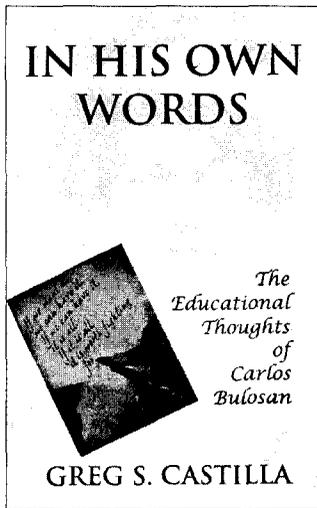


## Two Book Reviews

In His Own Words. The Educational Thoughts  
of Carlos Bulosan By Greg S. Castilla  
Naga City, Philippines: Ateneo de Naga  
University Press, 2003 168 pp.

BY PAZ VERDADES M. SANTOS



*In His Own Words: The Educational Thoughts of Carlos Bulosan* is a book based on Greg Castilla's dissertation for a PhD in Multicultural Education from the University of Washington in Seattle in 1995. In it, Castilla, a graduate of Class '66 of the Ateneo de Naga High School and Ateneo de Manila University in the early '70s, draws parallels between Bulosan's vision of society and the principles of multicultural education.

Not all dissertations deserve publication in book form, but this one certainly does, and for many reasons. It is of value to scholars of both education and literature in the Philippines, for Castilla deploys theories

in education to read the work of Bulosan. He likewise uses literary texts and a method of literary criticism to unveil an educational ideology.

Castilla's summary of issues in multicultural education, his conceptual framework and his methodology inform as well as guide education students. Multicultural education may seem to be primarily a concern in North America, Australia and Europe, where immigration is a social issue. But multicultural education is also important in the Philippines, a country which exports a big chunk of its population to the West to support families back home and keep the Philippine economy afloat. It is this Filipino diaspora which could be the eventual beneficiary of a non-racist, equal, free and just system preached by Filipino-American writer Carlos Bulosan and the gurus of multicultural education. Furthermore, the Philippines is also multicultural,

though it does not seem so, dominated as it is by a monocultural power structure of Catholic elite based in its northern islands. Multicultural education, or education that considers cultural pluralism and diversity with the end of eliminating inequalities in society, is certainly not irrelevant in this poor, war-torn country.

For Bulosan scholars, Castilla's review of literature, references and methodology in the two appendices provide a good overview for those who would embark on yet another study of this controversial Fil-Am. For example, Castilla calls attention to studies of Bulosan by Zabala and Alquizola, aside from those by Epifanio San Juan Jr. and Susan Evangelista which Philippine academics are familiar with. Summaries and highlights of the works he reviews are helpful information for teachers of Philippine literature, many of whom teach a poem or a chapter from Bulosan's novel.

Even for scholars of the Filipino diaspora or those studying other Filipino writers, the method of content analysis should be helpful.

The meat of the book is in the third chapter, "Betrayed by His Own Dreams." Castilla uses Bulosan's own words to show that American society in the 1930s was racist, corrupt, dehumanizing and economically unjust. However, Castilla points out that despite this grim scenario, Bulosan remained optimistic that people would eventually be free and racially equal.

The question that readily comes to mind after reading this chapter is this: Have things changed since Bulosan's time? My own perception, based on media and friends in the U.S., is that not much has changed essentially. Racism seethes below the surface, boiling over internally through discrimination of "ethnic looking" Americans (especially Middle Eastern-looking ones post 9/11), and to explode abroad as in the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. All the other ills of American society pointed out by Bulosan also continue to exist, for if not, why then the continuing passionate struggle for multicultural education?

Castilla presents in counterpoint the ideology of Bulosan and the theories of multicultural education in the last two chapters. He shows how Bulosan's ideas on education are a "conceptual progenitor" of multicultural theories. It is not too difficult to see the pedagogical principles in Bulosan's writings nor to summarize the tenets of multicultural education. However, focusing on the pedagogical implications of Bulosan's works, and linking these with multicultural education in what

American professor of Ethnic Studies Rick Bonus calls “deft innovation and analytic braiding” is this book’s contribution to scholarship.

The context of Castilla’s book may be America, but the issues of race, ethnicity, class and gender are all too familiar in the Philippines. Reading it may also make Filipinos reflect on whether education in the Philippines is what Bulosan calls the “filth that the culture-mongers teach in the schools [with] Books that are written by the cultural procurers of the ruling class.” (Castilla quoting Bulosan, p. 122) Hopefully not, but when school administrators insist on Harvard or Yale curricula, syllabi, books etc. in the Philippines, I tend to think so. I also tend to think this when I see that Philippine minorities are either absent from or misrepresented in our books and classrooms.

Therefore, though Castilla’s book caters to academics in the U.S., it is also worthwhile reading for those in Philippine government for insights into what type of education and society we must map out for the Philippines.

However, from my viewpoint as a teacher, the book’s best audience in the Philippines would be other teachers, for they then would have another source for educating this generation of aspiring OFWs taking Physical Therapy, Nursing or Caregiving on the truth about the “land of the free and the home of the brave.”



#### SUSAN EVANGELISTA

The idea of **multicultural education** is rather new to us here in the Philippines, and not something we pay much heed to, although we have been celebrating Ramadan with a school holiday throughout the country since 9/11, and elementary school textbooks make occasional reference to the Chinese among us. Maybe we think we don’t really need to consider multiculturalism, as we are more homogenous than, say, American society. On the other hand, we do have profound class differences, and we too are in a situation where a rather limited class controls what goes on in schools — course offerings, syllabi, etc. So perhaps the multiculturalists do have something to say to us after all.

**In His Own Words**, Greg Castilla's new and very interesting book on Carlos Bulosan offers us an original reading of Bulosan, based on how he would relate to present-day multicultural educators. Bulosan was, of course, bicultural in his own right, spending his childhood in Binalonan, Pangasinan, and then immigrating to the United States to function as a field worker, labor organizer and writer for the rest of his too short life. He had to negotiate between two or three cultures — white or sometimes Japanese management, and Filipinos or Mexicans, or black or white workers in labor work. His books — notably **The Laughter of my Father**, and **America is in the Heart**, were read, in translation, in cultures around the world.

Castilla's book starts out detailing Bulosan's "take" on American society, which he found to be racist, unjust and unequal, but which he still felt had some sort of democratic spirit or vision. Bulosan felt, then, that there was hope, that there was a reason to continue the struggle for justice and equality. Castilla then takes a look at the theories of multicultural education of six particular writers, and discovers that they share Bulosan's view of society, including the hopefulness that the democratic vision can be attained. The theory is in fact rooted in the interface between inequality and vision, just as Bulosan's writing was. Castilla then focuses, perhaps too briefly, on the terms of the struggle for both Bulosan and the modern movement for Multicultural Education.

The theoretical backing of multicultural education seems sound enough; it suggests the necessity for an educational plan that deals with a tremendous variety of complex issues: i.e. Castilla points out that an Asian American male student, in assessing his own position in society, would have to recognize that while he is of an often victimized racial grouping, he is also a member of the dominant gender group and may be from the dominant economic class as well. It isn't simply the good guys against the bad guys.

Yet one of the multiculturalists points out that knowledge "is always created and influenced by the social-class position of individuals and groups," and another reminds us that education in America "primarily reflects the perspective and points of view of the victors rather than the vanquished." (Castilla, 122) This presumably means that few school boards or administrations will willingly embrace

multicultural education, and therefore, a great deal of strategizing must be done to make way for this system.

And this brings to mind two earlier educators, Neil Postman, author of **Teaching as a Subversive Activity**, and Paolo Freire, author of **Pedagogy of the Oppressed**. Both were excellent strategizers, although neither was actually faced with an unwilling school board. Both, however, theorized from premises that the multiculturalists would no doubt support.

Postman theorized that to remain healthy, a society **must** have its internal critics — much like the friendly opposition of the British parliament — and since all other governmental institutions are hopelessly conservative and backwards looking, the school system is the only hope. Students, he postulates, must learn to think critically about everything that goes on in their lives. Postman suggests topics, courses, readings and includes long transcripts of actual classroom conversations in which high school students grapple with problems of justice and fairness and goodness. Postman's students make their own classroom rules, and decide how to deal with violations. They generate their own "problems" for investigation and more or less set their own curriculum. Their teachers must be open, willing to learn, willing to let them lead in new directions. The book was a run-away best seller among educators, so there must be some teachers to whom this appeals. Postman did not concern himself with the inevitable flak that such teaching might evoke from administrators and perhaps even parents.

Freire, of course, did not work within the school system but among peasants and workers, teaching literacy along with liberation. He postulated that the oppressed had to liberate themselves by **naming** the world, discovering their own truths. His method of teaching reading through meaningful syllables, starting with FA - VE - LA or slum, and leading learners into discussions of their own lives and meanings, the whys and wherefores of their oppression, is known to many and was particularly popular among the anti-martial law activists of the 70's.

Bulosan was probably closer to Freire, as he taught in the fields and in the canneries, asking Filipino workers and sometimes Mexican, white and black American workers, to figure out their own truths, to credit their own experiences and to

generate their own actions. One can only wish that he had left transcripts like Freire's so modern readers could see how these conversations went.

Bulosan's own writings would be extremely useful in a multicultural classroom, as they deal with an immigrant experience, an outside view of a rather rugged America. Many students other than Filipino would be able to identify equally well with these experiences, or with their modern counterparts. Racism, for instance, is something that has changed in form over the years — at least it is no longer illegal for Filipinos and whites to marry — and it would be very stimulating to get an interracial high school class to document racism as **they** experience it.

Bulosan also has two stories that deal rather directly with education, both of which Castilla discusses: "**As Long as the Grass Shall Grow**", and "**Be American.**" The first deals with a young, idealistic white teacher who does literacy work with the Filipino farm workers until she is literally beaten up and run out of town by vigilantes. Unfortunately, she doesn't have too much time to process these experiences with her students, but readers must suppose that they get the point. The other story deals with an immigrant named Consorcio who arrived in the U.S. full of enthusiasm for learning, determined to go to school and become a citizen. He bought books and tried to go to night classes, but he couldn't read the books and often had to work nights — and found out later that he was racially ineligible for citizenship anyway. So he involved himself in the labor movement and over years of struggle, educated himself in a much more valuable sense. At the same time, while struggling for the dream of equality, he became a **real** American in the most idealistic sense.

What wonderful teaching tools these stories might be!

So there we have it. For anyone who is interested in the Filipino experience in the United States, and the Filipino contribution to the struggle for true democracy; for anyone who is dedicated to education as a tool in the struggle; and for anyone who simply wants a fresh new reading of Carlos Bulosan, Greg Castilla's book is well worth reading. It is productive in all these directions.