, I would like to begin this chapter by explaining that my interest in challenging Liu's perceptions of the limits of an Asian American identity—within an APA label—is aimed at observing that removing labels from an omnipresent racial discourse is not a solution. What is problematic is not how the term is used but that an understanding of the historical significance that articulates a history of exclusion from an "American" identity often remains silenced. For this reason, Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* is an invaluable source for understanding the past and interpreting the present.

In addition, it is necessary to observe that there still remains a significant invisibility of Asian Americans within mainstream culture. I would argue this invisibility is the primary reason why among the current racial groups, persons of Asian descent are the most likely to deny their racial identification. Because of the limited representations within mainstream American culture, persons of Asian descent internalize racism (i.e. internalizing humiliation, shame, etc.) that views Asians as "chinks," "gooks," "alien spies" and most importantly as perpetual "foreigners." In *Thinking Orientals: Migration, Contact, and Exoticism in Modern America*, Henry Yu examines "why it is that an Asian American in the United States, no matter how long and for how many generations he or she might have been here, will still be regularly asked 'Where are you from?'" (Yu vi) He further explains:

The inquisitors are never satisfied with the answers of Los Angeles, or Vancouver, or Canada. You are seen as an 'Oriental' of some sort, and they need to sort you

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3 In Rachel Lee's dissertation, she challenges Jaime Harker's notion that "the term 'Asian American' as a monolithic entity is problematic." Lee states, "I assert the value of this Asian American interpretive rubric, claiming that political alliance remains as important a factor as faithfulness to ethnic-specificity in crafting one's interpretational grids. Moreover, the 'Asian American' panethnic identification may have begun as a more 'hoped for' than actual construct; however, the steady institutionalization of pan-Asian organizational strategies has subsequently produced an Asian American panethnic culture" (Lee 4). Her dissertation entitled *The Americas of Asian American Literature: Nationalism, Gender, and Sexuality in Carlos Bulosan's America Is in the Heart, Gish Jen's Typical American, and Jessica Hagedorn's Dogeaters* is intended to "suggest the importance of placing texts simultaneously within an ethnic-specific and Asian American interpretive framework" (Lee 5).

4 My reference to "mainstream culture" is aimed at observing the invisibility of Asian Americans in television, movies, music, etc. and not intended to dismiss the literary contributions of notable figures such as Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston.
according to some foreign distinction. And so you must answer, 'I am 'originally' from Japan,' even though you have never been to Japan, or 'My parents (or grandparents) are Chinese.' To feel like an outsider is an existential phenomenon on the individual level, but it is also the result of journeying through a certain kind of landscape. It is the terrain of race relations in the United States... (Yu vi)

Consequently, Yu's study also provides a perspective for the headline "American Outshines Kwan" (referenced in the Introduction) and the reason why Michelle Kwan was perceived as a non-American juxtaposed next to Sarah Hughes whose "whiteness" has become synonymous with "Americanness." The assumption of who is (and is not) an American based upon an appearance of "_foreignness" has consistently stigmatized persons of Asian descent within America and explains why an "Asian American" identity is consistently challenged and denied by those who are included within its category. Arguably, what underscores this challenge is the perception that an Asian American label (that embraces an identity separate from an "American" identity) reinforces a notion of Asians as "foreigners." This internalization is just one implication resulting from the "terrain of race relations in the United States" that Yu refers to. Thus, we would be mistaken to place blame on those implicated by a process of racialization and need to, therefore, look for more productive methods of understanding the complex "terrain" and how it has been "landscaped."

I suggest, with this chapter, rethinking the meaning of a collective Asian American identity for the purposes of reversing notions of inferiority through historical reinterpretations that seek to articulate the emergence of this identity in the affirmative and not in the negative. For example, in his groundbreaking text, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*, Ronald Takaki observes that the "unique" experiences of various Asian ethnicities within America bind together cultures that would not normally be united. He explains:

There are no Asians in Asia, only people with national identities, such as Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indian, Vietnamese, and Filipino. But on this side of the Pacific there are Asian Americans. This broader identity was forged in the crucible of racial discrimination and exclusion: their national origins did not matter as much as their race. Thus, out of 'necessity,' theirs became a community rooted in the struggle
against racism. Shared resistance began with a campaign against restrictions for naturalized citizenships and immigration that affected all Asian Americans. (Takaki 502)

While Takaki references the emergence of an Asian American identity resulting from "shared resistance" within a "physical" campaign, this identity has also resulted from a "mental" campaign rooted in rethinking perceptions of self. When Americans of Asian descent coined the term "Asian American" during the 1960s, they were seeking self-affirmation as opposed to the negation of their identities as objectified "Orientals."

This process of unification and redefinition of one's identity is critical in interpreting the construction of Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* whose protagonist metamorphosizes from perceiving an individual cultural identity to also perceiving himself within a collective cultural identity. I discuss his transformation in three steps. First, I observe how the emergence of America in the Philippines—consequential to the victory in the Spanish-American war—introduced Bulosan to race, although he does not identify himself as a racial subject until he arrives in the United States. Second, I observe ways in which the perceptions of "Filipinos" (in America) psychologically implicate Bulosan, causing him to internalize a notion of inferiority. And finally, I observe how his racial identity, influenced by authors and activists seeking societal change, impact Bulosan's perceptions into a collective Asian identity.

My perception that Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* is a catalyst in the formation of a collective Asian identity—speaking simultaneously of the Filipino and Asian American experience—is unique amid the many critics who situate Bulosan as primarily a Filipino writer. Although Bulosan is, without a doubt, included within a diaspora of Asian American literature and is observed as having a dual identity, it has been directed primarily to his Filipino and "American" identity rather than what I observe as a Filipino and an Asian (rather Asian American) identity. In addition, while many note the protagonist's "transformation," they diverge from my interpretation. Elaine Kim, while comparing him to Younghill Kang (a Korean who influences Bulosan to become a writer, discussed later in this chapter), makes only ethnic-specific references of both men. She explains, "Because Kang and Bulosan took part in a personal transition from Korean to Korean American and from Filipino to Filipino American, they are representatives of the genesis of Asian American literature" (Kim 33). According to Kim, Bulosan's (as well as Kang's) transformation is reflected by the
emergence into America, claiming two cultural spaces—his Filipino and American identity. Similarly, Susan Evangelista's study *Carlos Bulosan and The Beginnings of Third World Consciousness* aims "to explain the Filipino-American experience as a Third World experience in a First World country..." (Evangelista 6). Even Rachel Lee who affirms, in her study the significance of simultaneously maintaining both "ethnic-specific" and "Asian American" identities, states, "Given the constraints of narrative, however, such simultaneity is more likely to be posited than achieved. In other words, a critical attentiveness to the ethnic-specific context of a novel and the theoretical elaboration of the appropriateness of Asian American rubric occupy distinctive kinds of discursive spaces..." (Lee 5). Her examination of Bulosan's text as a "dream of fraternity" within America aiming to "underscore the primacy of sexual politics in the novel' portrait of U.S. —Philippine relations in the early part of the twentieth century (c. 1913-1914)" articulates Bulosan through a specific Filipino experience. And of course, E. San Juan's scholarship, centering on Bulosan, is intent upon claiming a distinct "Filipino experience" (as referenced in the Introduction). In his view, Filipinos have been "tokenized and subsumed within the larger, official category of 'Asian American'" (San Juan 1). Another notable study is Gregorio S. Castilla's *Carlos Bulosan: Conceptual Progenitor of Multicultural Education*. Castilla identifies *America Is in the Heart* as reflecting Bulosan's "political transformation" as revealed through the immigrant experience and foreshadowing contemporary practices of multicultural education (Castilla 21). While Castilla does not identify the same type of transformation I observe, he differs from the previous scholars by viewing Bulosan within a multicultural perspective, in addition to, an ethnic-specific one.

While the works mentioned above are only a glimpse into the scholarship written about Bulosan, my emphasis in highlighting certain works is aimed at observing where they diverge from my view. However, in Sau-ling Cynthia Wong's chapter entitled "The Politics of Mobility" in *Reading Asian American Literature*, her analysis of Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* shares my reading of articulating both a Filipino and Asian American experience. While her chapter discusses the construction of *America Is in the Heart* by identifying the significance of Bulosan's "mobility narrative," while simultaneously observing the "book's lack of directionality," she affirms the legacy of *America Is in the Heart* by stating, "I venture to submit another speculative reason for the book's enduring status: that it is a prototypical Asian American text, situated clearly in a larger American tradition but also prefiguring certain recurring Asian American concerns" (Wong 136).
Consequently, Wong's interest in the construction of *America Is in the Heart* reveals a primary concern within literary dialogues surrounding the book. While Elaine Kim asserts the work is "both less and more than a personal history," P.C. Morantte, a close friend of Bulosan, observes it is "30% autobiography, 40% case history of Pinoy life in America, and 30% fiction" (Kim 48, Morantte 31). While I am not concerned, necessarily, with dissecting which moments are true or have been exaggerated and/or distorted, my concern lies in interpreting meaning as revealed through its construction (although I address "Truth" in Chapter Two). A close reading of this text reveals the protagonist's transformation of "racial consciousness" who (to borrow Judith Butler's term) resignifies the meaning of his exclusion from American society, as a racial subject, by affirming and embracing both his Filipino and "Oriental" identity.

Bulosan's transformation begins by observing the implications of America's emergence into the Philippines. While Bulosan is introduced to a notion of race and experiences a physical separation (in appearance) from Americans in the Philippines, he does not identify himself as a racial subject until he arrives in the United States. *America Is in the Heart* is divided into two significant moments: Bulosan's early years in the Philippines and his later years in America. But as Tim Libretti observes, "Bulosan's narrative strategy...is structured as a pattern of constant return and reevaluation—in both space and time—in which each return yields a heightened race and class consciousness" (Libretti 21-22). Libretti references a notion of "return and reevaluation" by articulating how Bulosan's experiences in America, as a racial subject, illuminate and rekindle the significance of not only his Filipino heritage but also the implications of America's emergence in the Philippines (Libretti 21).

In addition, Libretti points out that the narrative strategy is intended to analyze moments within the young boy's life that could not fully be understood if the book was written without this sense of reflection or "reevaluation" spoken from his adult perspective. Libretti observes that as a young boy, Bulosan, "does not fully comprehend the significance and causality of the developments he witnesses [in the Philippines], which include peasant revolts, mass migrations from the country to the city, family dislocations, the breakdown of traditions along generational lines because of the imposition of the United States cultural norms in the schools..." until he becomes a man who has been "heightened by political and class consciousness" experienced after he emigrates to America (Libretti 21). What Bulosan finds in America is contradictory to the democratic ideals propagated within the
Philippines. The following passage, although placed in the beginning of the text, describes America's impact in the Philippines through Bulosan's "post-immigrant" perspective (Libretti 21). Bulosan writes:

For a time it seemed that the younger generation, influenced by false American ideals and modes of living, had become total strangers to the older generation. In the provinces where the poor peasants lived and toiled for the rich hacienderos, or landlords, the young men were stirring and rebelling against their heritage. (5)

While the Philippines was free from the ruthlessness of a Spanish colonial system, the emergence of America into nearly all aspects of Filipino life—disrupting its culture and altering the identity of young Filipinos—could be seen in terms of "neo-colonialism." Ronald Takaki observes how America's impact in the Philippines was apparent as the newly arriving Filipino migrants emerged onto American shores:

They were also American in their outlook. Many had been educated in schools established by Americans. 'From the time of kindergarten on our islands,' said Salvador del Fierro, 'we stood in our short pants and saluted the Stars and Stripes which waved over our schoolyards.' In their classrooms they looked at pictures of Washington and Lincoln, studied the Declaration of Independence, and read about the 'home of the free and the brave' in their English language textbooks. 'We said the 'Pledge of Allegiance' to the American flag each morning,' recalled Angeles Amoroso, who emigrated to the United States in 1923. 'We also sang 'The Star Spangled Banner.' All of the classes were taught in English.' Hundreds, thousands of American teachers had gone there to Americanize the Filipinos. (Takaki 57)

Reflecting on the interactions with Americans in the Philippines, Bulosan describes a notable moment:

One day an American lady tourist asked me to undress before her camera, and gave me ten centavos for doing it. I had found a simple way to make a living. Whenever I saw a white person in the market with a camera, I made myself conspicuously ugly, hoping to earn ten centavos. But what interested the tourists most were the naked Igorot women and their children. Sometimes they took pictures of the old men with G-strings. They were not interested in Christian Filipinos like me. They seemed to
take a particular delight in photographing young Igorot girls with large breasts and robust mountain men whose genitals were nearly exposed, their G-strings bulging large and alive. (67)

The significance of this passage for Bulosan, as he recalls the incident many years later, is the American's objectification of Filipinos as "savages." The pictures would be witness to such an ideology that consistently dehumanized Filipinos, thereby, excluding them from full participation within America.

But certainly not all of the white tourists in the Philippines objectified Filipinos in the ways of the previously described photographer. Bulosan describes an American, Miss Mary Strandon, who having befriended him becomes integral toward his intellectual development. He writes, "Miss Strandon began giving me books from the library. It was still hard for me to read and to understand what I was reading. Miss Strandon also realized that I had a passion for books, so she made arrangements with the city librarian to let me work with her" (70). In addition, Bulosan would include in his autobiography a dialogue that he had with Miss Strandon that was in many ways vital toward shaping his perceptions of what he believed America to be. Similarly, it is his first lesson on "race," but through a limited perspective. He introduces us to Dalmacio who, like Bulosan, is working as another houseboy. As Dalmacio encourages Bulosan to work on the pronunciation of his English, Bulosan stumbles upon the story of Abraham Lincoln (69). His curiosity of Lincoln sparks questions leading to answers sought from Miss Strandon.

'Will you tell me what happened to Abraham Lincoln, ma'am?' I [Bulosan] asked...

'Well, when he became president he said that all men are created equal,' Miss Strandon said. 'But some men, vicious men who had Negro slaves, did not like what he said. So a terrible war was fought between the states of the United States, and the slaves were freed and the nation was preserved. But one night he was murdered by an assassin...'

'Why?' I asked.

'Why?' she said. 'He was a great man.'

'What is a Negro?' I asked.

'A Negro is a black person,' she said.

'Abraham Lincoln died for a black person?' I asked.

'Yes,' she said. 'He was a great man.' (70)
Undoubtedly, Miss Strandon gives Bulosan a reduced version of the traditional interpretation of American history that describes America as a creation by "great" men. In so doing, she leaves him with the perspective that the American Civil War was fought to eradicate the institution of slavery (while in reality it was about preserving the Union) and that a President's dedication towards the cause of freedom was reflected in his willingness to sacrifice his life. Thus, what becomes problematic is despite the many themes within this dialogue connoting questions of democracy, racial hierarchies, racial injustice and historical interpretations to name just a few, Bulosan is left with a distorted perception of American history and the perceived principles of democracy. In addition, the ignorance of his youth prevents him from fully comprehending the meaning of the dialogue, never realizing that he would eventually be seen, in many ways, in the same light as the "Negroes" he is speaking of. Such limited historical interpretations promote America as an egalitarian nation propagating an illusory image to other countries. For Bulosan and other non-Americans, America is a dream. But upon Bulosan's encounters with racism in America—leading to the second part of his transformation—he sees the dream turn into a nightmare in which he understands that his "Filipinoness" will prevent him from achieving the "American dream."

In constructing his "fictionalized autobiography," Bulosan explicitly details moments of racism directed toward Filipinos instigated by "Americans," the police, and written in the law. In so doing, Bulosan articulates the psychological implications of American racism resulting from an internalization of inferiority. As Part Two of *America Is in the Heart* opens with Bulosan's emergence into America (via Hawaii), he suddenly understands it is not only Blacks that are perceived as inferior but also Filipinos. He writes:

I was pleasantly sunning myself one afternoon when Marcelo rolled over on his stomach and touched me. I turned and saw a young white girl wearing a brief bathing suit walking toward us with a young man. They stopped some distance away from us; then as though the girl's moral conscience had been provoked, she put her small hand on her mouth and said in a frightened voice: 'Look at those half-naked savages from the Philippines, Roger! Haven't they any idea of decency?' I was to hear that girl's voice in many ways afterward in the United States. It became no longer her voice, but an angry chorus shouting: *Why don't they ship those monkeys back where they came from?* (98-99)
The irony, of course, is that this girl who is wearing a "brief bathing suit" observes that it is Bulosan and his friend that are indecently exposed.

In another scene, Bulosan captures vividly the random acts of violence perpetrated by police against Filipinos. In a poolroom in Los Angeles, after discovering that two policemen have just shot a Filipino man, a nearby man responds to Bulosan's bewildered question of why the police committed the murder with a lackadaisical response: "'They often shoot Pinoys like that,' he said. 'Without provocation. Sometimes when they have been drinking and they want to have fun, they come to our district and kick or beat the first Filipino they meet'" (129).

And in a final scene detailing the racism within America, Bulosan reenacts a conversation among Filipinos members of the Communist Party. Through a series of questions, Bulosan articulates the contradictions within an American society espousing principles of democracy while simultaneously upholding laws that legalized racism:

'How come we Filipinos in California can't buy or lease real estate?' a man asked.
'Why are we denied civil service jobs?' asked another.
'Why can't we marry women of the Caucasian race? And why are we not allowed to marry in this state?'
'Why can't we practice law?'
'Why are we denied the right of becoming naturalized American citizens?'
'Why are we discriminated against in relief agencies?'
'Why are we denied better housing conditions?'
'Why can't we stop the police from handling us like criminals?'
'Why are we denied recreational facilities in public parks and other such places?' (268-269)

Consequently, Bulosan becomes implicated by the assumption of nonwhite inferiority that constantly surrounds him, perceiving himself through the perceptions held of Filipinos within dominant society. In capturing the internalization caused by racism, Bulosan articulates the connotations of "whiteness," as revealed through the forbidden "white woman." He writes, "It was like a fairy tale. Here I was with a white woman who had completely surrendered herself to me" (215). Later, he questions an interaction with a white female named Eileen, "Could I walk with her in the street without being ashamed of my race?" (216). Similarly, P.C. Morante writes that Bulosan, "felt his Filipinoness with a sense
of shame and pain” (Morantte 14). And in a set of correspondence collected within San Juan's *Becoming Filipino*, Bulosan writes, "When I say 'Filipino' the sound cuts deep into my being—it hurts. It will take years to wipe out the sharpness of the word, to erase its notorious connotation in America..." (San Juan 174).

Yet, it is imperative to note that Bulosan’s internalization is the consequence of not only racial slurs directed towards him—as a Filipino—but also from the explicit and implicit exclusion from society evident within the laws of land ownership, citizenship, marriage rights and so forth. Stuart Hall’s essay *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* illuminates the implications of such exclusion. He describes the "traumatic character of the 'colonial experience'" as not only how the oppressed were "constructed as different and other within the categories of knowledge of the West by those regimes [as described in Said's *Orientalism*]" but also how "they had the power to make us see and experience ourselves as 'Other'" (Hall 394). Similarly, in *On National Culture*, Frantz Fanon observes that the psychological manipulation of the colonizers became the primary reason for colonialism’s success in subjugating the colonized. He writes, "Every effort to bring the colonized person to admit the inferiority of his culture which has been transformed into instinctive patterns of behavior, to recognize the unreality of his 'nation,' and, in the last extreme, the confused and imperfect character of his own biological structure" (Fanon 45). While both Hall and Fanon are speaking from the specificity of the "colonial experience," clearly, we can make a parallel within American society (and arguably within the Philippines) where there have been similar methods of subjugation among nonwhites.

Finally, I observe Bulosan's transformation into a collective Asian identity through his interactions with activists and authors seeking societal change. While racism consistently surrounds Bulosan (creating him into a racial subject), simultaneously, those resisting perceptions of inferiority also surround him. Bulosan would meet Estevan who, although ends his life tragically, plays a significant role in the development of Bulosan's identity. Estevan's urgency to speak for and liberate the peasants from his town of Luzon, through his writings, would inspire Bulosan to also write. Bulosan reflects, "Thus it was that I began to rediscover my native land and the cultural roots there that had nourished me, and I felt great urge to identify myself with the social awakening of my people" (139).

In the midst of a society that consistently denigrated the lives of Filipinos, the example of Estevan's embracing his Filipino heritage symbolizes resistance. Estevan's writings would help Bulosan see pride in his country—a country that previously signified to
him little more than poverty. Bulosan reflects, "I would go back someday to understand what it meant to be born of the peasantry. I would go back because I was a 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" (62). Later, with an unexpected nostalgia, he cries out, "The sound of home! Would I also someday yearn for the sound of home? Would I also cry for the sad songs of the peasants in Mangusmana? And before I realized it, I began talking in our dialect: 'Ama! Ina! Manong! Ading! Sicayo!' The sound of home! Home among the peasants in Mangusmana!" (172).

 Seeking to find further inspiration, Bulosan turns to books while simultaneously looking to escape from the violence that engulfed him. Through the books and authors that he encountered, he rekindles the significance of his Filipino heritage. He writes:

   My despair led me to fairy tales... 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! My interest in folklore led me to the lives of Filipino heroes. Knowing them led me to the mainsprings of our history—to Jose Rizal whose story had been told to me years ago by my brother Macario when I had been sick in Binalonan. Why had I forgotten him until now, I did not know. (260)

   But not only does Bulosan find self-empowerment through his Filipino heritage (inspired by fellow Filipinos and Filipino folklore), but also affirms his identity through the examples of other Asian authors. Bulosan writes:

   I returned to the writers of my time for strength. And I found Younghill Kang, a Korean who had immigrated to the United States as a boy and worked his way up until he had become a professor at an American university. His autobiography, The Grass Roof, gave me an enlightening insight into the history of the Korean revolutionary movement. But it was his indomitable courage that rekindled in me a fire of hope. (265)
Motivated by Kang's personal story, he asks, "Why could I not succeed as Younghill Kang had? He had come from a family of scholars and had gone to an American university—but was he not an Oriental like myself?" (265). Bulosan parallels his own life, as an immigrant and an "Oriental," with Kangs and sees education as the only separation between the two. Bulosan contemplates, "Was there an Oriental without education who had become a writer in America? If there was one, maybe I could do it too!...then I came upon the very man—Yone Noguchi! A Japanese houseboy in the home of Joaquin Miller, the poet, who became the first poet of his race to write in the English language" (265). While Kang is Korean, Noguchi is Japanese, and Bulosan is Filipino, in Bulosan's view, the shared racial identification as an "Oriental" unites the three men.

Upon this awakening of "Oriental" consciousness, Bulosan concludes *America Is in the Heart* with this shared perception of race, while simultaneously affirming his Filipino heritage. In a scene where he is trying to find a room, he states, "It [a hotel] was managed by an elderly woman who, when I asked if Orientals were accepted, explained that it was not an American establishment. She meant that Filipinos were allowed to stay so long as they abided by the rules" (306). Still further, he states, "The monotony of my existence led me into the Filipino underworld, into the tangle of Oriental gangland" (308).

My interpretation of Bulosan's transformation, observing that a process of racialization experienced in America was the primary reason that Bulosan self-identifies as an "Oriental," is for the same reason Takaki explains that "there are no Asians in Asia." America's history of exclusion is the primary reason for the manifestation of an Asian American identity. But the significance of the Asian American identity is that it was constructed by persons of Asian descent and not forced upon them by the dominant society as was the term "Oriental." However, I want to clarify that the rationale behind interpreting Bulosan's embracing of an "Oriental" label (preceding the creation of a self-affirmative "Asian American" label) as a form of empowerment, is only sought in observing how Bulosan positions and identifies himself with the experience of other Asians. His motive for using an "Oriental" label is clearly different from white America's use of the term to objectify Asians. Thus, in this chapter I have tried to show, through a reinterpretation of Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart*, the motive for Bulosan's use of the "Oriental" label foreshadows the empowerment sought within a collective Asian identity within an Asian American label. While revealing Bulosan's racial transformation, I observe how his process of racialization eventually transformed into heightening his Filipino consciousness and newfound "Oriental"
consciousness aiming to observe that he was resignifying the meaning of "race," precisely what the Asian American Movement sought to do, only he was doing this decades earlier.

In addition, I am suggesting that texts such as Carlos Bulosan's America Is in the Heart reveal a process of transformative racial identities that has not stopped with the "Asian American" label coined within the Asian American Movement. An ongoing process of "resignification," seeking further modes of empowerment, has created an APA—Asian Pacific American label reflected in the designated Asian Pacific American Heritage Month of May (and used in Liu's book, referenced at the beginning of this chapter). Also used interchangeably within contemporary racial discourse is an "API" or "Asian Pacific Islander" label. The question of whether or not these labels will endure is not as important as asking how long will the implications from a history of racial exclusion remain? My assertion is that as long as race continues to play such a significant role in positioning certain groups of people over others, the need for political identities is an imperative form of "survivance" (to use Gerald Vizenor's term). The strength of America Is in the Heart is that it articulates not only how the past reflects the present but also identifies strategies for rebuilding the future.

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6 The editors of the Norton Anthology write, "Coining the term survivance, which infuses survival with a more active sense of resistance, Vizenor turns the image of the Native American from romanticized victim to a figure of strength and endurance: the result is what he calls the 'postindian,' the postmodern Native person who has an awareness of and manipulates conventional images of the 'Indian'" (Norton Anthology 1976).
CHAPTER TWO

Locating Resistance and Mutuality in the Histories of Asian Americans and African Americans: An Analysis of Carlos Bulosan’s *America Is in the Heart* and Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*

"I will be a writer and make all of you live again in my words."

— Carlos Bulosan, *America Is in the Heart*

"I wanted to lend, give my tongue, to voiceless Negro boys."

— Richard Wright, *Conversations with Richard Wright*

While historical interpretations tend to isolate the histories of racial groups, I am interested in how histories intersect. It is my assertion that while race dichotomizes groups, simultaneously, it can unite them through shared experiences. By looking at alternative interpretations of history—specifically of persons of color—histories that have been translated into victimization can be transformed into resistance. In this chapter, my aim is to locate moments of resistance and mutuality in the histories of Asian Americans and African Americans by examining the relationship between Richard Wright and Carlos Bulosan—as intellectuals, marginalized men and contemporaries of one another (Jaskoski 237). Both men would utilize (and redefine) the genre of autobiography by speaking from a collective (rather than an individual) perspective by deliberately becoming the voice for African Americans and Asian Americans previously unable to articulate their experiences to an America insistent upon disregarding their humanity.

I have chosen to examine Wright’s *Black Boy* and Bulosan’s *America Is in the Heart* because I am interested in observing how the formation of nonwhite racial (or cultural) identities has been consequential to the formation of an exclusive “white” American identity. As Stuart Hall observes, one way to view cultural identity is as a "production of identity" that is in "constant transformation" aimed at reconstructing identities that were disrupted and destroyed by colonization and slavery (Hall 393-94). He asserts, "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, narratives of the past" (Hall 294). Thus, I argue that the significance of Wright and Bulosan is for readers to recognize that the construction of their autobiographies and their decision to posit themselves as representatives for their race has an immediate correlation in understanding the formation of contemporary group identities (i.e. African Americans, Asian Americans, American Indians, etc.).
While chapter one focuses on the racial formation of Carlos Bulosan, I begin this chapter by investigating the racial formation of Richard Wright for the purposes of articulating the impact Wright's life (as revealed through *Black Boy*) had on Bulosan. In addition, I observe the parallels not only within their autobiographies but also within their lives as marginalized men, implicated by race. Second, I examine *America Is in the Heart* and *Black Boy* as instruments of resistance. In so doing, I discuss how both Wright's and Bulosan's shared feelings of alienation and objectification within their environments triggered similar critical perceptions of America, leading them to consciously deconstruct the limited representations of Blacks and Asians through their writing. Finally, I explore the criticism surrounding the two texts by contextualizing Wright's and Bulosan's construction of their autobiographies. I discuss how their authorial intent parallels (and foreshadows) the formation of contemporary identities and the ways in which these identities position themselves politically within a notion of "identity politics."

In beginning my analysis, it is necessary to observe that *Black Boy* and *America Is in the Heart* are continuations within a tradition of minority writers who have used their personal stories as a form of protest. For example, slave narratives such as Frederick Douglass' *Narrative* (1845) vocalized the experience of the "slave" and challenged the hypocrisy of the Church that maintained and justified the institution of slavery. Similarly, Zitkala-Sa—in her four autobiographical narratives (1900-1902)—would use her personal story to challenge the "enslavement" of Indian children stripped of their identities within Indian Boarding Schools. Like Douglass and Zitkala-Sa (to name only a couple of writers), both Wright and Bulosan would write from positions intended to break the historical literary silence of persons of color. The result of Wright's and Bulosan's unique approach to the genre of autobiography, however, is in recognizing that despite their continuation of a tradition of autobiography as a protest literature, they have transformed what has traditionally been a personal form of expression by writing from a collective (rather than an individual) perspective. In *Carlos Bulosan's Literary Debt to Richard Wright*, Helen Jaskoski supports my assertion by stating, "Wright and Bulosan wrote to inform as well as persuade, to enlighten their readers about what life was like, in fact, for African Americans and Asians in the United States" (Jaskoski 241). In her essay, Jaskoski primarily points to the literary influence Wright's work had on Bulosan. And although she affirms, "the aptness of the

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influence stemmed from genuine parallels in the lives and conditions of the men and their communities," she asserts that the construction of America Is in the Heart is clearly indebted to the vision of Richard Wright in his constructed autobiography—Black Boy (Jaskoski 239).2

First, the relationship and parallels between Carlos Bulosan and Richard Wright begin by observing that both men were authors, poets, and activists. America Is in the Heart and Black Boy open with Bulosan's life in the Philippines and Wright's life in the South. America became for Bulosan the promise of a new future that the North signified for Wright. Bulosan came to America at the age of seventeen in 1930 and Wright moved to the North (by way of Chicago) at the age of nineteen in 1927. Like many others before them, their move to America and to the North signified a desire to find liberty, providing an opportunity for Wright and Bulosan to pursue their dreams of becoming writers. Yet, Wright was seeking much more. He saw a move to the North as an opportunity to reclaim his humanity as a man free from the objectified image of the "Negro" or the "black boy" endemic within a hostile and violent Jim Crow south.

Among the violent encounters Wright witnessed perpetrated against Blacks in the South was the murder of his Uncle Hoskins—killed by Whites who wanted him to quit his liquor business (64). Another encounter Wright describes is the death of Bob, a black man, caught with a white female prostitute. Wright states that Bob—who was taken to a road and shot—"had been caught by the white death, the threat of which hung over every male black in the South" (203). The significance of both Uncle Hoskins' and Bob's death to Wright would be the revelation and immediacy of "white terror" (64). He writes:

What I had heard [Bob's death] altered the look of the world, induced in me a temporary paralysis of will and impulse. The penalty of death awaited me if I made a false move and I wondered if it was worth-while to make any move at all. The things that influenced my conduct as a Negro did not have to happen to me directly; I needed but to hear of them to feel their full effects in the deepest layers of my consciousness... (203)

Because of the "threat" of violence, instigated by Whites toward Blacks, Wright contextualizes an environment of a Jim Crow south where survival for Blacks was dependent

2 Bulosan makes reference to Wright in America Is in the Heart as he recalls Wright's inability to check out library books. Bulosan reflects, "I was fortunate to find work in a library and to 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).
upon maintaining a facade that assumed they agreed that their place was that of an inferior class of people. In a dialogue with his classmate, Griggs, Wright articulates this facade. Griggs states:

>'You act around white people as if you didn't know that they were white. And they see it.'
>'Oh Christ, I can't be a slave,' I said hopelessly.
>'But you've got to eat,' he said.
>'Yes, I got to eat.'
>'Then start acting like it....
>'When you're in front of white people, think before you act, think before you speak. Your way of doing things is all right among our people, but not for white people. They won't stand for it....
>
[Wright contemplates] What Griggs was saying was true, but it was simply utterly impossible for me to calculate, to scheme, to act to plot all the time... (218-219).

Although Wright understood the consequences for those who did not "stay in their place," the passage above reflects his inability and refusal to assume an inferior position to Whites. Thus, he recognized a necessity to move north and leave his southern environment.

The North would provide not only an opportunity to pursue Wright's ambitions to become a writer but also it would provide him with the inspiration necessary for living. He reflects, "by imagining a place [the North] where everything was possible, I kept hope alive in me. But where had I got this notion of doing something in the future, of going away from home and accomplishing something that would be recognized by others...” (199). Wright's amazement at his desire to dream signifies how the environment of the South suffocates the hopes and dreams of most Blacks. As Wright explained in an interview (1945), ""the environment the South creates is too small to nourish human beings, especially Negro human beings. Some may escape the general plight and grow up, but it is a matter of luck"" (Fabre 65). Wright's ability to dream, in addition to his physical move north, made him one of the "lucky" ones. In another interview (1945), explaining his intent behind the construction of Black Boy, Wright states, “I do want to tell how I came to feel that those events [as selected by Wright in Black Boy] possessed enough importance to compel me to write about them; how it was possible for me to feel that my life had a meaning which my Jim Crow,
southern environment denied" (Fabre 81). Hence, Black Boy is Wright's desire to use his personal success to help liberate mentally (if not physically) those who were not as "lucky."

Consequently, Wright's move to the North was an opportunity to satisfy his perpetual "hungrers" described in Black Boy. First, he illustrates hunger as his physical lack of nourishment—intensified after his father leaves the family: "I would feel hunger nudging my ribs, twisting my empty guts until they ached" and "There were hours when hunger would make me weak, would make me sway while walking..." (16, 149). Second, he illustrates hunger as his ongoing state of restlessness as a man seeking mental nourishment that he understood he could never achieve in the South. He writes, "All my life I had been full of a hunger for a new way to live" (452).

Undoubtedly, the construction of Carlos Bulosan's America Is in the Heart owes a great deal to the construction of Wright's Black Boy, which would have a profound impact on Bulosan. Helen Jaskoski observes how the two texts parallel in literary strategies from the use of folklore, symbolism and themes recognizing how both authors have manipulated autobiography to heighten and articulate social concerns (Jaskoski 239-241). Furthermore, Oscar V. Campomanes and Todd S. Gernes observe that through Wright's experiences as a racialized subject in America, Bulosan was able to understand ways in which race privileged some and excluded others:

Reading the work of other authors, however, such as Richard Wright, represents his [Bulosan] 'formal search' for aesthetic form, his probing of social, cultural and intellectual contexts, his sharpened structural perception of the realities of exploitation and oppression in America, and his musing over the scattered pieces of a shattered American dream. (Campomanes and Gernes 25)

Among the themes that Bulosan would capitalize on would be Wright's literal and metaphorical use of "hunger," experienced both physically and emotionally. As P. C. Morantte observes, "he [Bulosan] resolved to see hunger, think hunger, live hunger, love hunger, hate hunger..." (Morantte 129). Bulosan reflects, "I can say that my insatiable hunger for knowledge and human affection were the two vital forces that made my days of great loneliness and starvation a frantic determination to live" (236). Here, Bulosan juxtaposes his physical hunger with emotional hunger (i.e. of knowledge and affection)

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3 Harper and Row originally separated Wright's autobiography into two parts: Black Boy, set in the South; and American Hunger, set in the North.
articulating how both are imperative to his will to live. In another scene, Bulosan references his desire to understand those within his community as a "hunger for the truth" (144). Still further, after reuniting with his brother, Macario (based on his real brother, Aurelio), in America, he states, "Carlos! He [Macario] had changed my name, too! Everything was changing. Why?...I looked at my brother sidelong but said nothing. Suddenly I felt hungry and lonely and tired" (130). While a theme of "hunger" clearly parallels Wright's book, Morantte observes that Bulosan's emergence into America amid the Depression created a milieu of hunger: "Carlos was living in the thirties in which a hungry generation, a lost generation was immersed, or was drowning in an ocean of economic and social hungers" (Morantte 129).

Another theme that Bulosan would utilize from Wright is a theme of "flight." Wright's use of the theme describes his desire to escape the objectification and restrictions placed on Blacks within the South. While Wright would literally flee to the North, he was also fleeing "white terror" (previously referenced). He states, "This [the South] was the culture from which I sprang. This was the terror from which I fled" (303).

Similarly, Bulosan's use of the theme of flight literally signifies his consistent traveling from place to place seeking employment as well as describing his desire to seek an environment where he could feel mentally free. He reflects, "I had been fleeing from state to state, but now I hoped to gather the threads of my life together. Was there no end to this flight?" (149) In another scene, he contemplates, "While I was fleeing from the barbarity of the two Filipinos in Montana, I was also trying to escape from the barbarian that was myself. It took me a little lifetime to fight against the death of myself, to fight the slow decay that devoured me like a cancer" (152). The significance of his theme of "flight" is that Bulosan understands the implications of remaining within an environment of terror and violence. But like Wright, Bulosan describes how a belief that his hostile surroundings were temporary allowed him to escape the vicious cycle of violence, in which other Filipinos found themselves trapped. He, too, was among the few "lucky" ones. While witnessing a violent fight between two Filipinos, he explains:

I had not seen this sort of brutality in the Philippines...I was not shocked when I saw

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4 While my analysis has been intended to parallel *America Is in the Heart* with *Black Boy*, Campomanes and Gernes observe that a theme of "flight" within *America Is in the Heart* parallels Wright's *Native Son* (Campomanes and Gernes 27). Oscar V. Campomanes and Todd S. Gernes, "Two Letters from America: Carlos Bulosan and the Act of Writing," *MELUS* 15.3 (Fall 1988): 15-46.
that my countrymen had become ruthless toward one another, and this sudden impact of cruelty made me insensate to pain and kindness, so that it took me a long time to wholly trust other men. As time went by I became as ruthless as the worst of them, and I became afraid that I would never feel like a human being again. Yet no matter what bestiality encompassed my life, I felt sure that somewhere, sometime, I would break free. This faith kept me from completely succumbing to the degradation into which many of my countrymen had fallen. (109)

Thus, as Wright and Bulosan (implicated by race) sought to save themselves from their oppressive environments, they would use their talent—as writers—to "save," or rather, empower their respective communities by challenging an American society for their objectifications of "Negroes" and "Filipinos."

The second point of this chapter observes Black Boy and America Is in the Heart as instruments of resistance. Bulosan explains, "The time had come, I felt, for me to utilize my experiences in written form. I had something to live for now, and to fight the world with; and I was no longer afraid of the past. I felt that I would not run away from myself again" (306). Similarly, Wright proclaims, "I would hurl words into the darkness and wait for an echo, and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of the hunger of life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressively human" (453). Like Wright, who explains his desire to "reveal the meaning of Negro experience," Bulosan would reveal the meaning of "Filipino" experience (416). In the examples following, I view resistance by recognizing that not only do Wright and Bulosan document a history of racism, but also they humanize suffering by vocalizing the complexities of lives that were pushed into degradation consequential to an exclusive American society. In addition to the resistance that Campomanes and Gernes observe in Bulosan's (and Wright's) "act of writing" as "an act of breaking silence, of bearing witness to the struggles not merely of the Filipinos but of all oppressed peoples in America striving for liberty, autonomy, wholeness, and self-worth," I place emphasis on also recognizing the significance of Wright's and Bulosan's interpretations (Campomanes and Gernes 24).

Among the events that Wright and Bulosan would "bear witness to" and interpret was the appeal of the Communist Movement to nonwhites—including Wright and Bulosan (The Communist Party made a decision to recruit Blacks and other minorities after World War I.).
They would find themselves influenced by the Communist ideology only later to find themselves blacklisted during the McCarthy era witch-hunts of the 1950s. The inclusion of Wright's and Bulosan's participation within the Communist Movement in their autobiographies is a way in which to articulate the disillusionment felt by the masses of nonwhites whose exclusion from American society prompted them to seek refuge in the Communist Party's promises of equality. Wright and Bulosan would use their experiences within the movement as another way to interpret the plight of Blacks and Asians in America. Their interest in the Communist Movement resulted in their desire to seek solutions towards the dream of a more inclusive American society. However, as Bulosan saw a hopeful future, Wright perceived that in many ways his experiences within the Movement (in the North) were a continuation of his hostile southern environment.

In describing Bulosan's interest in the Communist Movement, P.C. Morantte writes: "Communism had fascinated him very much, and the more he read about it the more he thought of anchoring his views of solving the ills of the working class on the communist program of ameliorating mankind" (Morantte 127). Despite his interest, Bulosan thought the Communist Party began by appealing to Filipinos for all the wrong reasons. He describes the Movement as having a "false start" for it created a "proletarian pretense" or what he describes as "working class arrogance" among specific Filipinos (293). He reflects, "I can now say that communism among Filipinos had a false start. It was propagated by stupid little men, anti-Filipino" (293). In addition, Bulosan (like Wright) began to feel the separation the Party was creating between himself and other Communists by branding Bulosan an "intellectual." Bulosan explains, "They sneered at me because I was now showing signs of being an 'intellectual'—this word they used contemptuously behind my back" (292). But unlike Wright, Bulosan remained hopeful in the Movement despite his observations of its flaws. He states:

But the Communist Party had contributed something definite toward the awakening of Filipinos on the West Coast. Even when it had entirely forsaken them, a few of the more enlightened members gathered the carcass of their hope in socialism and tried to breath a new life into it. I felt that I belonged to this second phase of the Communist movement among Filipinos, that I would draw inspiration and courage from it to withstand the confusion and utter futility of my own life. (293)
Like Bulosan, the Communist Movement's ideas appealed to Wright. In *Ordeal of a Native Son*, Addison Gayle explains that Wright was not so much against "Communism as of Communists" (Gayle 166). Gayle explains, "He was not opposed to their objectives, but to their means, to their cynicism, and most of all to their authoritarianism" (Gayle 166).

As Wright found himself drawn to the Communist ideology that promoted unity among Whites and Blacks, he felt that the white Communists were unable to make the connection between themselves and the masses they were supposed to be helping. He writes, "In their efforts to recruit masses, they had missed the meaning of the lives of the masses, had conceived of people in too abstract a manner" (377). According to Wright, they "idealized" Blacks rather than trying to understand their perspectives (399). Thus, Wright intended to build a bridge for communication between the two by writing a "series of biographical sketches of Negro Communists" (379). His intent for the sketches, however, would be misunderstood. He explains, "I wanted to voice the words in them [Black Communists] that they could not say, to be a witness for their living. And they were wondering if I were in league with the police!" (398). Wright would discover that not only white but also black Communists "were more fearful of my [his] ideas than they would have been had I [he] held a gun on them," for "ideas" indicated independent thinking that challenged the Communist's ideology sought in silencing individuality (399). He reflects, "I had spent a third of my life traveling from the place of my birth to the North just to talk freely, to escape the pressure of fear. And now I was facing fear again..." (406). Thus, Wright's experiences with the Communist Party created a different reality that challenged his previous perceptions of what life would be like in the North. According to Wright, "the ethics of Communism were as grounded in authoritarianism as those of Jim Crow" (Gayle 151).

In addition, Wright would understand that the problem of color was as much a part of the North as it was in the South. In witnessing the different reactions of Northern black men with Southern black men, he saw that in many ways racism had the same psychological consequences on Blacks as they fought against a society that insisted upon their inferiority. Wright conveys this in the following passage:

Color hate defined the place of black life as below that of white life; and the black man, responding to the same dreams as the white man, strove to bury within his heart his awareness of this difference because it made him lonely and afraid. Hated by whites and being an organic part of the culture that hated him, the black man
grew in turn to hate in himself that which others hated in him. But pride would make him hide his self-hate, for he would not want whites to know that he was so thoroughly conquered by them that his total life was conditioned by their attitude; but in the act of hiding his self-hate, he could not help but hate those who evoked his self-hate in him. So each part of his day would be consumed in a war with himself...(313).

As black men in the South had "acted" in order to survive, black men in the North also "acted," but in different ways and for different reasons. Wright describes this covering of self-contempt as a perpetual cycle of hate. While racism in the North was subtler than the South, the implications were clearly evident. Therefore, Wright felt it necessary to provide a perspective of the North that challenged the myth—held by many southern Blacks—that the North was "the Promised Land" or as David Bradley asserts, "the Land of the Lincoln Liberator—the birthplace of Yankees who died to make men free" (Bradley vi). While *American Hunger* describes "an emotional isolation that I [Wright] had not known in the depths of the hate-ridden South," he began to challenge a myth of the North in his earlier book *12 Million Black Voices* (1941) (Wright 399). In this book, Wright would provide details of the appalling living conditions found in the northern city of Chicago. He describes the overcrowded and run-down tenement buildings or "kitchenettes" where landlords would take, for example, a seven room apartment and sell as seven individual rooms (Wright 104). He writes:

> The kitchenette is our prison, our death sentence without a trial, the new form of mob violence that assaults not only the lone individual, but all of us, in its ceaseless attacks. The kitchenette, with its filth and foul air, with its one toilet for thirty or more tenants, kills our black babies so fast that in many cities twice as many of them die as white babies. The kitchenette is the seed bed for scarlet fever, dysentery, typhoid, tuberculosis, gonorrhea, syphilis, pneumonia, and malnutrition. (106-107)

Consequently, Wright's experiences in the South and the North allowed him to look

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5 In *White Man Listen!,* Richard Wright states, "...the situation of their [Asians and Africans] lives evokes in them an almost unconscious tendency to hide their deepest reactions from those who they fear would penalize them if they suspected what they really felt. Do I mean to imply that Asians and Africans and American Negroes are not honest people, that they are agents of duplicity? They are about as honest as anybody else, but they are cautious, wise, and do not wish to bring undue harm upon themselves. Hence, they act" (Wright 18).

6 This is reminiscent of Bulosan's dialogue with Miss Strandon regarding Abraham Lincoln.
at America critically. He would find little hope in a country espousing rhetoric of freedom and equality for everyone, but limited to only some. He states, "I feel that America's past is too shallow, her national character too superficially optimistic, her very morality too suffused with color hate for her to accomplish so vast and complex a task. Culturally the Negro represents a paradox: Though he is an organic part of the nation, he is excluded by the entire tide and direction of American culture" (320). His critique of America led him to speak for the alienation felt by a majority of Blacks who, according to Wright, "are told in a language they cannot possibly misunderstand that their native land is not their own" (355). He states, "My knowledge of how Negroes react to their plight makes me declare that no man can possibly be individually guilty of treason, that an insurgent act is but a man's desperate answer to those who twist his environment so that he cannot fully share the spirit of his native land. Treason is a crime of the state" (355-56). Here, Wright attempts to hold America accountable for the conditions of racism and poverty instigated by a society that consistently devalues the humanity of those that are not white.

Similarly, Bulosan's forced exclusion from American society would lead to a critical view of America by recognizing the destruction of many within his community. For example, as he reunites with his brother, Macario, in a poolroom in America, he reflects, "I found my brother in a strange world. I could stand the poverty and hunger, but this desperate cynicism disturbed me. Were these Filipinos revolting against American society in this debased form? Was there no hope for them?" (133) In another scene, Bulosan describes what life was like to live in "the red light district, where pimps and prostitutes were as numerous as the stars and the sky" (134). He writes, "I almost died within myself. I died many deaths in these surroundings, where man was indistinguishable from beast" (135). Bulosan's interpretation of Filipino self-destruction, however, is that it is a direct result from a society that explicitly devalued the humanity of Filipinos. He explains, "I knew that our decadence was imposed by a society alien to our character and inclination, alien to our heritage and history" (135).

But Bulosan's critique of American society, beginning with pessimism, eventually turns to optimism by perceiving that the exclusion of Filipinos from American society was temporary. Turning to history and reflecting on the parallel between the story of Moses from the Old Testament and the current plight of Filipinos in America, he perceived that the Filipino struggle was a sacrifice that would lead to the eventual inclusion of future immigrants into American life. Thus, through lectures, he began to share his perceptions
with other Filipinos, intending to give them hope by helping to make sense of their nonsensical environment that was filled with racism, poverty and violence. He writes:

"All these persecutions happened a long time ago in an ancient land,' I told them. 'But they are significant to us because we are undergoing similar persecutions. We who came to the United States as immigrants are Americans too. All of us were immigrants—all the way down the line. We are Americans all who have toiled for this land, who have made it rich and free. But we must not demand from America, because she is still our unfinished dream. Instead we must sacrifice for her: let her grow into bright maturity through our labors. If necessary we must give up our lives that she might grow unencumbered" (312).

While the message is directed toward other Filipinos, the significance of this passage is that Bulosan is articulating that the immigrant experience is not specific to Filipinos. He reminds America that she is made up of immigrants seeking the same freedom and opportunity that Filipinos are seeking. Like Wright who challenges the "degrees of Americanism (353)" given to Blacks, Bulosan challenges (and reinterprets) a notion of who is (and is not) included within a definition of "American." In addition, the significance of the passage parallels the intent of my thesis by reinterpreting an American history, as documented by these two autobiographies, crystallizing moments of resistance rather than victimization through the construction of *Black Boy* and *America Is in the Heart.*

Other moments of resistance as demonstrated by Wright and Bulosan are the inclusions of proactive people (rather than passive victims) seeking substantial change amid the victimizers (See Evangelista's reference below). For example, as Bulosan includes the happenings within the Labor Movement, he records a dialogue spoken by his friend Jose, who asserts the humanity denied to Filipinos: "This is a war between labor and capital. To our people, however, it is something else. It is an assertion of our right to be human beings again, Carl" (186). In another scene Bulosan explains, "I went from town to town, forming workers' classes and working in the fields. I knew that I was also educating myself. I was learning from the men. I was rediscovering myself in their lives. They had been exiled from me for years. But now we were together again" (313). Bulosan articulates the efforts of working class Filipinos who organized, went on strikes and through their writings challenged a capitalistic and racist society. Susan Evangelista agrees: "He [Bulosan] sees himself, his friends, and his countrymen not merely as passive victims of racism and poverty, but as
thinking, acting individuals, who create their own history, and indeed part of American history, as they work through their lives" (Evangelista 28). John Jae-Nam Han also writes, "...he [Bulosan] fights racism through writing and through actively participating in the workers' movement" (Han 31).

In *Black Boy*, for example, Wright's inclusion of the "Garveyites" also provides a perspective of those resisting within American society. While he does not agree with them in their ideology, he admires them for their passion and assertiveness by finding empowerment within the Black identity (ironically, this chapter argues this is what Wright was also doing):

The Garveyites had embraced a totally racialistic outlook which endowed them with a dignity that I had never seen before in Negroes. On the walls of their dingy flats were maps of Africa and India and Japan, pictures of Japanese generals and admirals, portraits of Marcus Garvey in gaudy regalia, the faces of colored men and women from all parts of the world. I gave no credence to the ideology of Garveyism, it was, rather the emotional dynamics of its adherents that evoked my admiration...It was when the Garveyites spoke fervently of building their own country, of someday living within the boundaries of a culture of their own making, that I sensed the passionate hunger of their lives, that I caught a glimpse of the potential strength of the American Negro. (337)

In representing Blacks who sought to reclaim their heritage such as the Garveyites, Wright would "destroy the myth of the innately 'happy Negro,' a stereotype used excessively to argue the minimal effects of racial oppression" (Fabre 279). Wright explains, "If you can feel that he [the Negro] is so different that he is just naturally happy and he smiles automatically you kind of exclude him, in an ironic sense from the human race and therefore you don't have to treat him exactly like you would treat other people and you don't have to feel bad about mistreating him" (Fabre 65).

My final point in this chapter is intended to analyze the construction of *Black Boy* and *America Is in the Heart* (that have been both embraced and rejected by critics) by recognizing how Wright's and Bulosan's intent parallels (and foreshadows) the formation of contemporary identities rooted in an "identity politics," which is the assumption "that an identity must first be in place in order for political interests to be elaborated and, subsequently, political action to be taken" (Butler 181).
First, in exploring the criticism behind the texts, Helen Jaskoski explains, "Critics engaged with Bulosan's texts have attempted compromise formulations similar to those put forward for Wright's. [Margarita] Orendain calls America Is in the Heart 'fictionalized autobiography,' a form characterized by 'realism'" (Jaskoski 239). However, in Carlos Bulosan: The Issue of Honesty, Miguel Bernad writes, "The case against Bulosan is two-fold. He has been accused of plagiarism (which is a form of dishonesty); and he has been (or should be) accused of telling fictitious tales and palming them off as true" (Bernard 103).

Similarly, Michel Fabre explains that the reception of Wright's book sparked much controversy for its fictitious accounts, quoting the words of Mississippi congressman Bilbo [1945] who called it a "damnable lie from beginning to end" (Fabre 282). Furthermore, Addison Gayle writes, "condemnation of the book was strident and intense" (Gayle 173) and cites Benjamin Davis who while initially "opened with praise for the intention and the theme of the work...thrust and counterthrust were directed at the author—at the book's exaggerations" (Gayle 172). But in Helen Jaskoski's view, "Fictionalizing tends to vitiate the claims of such works to a moral imperative based on the documentation of actual evil" (Jaskoski 241).

Like Jaskoski, Fabre recognizes that Wright specifically exaggerated scenes to heighten an understanding of social concerns faced by Blacks in the South. Regarding Wright's description of his experiences in the local saloons, Fabre writes, "He [Wright] was never really a delinquent, despite his effort to make us believe so by exaggerating his depraved behavior to underline the harmful effects of racial and economic oppression" (Fabre 13). Still further, Fabre explains that although Wright may have distorted the chronology of his employment at the Optical Company and recognizes that "whether or not the optician was actually from Illinois and, therefore, against racial prejudice," the inclusion of this moment in Wright's life was an attempt to capture the "white terror expos[ing] to Richard the frailty of his plans and the emptiness of his hopes. The racial system excluded him from achieving the American ideal... " (Fabre 52).

While the question of "truth" and the relationship to how Bulosan and Wright constructed their autobiographies has been problematic for some, we would be mistaken to

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6 According to Elaine Kim, the criticism had a profound impact on Bulosan. She writes, "Also disheartening to him [Bulosan] 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" (Kim 46).

7 Fabre states, "it seems likely that it was during the summer of 1924 that Richard worked for the American Optical Company" (Fabre 52).
assume that the convergence between facts with fiction is something specific to Bulosan's and Wright's autobiographies. Other authors would address not only the conflicts of memory but also the limits to a definitive notion of what does (and does not) consist of "truth." For example, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* deliberately blurs genres of storytelling, myths, fact, and fiction reconstructing for the reader the complexities of growing up in two separate and contradictory worlds as a Chinese-American. Similarly, bell hooks explains that the construction of her memoir, *Wounds of Passion*, is indebted to Audre Lorde's concept of "biomythography," which challenges "notions of absolute truth" (hooks xix).

My interest, however, in addressing a notion of "truth" in relation to Bulosan's and Wright's texts is intended to recognize the divergence in their motivation from contemporary minority authors. Through our 21st century eyes, we fail to remember that Bulosan and Wright wrote at a time when the voices of nonwhites were nearly invisible (in spite of the accomplishments of Douglass and Zitkala-Sa). I argue that authorial intent—despite Roland Barthes' claim of the "Death of the Author"—is imperative in contextualizing the construction of *Black Boy* and *America Is in the Heart* not only because of the invisibility of nonwhite writers when Wright and Bulosan wrote their autobiographies, but also because their intention is consequential in understanding how persons of color have transformed a perception of race. While historically race denoted inferiority through racial identifications of those that were not White, race has evolved into denoting self-affirmation for persons of color through a notion of racial "identities."

This transformation is evident by observing how Wright and Bulosan embraced a role of "representative" for African Americans and Asian Americans by articulating the pain, humiliation and suffering felt by many within their communities to mainstream America. Through their voice they would personalize an interpretation of a collection of events authenticating and affirming the oppression and exploitation of many whose stories were left

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8 In *Interpreting the Self*, Diane Bjorklund writes, "Since the 1950s, literary critics such as Roy Pascal have explored the nature of truth in autobiography, and they have recast it as both creative act and literary genre. The subjectivity of autobiography has become a topic for analysis, particularly the fine line between fact and fiction when persons tell their life stories. Critics now recognize that an autobiographer faces complex and intriguing problems of self-interpretation and self-construction" (Bjorklund x).

9 bell hooks explains biomythography (as invented by Audre Lorde) as "move[ing] away from the notion of autobiography as an exact accounting of life. Encouraging readers to see dreams and fantasies as part of the material we use to invent the self..." (hooks xix)

10 The editors of the *Norton Anthology* introduce Barbara Christian's essay "The Race for Theory" as they state, Christian questions the elitist jargon and opaque style of postmodern theory, with its proclamation of the death of the author, should become prominent at the same moment when the works of black men and women are just gaining recognition" (Christian 2255).
untold, aiming to manifest humanity to those numb to the humanity of persons of color. Jerry Ward affirms that Wright's autobiography "illuminate[d] how obscene was denial of access to full participation in the democratic process by law, custom, and the practice of race" and argues that Black Boy explains "the universal potentials of the person who is socialized to be black and male in an oppressive society" (Ward xvi). Similarly, Carey McWilliams asserts America Is in the Heart "reflects a collective life experience of thousands of Filipino immigrants" and argues that it "is a deeply moving account of what it is like to be treated as a criminal in a strange and alien society—one to which the immigrant has been drawn precisely because of the attractions of its ideals" (McWilliams vii).

For Bulosan and Wright, the significance of their experiences becomes no greater or lesser than the lives of those within their respective communities. Hence, their autobiographies served a greater purpose than merely a reflection of their lives. They would see their lives as a catalyst for change. By documenting a history for Asian Americans and African Americans that has been historically silenced, their books are a "literature of witness" (Jaskoski 241).

My argument is that contemporary identities such as African Americans and Asian Americans owe a great deal to the vision of Wright and Bulosan who constructed their identity as a way to unify the many unheard voices. As Wright articulated "the significance of being Southern, black, and male in America," (Ward xi) Bulosan reflects what it means to be Filipino, "Oriental," and an immigrant. Stuart Hall describes this construction as "positioning," referencing the ways in which persons of color transform their racial identities as a consequence of their oppressive histories (Hall 395). Hall explains, "the past is constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth. Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture...Hence, there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position..." (Hall 395).

By positioning Wright's and Bulosan's lives as the "Black" and "Asian" experience, the result was a significant challenge to the negative perceptions of these racial groups endemic within an exclusive American society. In so doing, they resignified these identifications by providing them with a history that reclaimed their humanity. Ultimately, the embracing of their racial identities also resignified the meaning of "American."
CONCLUSION

In "The Art of Fiction: An Interview," in Ralph Ellison's book *Shadow and Act*, Ellison is asked, "Would you say that the search for identity is primarily an American theme?" His response, "It is the American theme. The nature of our society is such that we are prevented from knowing who we are. It is still a young society, and this is an integral part of its development" (Ellison 177).

I would argue that the "nature" within America that Ellison describes is the intersections of the constructs of race, class, and gender in relation to historical interpretations. This relationship is responsible for producing an American hegemony based upon the ideology of Eurocentrism. In addition, it has created a binary of superiority and inferiority that has systematically excluded nonwhites from an American identity. Thus, as we look to the experiences of those who have been historically excluded, we can begin to understand how this has impacted the formation of contemporary group identities.

While Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* documents the historical exclusion of Asians in America, Richard Wright's *Black Boy* documents the historical exclusion of Blacks in America. In choosing the genre of autobiography, both authors have intended to humanize the pain and suffering felt by those who have been victimized by racism.

My aim, however, in writing this thesis has been to challenge our historical interpretations that identify nonwhites solely as victims by turning to history and find strength in those that have resisted in the midst of a legacy of oppression and exploitation. I am interested in challenging the Eurocentrism endemic within American society by rethinking the role of nonwhites as vital contributors in the construction of this nation. By looking at the historical patterns evident within *America Is in the Heart* and *Black Boy*, one can see consistent resistance to the inferior representations imposed upon them by society. Both Bulosan and Wright are fueled by the message that as an "Oriental" and a "Negro," they do not belong. Refusing to remain silent and accept society's perception of them, their resistance crystallizes in the "act of writing."¹

While both men would record their personal transformations, their deliberate decision to posit themselves as "representatives" for their race crystallized an understanding of what it meant to be Asian and Black within America. I am not saying, however, that we should

¹ Oscar V. Campomanes and Todd S. Gernes, "Two Letters from America: Carlos Bulosan and the Act of Writing," *MELUS* 15.3 (Fall 1988): 15-46.
assume that all Asian Americans and Black Americans think, feel, and act collectively. What I am saying is Bulosan's and Wright's desire to speak for those within their community, who were silenced within American society, was instrumental in shaping the impact of contemporary group identities.

Consequently, the significance in both books is in recognizing that while race has historically been intended to divide Whites from those that are not White, Bulosan and Wright are among those that have been the catalyst for "resignifying" the meaning of race. Both would embrace their racial identities in the midst of a society that explicitly stated their inferiority. Henry Yu writes:

The importance of abstractions such as race, place, nation, or culture marked how identity as a concept and a set of categories acted as a way of symbolically and imaginatively sharing memories and experiences. The labels were seemingly static—I am from China, or I am a midwesterner—but each bespoke an implied history that could lead to identification and empathy. In other words, the categories through which we now understand ethnicity and identity are telescoped from narratives of geographic origin and migrational histories. (Yu 105-106)

Influenced by Wright's desire to "reveal the meaning of Negro experience," Bulosan would undergo a transformation as a Filipino to also identifying himself within a collective identity as an "Oriental," foreshadowing the emergence of a collective Asian American (or Asian Pacific American) identity constructed within the Asian American Movement (416). As Yu observes:

The creation of the Asian American studies in the 1970s was a powerful social and political movement that tried to distance itself from the theories and texts of the early Oriental Problem researchers. It is ironic, therefore, that the very rise of cultural and ethnic identity as a means of self-description and understanding was tied to the theories of the Oriental Problem that Asian American studies was trying to repudiate...The desire for cultural identity as a way of self-understanding was not created by Chicago sociologists, but they supplied the dominant language through which identity would be described and analyzed. (Yu 192-93)

Similarly, in this thesis, I have tried to rethink our interpretations of persons of color as
"resisters" and not as "victims" by pointing to ways in which Carlos Bulosan and Richard Wright have used the language of their "oppressors" in such a way as to redefine their position within America. Through this reinterpretation, empowerment is sought in understanding that although we may not be able to remove ourselves from the impositions of history; we can still find ways of empowerment, self-affirmation and resistance by redefining who we are.
WORKS CITED


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