

A Homi Bhabhaian Reading of Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart: A Personal History**

Yali Zhang

Shanxi Normal University, Linfen, Shanxi, China

Abstract—Homi Bhabha's concept of simulation is broadly used in the post-colonial literary and cultural criticism. Bhabha's simulation transcends his post-colonial predecessor Said's dichotomic way of thinking in *Orientalism* and makes the disadvantaged power's mild resistance to the hegemonic power become possible. This paper means to give a Homi Bhabhaian reading of Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart: A Personal History*. It explores the strategic interaction between the American colonizers and the Filipino colonized in which Bhabha's simulation serves both as a strategy of control for the colonizers and a strategy of rebellion for the colonized. This strategy embodies an operational process of power and helps Bulosan to realize his initial purpose of writing: "to give literate voice to the voiceless one hundred thousand Filipinos in the US, Hawaii and Alaska".

Index Terms—post-colonial criticism, Carlos Bulosan, *America Is in the Heart: A Personal History*

Carlos Bulosan is one of the most important Filipino American writers in the 1940s. His *America Is in the Heart: A Personal History* was published in 1946 and was once hailed by *Look* as one of the fifty most important American books ever published (Campomanes, 1995). It portrays how Carlos, together with his families, struggled in vain to shake off the poverty nightmare in his Philippine motherland that had been colonized by Spain and America in turn, how they longed for the democracy, the freedom and modern civilization in America as were propagandized by the colonizers and how they were ill-treated, however, when they later on emigrated to America. While the Asian American literature researchers in Chinese mainland have done a huge bulk of postcolonial studies on the works by Chinese-American and Japanese-American writers, we have not yet paid close attention to this Filipino-American writing.

This paper means to explore the strategic interaction between the American colonizers and the Filipino colonized in which Homi Bhabha's simulation serves both as a strategy of rule for the colonizers and a strategy of resistance for the colonized. This strategy embodies an operational process of power and helps Bulosan to realize his initial purpose of writing: "to give literate voice to the voiceless one hundred thousand Filipinos in the US, Hawaii and Alaska (Kim, 1989, p.44).

I. SIMULATION AS A STRATEGY OF CONTROL AND A STRATEGY OF REBELLION

Homi Bhabha's concept of simulation is broadly used in the post-colonial literary and cultural criticism. According to Bhabha, simulation witnesses a power-constructing process. For the colonizers, simulation is an open goal in their imperialistic policy in the first place. They demand that the colonized adopt and internalize their value system. In this regard, simulation is a means for the colonizers to civilize the colonized by asking the colonized to imitate or repeat their culture. Since simulation operates in the affective and ideological realm, it is significantly different from the overt oppression and murdering. "Simulation emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge". (Bhabha, 1994, p.85) The colonizers, at the same time, are both narcissistic and invasive. Through simulation, they do not mean to assimilate the colonized into their equals. Therefore, on the one hand, they inspire the colonized to approach their civilization, on the other, they also, by insisting that the colonized are savage and inferior, deny the approach. Hence, the fundamental purpose for the colonizers to use the simulation strategy is to keep enough distance from the colonized and maintain their hegemony of rule over them. For the colonized, simulation allows them to enter the ambivalent third-space dominated by the colonizers where they manage to discover the inherent contradictions of the colonial discourse and produce certain hybridity variant, "almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha, 1994, p.86), by appropriating and rewriting it. This is the way the colonized realize resolving and subverting the colonial discourse. Simulation, in this regard, like the camouflage practiced in warfare, strategically rebels against the hegemony while effectively protects the rebels. Bhabha's simulation transcends his post-colonial predecessor Said's dichotomic way of thinking in *Orientalism* and makes the disadvantaged power's mild resistance to the hegemonic power become possible.

II. SIMULATION AS STRATEGY OF CONTROL FOR THE AMERICAN COLONIZERS

* This paper is funded by Overseas Returnees Foundation of Shanxi, China (No. 20101466).

A. *Inspiring the Filipino Colonized's Identification*

America Is in the Heart is composed of four parts. The first part is about young Carlos' life in his hometown in the Philippines and the latter three parts shift to America from Carlos' migration during the Economic Depression years all the way through to the breakout of World War II. What is different for Filipino's mobility to America from the mobility of other Asians is that "Filipinos went to the United States because Americans went first to the Philippines" (Bonus, 2000, p.25). "Because of the American influence, everything American was considered to be the best. It is like if you made it to America, you were in heaven" (Bonus, 2000, p.23). What exerts such a great influence upon the Filipinos is America's cultural logic of exceptionalism which can be traced back to the first puritan migrants, who considered themselves as charged with a special mission to build in the New World a church and a society that can serve as a model for the whole world and offer a shelter for any political or religious refugees. This cultural discourse underlies America's subsequent political endeavors at different periods. It exhorts the world to believe that America is a culturally, economically, and politically distinguished nation and it glorifies America's territorial expansion in the 19th century as an altruistic enterprise. In 1898, in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War, the United States brutally took possession of the Philippines over native opposition and uprising, thereby extending its "Manifest Destiny" to Pacific Asia. The often-ignored Philippine-American War (1899-1902) resulted in the death of about a million Filipinos. Yet the United States denied the imperial nature of the conquest and the then President William McKinley translated it into "benevolent assimilation" by declaring "Orphans of the Pacific" cut off from their Spanish fathers and desired by other European powers would now be adopted and protected by the compassionate embrace of the United States" (Alquizola, 1994, p.185). America is thus constructed as a liberal and exceptional father. Peddled by the educational system, the media, the American tourists, artists, and other sojourners in the Philippines, the benevolent policy worked in inspiring the Filipino colonized to identify with American exceptionalism.

More specifically, convinced that education was an effective way to pacify and assimilate the Filipinos, U.S. colonizers introduced a universal public education and revamped Philippine educational institutions and curricula using the American system as its model and English as the language of instruction. The young Filipino students admitted in the schools were not only learning a new language but a new culture. They were taught to regard American culture as superior to any other and American society as the model par excellence for Philippine society. The Carlos family in 1920s, for example, believed that the admission of one of the sons Macario into a public school would bring honor and hope for their poverty-stricken farmer family even though the high educational expense forced them to mortgage, and eventually forfeit their home, scattering the family. Bulosan represents educated Macario's transformation in interesting and subtle ways. When Macario meets his father, he would rather shake hands with his father instead of kissing his hand, the traditional way of greeting and of showing respect to the older generation. Also Macario's opinion on Carlos's long hair reveals indirectly the change of his way of thinking.

"Well, let us go home and I will cut your long hair," said Macario to me.

"Don't you ever cut your hair, brother?"

I was speechless. I was ashamed to say anything.

"He needs it for protection against vicious mosquitoes and flies," said my father. "It is also his shield from the sun in hot summer."

"I will make a gentleman out of him," Macario said. "Wouldn't you like to be a gentleman?" (Bulosan, 1973, p.20-21)

Macario's response on the subject of Carlos's long hair reflects the greater values he places on America's "western" civilization and modernization. The U.S. educational system, which is administered from American's perspectives, has put the indigenous Filipino culture into an inferior and uncivilized position, and it actually has led Filipinos to internalize the ideologies that might work against the indigenous culture of the Philippines.

In addition to school education, the direct and indirect personal contact between the Americans and the Filipinos also works in internalizing America's superiority among Filipino natives. Dalmacio, the Igorot houseboy doing washing and cooking for an American woman teacher, for one, urged Carlos to study English.

There was another American woman who lived in the apartment next door. She had an Igorot houseboy whose name was Dalmacio. She was a teacher in one of the city schools, and the boy, who did her washing and cooking, was one of her pupils. When our work was done for the day, Dalmacio and I would go to the lake and sit on the grass.

"I will soon go to America," he said one day. "I am trying to learn English so that I will not get lost over there."

...

"You don't need money," Dalmacio said. "You could work on the boat. But English is the best weapon. I will teach you if you will do some work for me now and then."

He put a book in my hand and started reading aloud to me.

"Repeat after me," he said. "Don't swallow your words. Blow them out like the Americans."

I repeated after him, uttering strange words and thinking of America. We were reading the story of a homely man named Abraham Lincoln.

"Who is this Abraham Lincoln?" I asked Dalmacio.

"He was a poor boy who became a president of the United States," he said. "He was born in a log cabin and walked miles and miles to borrow a book so that he would know more about his country."

A poor boy became a president of the United States!

Deep down in me something was touched...I was fascinated by the story of this boy who was born in a log cabin and became president of the United States (p.69).

The American master's everyday teaching blunted Dalmacio's awareness of his subordinate position as a houseboy. He mimicked his white master by trying hard to study English well so as to one day go to that promised land. More importantly, he, consciously or unconsciously, served as his master's agent through whom his Filipino compatriot Carlos got fascinated with America as well. Carlos could not help repeating "A poor boy became a president of the United States". Clearly as he said, he got touched at this. The young boy in the story became his ideal ego right at the moment. More accurately, what Carlos desired to get identify with was more the ideal nation that enabled the poor young Lincoln to become the president than Lincoln the individual. "Identification involves the desire to get closer to others by becoming like them" (Issac, 2006, p.126) and a convenient way for Carlos to "become like them" was to go to work as a houseboy for an American woman named Mary Strandon. She was an artist from Iowa and what was unusual in her was that her father fought and died in the Philippine-American war. As the daughter of a former colonizer, Mary soon discovered Carlos' inspired identification and she found a job for him in the library she worked. Carlos was much excited about this new job because his ideal ego Lincoln also frequented libraries to borrow books and the job offered him a strong affinity to Lincoln and to the nation that promised abundant opportunities for people like Lincoln.

B. *Petting the Filipino Colonized*

The identification of the colonized satisfies the narcissistic needs of the colonizers, but the invasive nature of the colonizers prompts them to keep a distance from the colonized so as to permanently subjugate the colonized. Therefore, simulation strategy partly constructs the colonizers as a loving father, partly as an oppressor. In the novel, the colonizers' way of distinguishing themselves from the colonized is to reduce the colonized to affectionately dominated pets whose imposed coarseness sets off the colonizers' self-granted civility.

Carlos and Luciano's experience, in a way, draws a connection between imitating and petting. The brothers once made money by catching and selling parrots. Their bird-catching process interestingly reveals a mimetic chain: they train a parrot to imitate human sound and then use the parrot as a decoy to entrap more birds. These mimic birds, for Carlos brothers, were veritable pets: "We did not catch them for their usefulness, but for the esthetic pleasure we found in observing them" (p.53). While Carlos brothers enjoyed the pleasure of the mimic birds, they might not expect they too were petted when the mimetic chain extended. Attracted by America's modern civilization represented by the construction of overland highways, Carlos brothers opened a small store by the highway based on their meager savings, hoping to trade with those passing American and European tourists only to find "they passed through Binalonan on their way to Baguio, stopping only for water and food and to take pictures of the natives (p.54). The tourists paid a little money and asked the natives to undress before their cameras and "they seem 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. (p.67) The camera lens here became an instrument of power through which the westerners were representing the natives in the ways that the natives were typically oriental. In other words, the primitivity of the Filipinos caught in the cameras of the westerners was more a man-made than a real state of the natives. If the mimic birds that imitated human sound were the source of pleasure for the natives, then the natives imitating the American modernization too offered pet-like pleasure to the colonizers because the man-made state of the natives helped to define the colonizers as a contrasting image, hence confirming the colonizers' civilization and superiority that differentiate them from the natives and consolidate their rule over the natives.

III. SIMULATION AS A STRATEGY OF REBELLION FOR THE FILIPINO COLONIZED

A. *Emigration as Simulation: Discovering the Quasi-colony*

At the end of 1920s, when mere survival became a serious problem in his Philippine hometown, Carlos, together with many of his countrymen, emigrated to the United State. Emigration, for Carlos, was a continuation of his imitation. It is safe to say that his emigration decision was greatly inspired by his internalization of the superiority of the Promised Land that once created the myth of Lincoln's presidency. But it is the emigration that enabled Carlos to step from the margin to the center of the colonial discourse and discover the inherent contradiction in it.

The real purpose for the American government to admit Filipinos in the 1920s is to alleviate the problem of laborer shortage in the west coast. By the end of 1920s, roughly 30, 000 Filipino laborers came to America, 93% of whom were males around 16 to 30 years old (Campomanes, 1995, p.96). Since the laborers were supposed to produce maximum profit at minimum expense, they were not allowed to bring their wives and children with them. While mobility transformed the Filipinos from the colonized to ethnic minorities, or "American Nationals" in white dominated society, W. E. B. Dubois clearly pointed out the inner connections between these two groups of people. He asserted that "if [a] colony, strictly speaking, is a country which belongs to another country, forms part of the mother country..., then there exists today...in the Americas and the Caribbean..., colonies—albeit "quasi-" or "semi-" colonies, but colonies nonetheless (Du Bois, 1985, p.229) and among the characteristics of these semi-colonial people are: physical and/or psychological violence, domination and discrimination, poverty, disenfranchisement, the denial of participation in the political process and so on (Du Bois, 1985). The Filipinos in America (also called pinoy) fit into almost all these

characteristics.

The racial discrimination against Filipinos started on the ship that was carrying Carlos and other Filipino workers to the United States. When the half-naked Carlos and his friend were lying out on the deck in the sun, they were spotted by a young white woman in bathing suit. While the whites seemed to be especially interested in the naked body of the natives in the Philippines, the white girl on the ship heading for America recoiled in horror at the sight of the Filipino men. The totally different responses towards the same people result from the colonizers' "racing of space and the spacing of individuals" (Chuh, 2003, p.48) way of thinking. That is, space is depicted as dominated by individuals of certain race, and the individual is represented as imprinted with the characteristics of a certain kind of space. Thus Americans deemed the Filipinos as an uncivilized race inhabiting in the jungle and thought that the Filipinos could hardly take the wilderness out of them even though they were brought to a civilized region like the United States. They would pose a peril instead. Therefore, there should be a clear demarcation between *their* space and *our* space. Clearly the white girl in the scene could hardly bear the prospect that these "savage" Filipinos would share the same space with her, and that is why she shouted angrily "Why don't they ship those monkeys back where they came from?" (p. 99).

This is only a prelude to the sea of troubles that Pinoys suffered in America. Though they would not be expelled like Chinese or Japanese minorities, Pinoys were prohibited in many public places like parks and restaurants in America. They were not allowed to vote, to hold office or to purchase land. They were often physically attacked, even assassinated by white extremists. Carlos, for one, narrowly escaped death quite a few times. In order to survive he moved to and fro along the west coast, heading for nowhere and the number of the places he temporarily stayed amounted to 60 (Wong, 2005, p.43). In the world of work, they were heavily exploited by their employers in the canneries in Alaska or in the cauliflower fields in Santa Maria and work, for them, was only "a beastly struggle for existence" (p.138). Due to the sex imbalance in Pinoy society, brothels or taxi-dance halls was one of the few social outlets where Pinoys could seek for leisure in a hostile environment, but even here they were implicitly exploited by the white or Mexican prostitutes because a season's earnings could only buy one night's pleasure. In addition, their consumption in the whorehouses provoked white people's intense feelings against them and Pinoys were demonized as savage creatures driven only by strong sexual desires who came to corrupt white women. It is probably on account of this misrepresentation that in 1933, the California legislature amended the already existing anti miscegenation laws to include Pinoys as one of the groups prohibited from marrying whites. Eight other states later on followed suit (Campomanes, 1995, p.98). That was why the Pinoy in the book was brutally beaten up when he took his white wife and child to a dining hall.

The huge gap between Carlos' "American dream" and his nightmarish real experience eventually makes him understand that the promise of wealth, democracy, freedom and equality in the colonial discourse is exclusively confined to the whites. For the colored, Filipinos included, it is only a beautiful bubble, desirable but inaccessible. Reflecting on this inherent contradiction of the colonial discourse, Bulosan wrote: "Western people are brought up to regard orientals or colored people as inferior, but the mockery of it is that Filipinos are taught to regard Americans as our equal....The terrible truth in America shatters the Filipinos' dream of Fraternity" (Campomanes, 1995, p.118). The emigration as a simulation thus helps to expose the contradiction of the colonial discourse and disrupts its self-claimed authority.

B. Appropriating and Rewriting as Simulation: Resolving and Subverting the Colonial Discourse

Simulation as a strategy for the colonized does not only involve imitating the colonial discourse, but also involves appropriating and rewriting it. By appropriating and rewriting, simulation produces a hybridity variant of the colonial discourse, "almost the same but not quite (Bhabha, 1994, p.86)". By way of "ironic compromise", simulation realizes resolving and subverting the colonial discourse.

In Philippines, English, the imposed lingua franca, was instrumental in de-Filipinizing and Americanizing the Filipinos. And it was the language, together with the ideology embedded in it, that attracted the Filipinos, Carlos for one, to come to America. But the mistreatment Carlos received only drove him to hospital. Though physically fallen ill, Carlos' spirit arose. He took up reading on his sick bed both to enhance himself and to consider the ways to spend his upcoming days. A wide range of reading of the realistic writers like William Faulkner, Hart Crane, Richard Wright and Maxim Gorki made him realize the importance of human being's dignity and humanity. Particularly when he reread the short story written by Estevan, a Filipino writer who met a tragic death in America, he said: "Thus it was that I began to rediscover my native land, and the cultural roots there that had nourished me, and I felt a great urge to identify myself with the social awakening of my people (p.139). Empowered with both reading and his personal encountering, Carlos began to write in English. He decided that to tell the world what the whites had done to him in his writing is a way for Pinoys to break the imposed silence and to right the social injustices. Later on, after he left hospital, he got access to some socialist colleagues and set up in collaboration with them a series of journals that served as a platform for them to write articles. These articles covered a variety of topics, all aiming to arouse Pinoys' awareness of fighting against racial oppression and striving for freedom and equality. Besides, an awakened Carlos fully realized that the Spanish and American colonial rule was the root for years of poverty in the Philippines, and he reiterated that he would one day return back to his hometown to enlighten his countrymen to get out of their ignorance of colonial facts. Furthermore, his view moved beyond his own race and his writings showed concerns to other minority groups in America, even to the Spanish people's fight against the fascists. He regarded it a writer's life-long goal to awaken these downtrodden people

and to encourage their fight for the improvement of their present conditions.

Chinua Achebe (1965) thinks that African literature should include national literature and ethnic literature. The former refers to the writings in English, the colonial language, the latter, the writings in diverse native tongues. He highlights the importance of English language writings to the effect that though writing in one's native tongue is a complete gesture for decolonization, English language writing, due to the communicative power of English as an international language, might produce larger readership, hence greater influence (p.28). Similarly, for Carlos, or Bulosan, their writings in English, was an imitation of, even a compromise to the colonial language. But it was the colonial language that helped to spread their writings among all those that were trapped in similar conditions to their Filipino compatriots. More importantly, what they articulated in their writings was no longer what the American colonizers had articulated to them. It was an appropriating and rewriting. They appropriated the quintessence of America's exceptionalism, but since they had discovered its inherent contradiction, they rewrote it to an ideal of justice and equality for all people in the world, regardless of their nationality, skin color, religious belief and degree of civilization. Such an ideal was confirmed at the end of the novel:

I glanced out of the window again to look at the broad land I had dreamed so much about, only to discover with astonishment that the American earth was like a huge heart unfolding warmly to receive me. I felt it spreading through my being, warming me with its glowing reality. It came to me that no man—no one at all—could destroy my faith in America again (p.326).

The America that Carlos held firm faith in was more an ideal America in his heart as the title of the novel indicated than the America within its geographical boundary. The ideal, by ironically imitating America's exceptionalism, subverts the colonial discourse. That is how simulation serves as a strategy of mild rebellion for the colonized.

REFERENCES

- [1] Achebe, Chinua. (1965). English and African Writer. *Transition*, 18: 27-30.
- [2] Alquizola, M. (1994). The Fictive Narrator of America Is in the Heart. In G. M. Nomura, S. H. Sumida, & R. Endo (Eds.), *Frontiers of Asian American Studies: Writing, Research, and Commentary*. Pullman, WA: Washington State University Press, 211-217.
- [3] Bhabha, H. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. London & New York: Routledge.
- [4] Bonus, R. (2000). *Locating Filipino Americans: Ethnicity and the Cultural Politics of Space*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- [5] Bulosan, C. (1973). *America Is in the Heart: A Personal History*. Seattle & London: University of Washington Press.
- [6] Campomanes, O. (1995). Filipino in the United States and Their Literature of Exile. In V. Rafael (Ed.), *Discrepant Histories: Translocal Essays in Filipino Histories*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 81-122.
- [7] Chuh, K. (2003). *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique*. Durham, NC & London. UK: Duke University Press.
- [8] Dubois, W.E.B. (1985). *Against Racism: Unpublished Essays, Papers, Addresses, 1887-1961*. Ed. Herbert Aptheker. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- [9] Isaac, A. P. (2006). *American Tropics: Articulating Filipino America*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- [10] Kim, E. (1989). *Making Waves: Writings By and About Asian American Women*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- [11] Wong, K. S. (2005). Diasporas, Displacements, and Construction of Transnational Identities. In Wann W. Anderson & Robert G. Lee. (Eds.), *Displacements and Diasporas: Asians in the Americas*. London: Rutgers University Press, 41-53.

Yali Zhang was born in Shanxi, China in 1976. She received her M. A. in American literature from Tianjin Foreign Studies University, China in 2004 and her M. A. in applied linguistics from Nanyang Technological University, Singapore in 2008.

She is currently a lecturer in the School of Foreign Languages, Shanxi Normal University, Linfen, Shanxi, China. Her research interests cover British literature and Asian American literature.

Read "America Is in the Heart" by Carlos Bulosan online on Bookmate " First published in 1943, this classic memoir by well-known Filipino poet Carlos Bulosan describes his boyhood in the Philippines. First published in 1943, this classic memoir by well-known Filipino poet Carlos Bulosan describes his boyhood in the Philippines, his voyage to America, and his years of hardship and despair as an itinerant laborer following the harvest trail in the rural West. Replaced by ISBN 9780295993539. Fiction. To read this book, upload an EPUB or FB2 file to Bookmate. How do I upload a book? Search on Google. Impression.