

## Philip Vera Cruz: In Search of Defamiliarizing Narrative

By E. San Juan Jr.

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It was as if many of us Filipinos were living behind hidden identities for fear of associating with the realities of our lives, our real names, and therefore, our real identities... My life here was always an emergency. —PHILIP VERA CRUZ, *A Personal History* (1992)

On July 21, 1994, Representative Lucille Roybal-Allard of the California State Legislature delivered a brief homage to Philip Vera Cruz (1904-1990), a founding member of the United Farm Workers, who died on June 10 at the age of ninety. Vera Cruz left a “legacy of commitment and dedication to social justice,” Rep. Roybal-Allard stated, which survives “in the work of grassroots organizers” everywhere. From his arrival in this country in 1926 as a “colonial ward,” neither alien nor citizen, from beleaguered Asian territory annexed by the U.S. after the Spanish-American War (1896-98) and the Filipino-American War (1899-1902), to his leadership (together with Larry Itliong) of the historic 1965 Delano Grape Strike, the course of Vera Cruz’s life followed a typical pattern—youthful initiation, crisis (*peripeteia*), discovery—memorably delineated in Carlos Bulosan’s classic life-history of the Filipino migrant worker, *America Is in the Heart* (1948).

In contrast to Bulosan, now part of the ethnic canon in Asian American Studies, Philip is almost unknown despite his being vice-president of the United Farm Workers from its founding up to 1977. His 1992 memoir, edited by Craig Scharlin and Lilia Villanueva, has not really circulated as widely, despite or maybe because of its candid yet tempered criticism regarding the leadership style of Cesar Chavez. Chavez’s place in the pantheon of heroic Americans like Martin Luther King appears secure. But Philip’s name has remained in limbo. Except for a handful of Filipino academics, most Filipino Americans (now larger in numbers than the Chinese group), nor the Latinos whom he championed, I am sure, have never heard of Philip Vera Cruz. Nor will his compatriots spend time and energy to find out about Philip’s life and his significant contribution to the popular-democratic struggles of the working people in this country and around the world.

Before attempting an explanation why, I want to pose the general problem of how to make sense of the life of any individual, how to understand its distinctive physiognomy and

meaning. Are all human lives alike? Yes and no. We all belong to the natural species of *homo sapiens/faber*, sharing common needs and aspirations. Praxis, our interaction with nature to produce and reproduce our social existence, unites all humans. However, we are all different because our lives are shaped by multiple contexts in history, contexts which are often variable and unpredictably changing, so that one needs the coordinates of the body, psyche, and society to map the trajectory of any single individual's life-history. Writing on Luther and Gandhi, Erik Erikson focused on the identity crisis of individuals in the life-cycle framed by the structure of ideological world images. He noted in particular identity problems as omnipresent in the "mental baggage of generations of new Americans, who left their motherlands and fatherlands behind to merge their ancestral identities in the common one of self-made men... Migration means cruel survival in identity terms, too, for the very cataclysms in which millions perish open up new forms of identity to the survivors" (1975, 43). Philip was a survivor, indeed, but was he a self-made man in the cast of the Anglo Horatio Alger models?

Instead of following a psychohistorical approach, I want to engage the challenge of Philip's *testimonio* as a constellation of personal events, events that can be read as an allegory of the Filipino community's struggle to fashion subjects capable of fidelity to promises and commitments, and thus invested with self-respect and self-esteem. Winning reciprocity and recognition, Philip held himself accountable to his family, ethnic compatriots, and co-workers in terms of universal maxims and norms that suggest a collective project for the "good life" envisaged within and through the contingencies and risks of late capitalist society.

Today, given the debate on multiculturalism, the nature of identity is almost equivalent to cultural belonging, to genealogy and affiliation. In the culture wars in which everyone is engaged, whether one likes it or not, the politics of identity seems to have repudiated any universal standard or "metanarrative," so that one's life can only be situated within the frame of limited localities, specific zones of contact, particularities of time and place. I do not subscribe to the postmodernist doctrine of nominalist relativism—that only atomistic sense-data, not general concepts, can provide experimental knowledge. As Charles Sanders Peirce argued, consensual belief can be fixated at the end of any inquiry provided we agree that the reasons for any belief are fallible and open to modification. Whatever the position one takes in the dialectic of global and local, the singular and the universal, it is difficult to avoid the question of how to adjudicate the relative power of social/cultural and individual/psychic factors in the shaping of subaltern lives. Nietzsche and Derrida cannot so easily reject the Enlightenment legacy of doubt and critique without pulling the rug from under their feet; such legacy, on the other hand, has been put on trial by its victims—by feminists and by thinkers like Fanon, Aime Cesaire, Mariategui, C.L.R. James, Edward Said, and others.

I submit that the life-pattern of an individual like Philip Vera Cruz is unique and at the same time typical for a colonized subaltern in the U.S. Empire. But it is not idiosyncratic since he, like thousands of his compatriots from the Philippines (or other colonial possessions like Puerto Rico), was exposed to the same political, economic and ideological forces that shaped the lives of the majority of migrant workers in the U.S. in the last century. This occurred in varying degrees, with nuanced complexities, depending on their ethnic/racial, gender, class, and national positions at particular historical conjunctures. In the case of the

Filipino subject—the “nationals” in the first three decades of the last century—the crucial context for understanding the ethos or subject-position of this group is none other than the violent suppression of the revolutionary struggle of Filipinos against colonial domination, first by Spain and then by the U.S. This coincided then with the beginning of segregation enforced by lynching mobs, the confinement of Native Americans to reservations, and mass war hysteria against the “Black Legend” (*Ieyenda Negra*) during the Spanish-American War. In this charged climate, nationality, racialized physiognomy, and social class marked all Filipinos, and continues to mark them, as stigmata difficult even for assimilationists to erase.

Despite the defeat of the anti-imperialist insurgency, Filipinos who grew up in the first three decades of the last century absorbed the ideals and passion for independence which saturated the milieu and resonated up to the outbreak of World War II. Philip’s will to autonomy is displayed in his realistic attitude to religion—for him, “churches are only as good as what they do, not what they say” (2000, 80)—a practicable stance easily harmonized with his emphasis on what he calls traditional Filipino values of helpfulness, understanding, and loyalty.

The racialized subjugation of the natives, the arguably genocidal extermination of over one million Filipinos resisting U.S. aggression, continued through a dual policy of coercion and “Benevolent Assimilation.” Eventually the U.S. coopted the elite and used the patron-client system to pacify the seditious peasantry. The Americanization of the Filipino through selective education and the liberal *habitus* of a “free-market” order, side by side with feudal or tributary institutions, produced the subaltern mentality which one will find in most Filipinos then (and up to now, in the professional stratum and the petty bourgeoisie in general), particularly those recruited for work in the Hawaiian plantations, the student pensionados sent by the colonial government, or those who, like Philip and Bulosan, chose on their own to pursue the adventure of making their fortune in the U.S. in the years of the Great Depression.

Unlike in Iraq and Afghanistan today, U.S. colonizing strategy in early twentieth-century drew from the experience of the brutal taming of the American Indians and the juridical/ideological policing of blacks, Tejanos, Chinese, etc. Class and ethnic stratification via mass public education regulated the rigor of industrialization while the few exceptional cases of successful careers gave an illusion of mobility and possibilities of change. The gradual but inexorable movement from the impoverished rural village to the modern city and then to the North American continent replaced the lure of revolutionary ideals. The impact of the defeat of the armed nationalist movement registered in different ways for every Filipino migrant—one needs to qualify here that Filipinos were not technically immigrants until the establishment of the Philippine Commonwealth in 1935 when entry of Filipinos was limited to 50 every year. One can say that the primal scenario of defeat bred suspicion, not trust; however, every Filipino of peasant or working-class origin had to settle account with that “curse” by sly, cunning accommodation or by hidden forms of civil disobedience if she or he wants to show fidelity to the promise of being responsible to family and community.

For Bulosan, the personal experience of peasant revolts brutally put down by the U.S. in the twenties allowed him to see in collective suffering a promise and hope of liberation. He interpreted every episode in his life as part of this narrative of transformation. Thus early union organizing by the CIO in the West Coast and the popular front of intellectuals—especially the international front against fascism in Spain and Europe—made it possible for him to withstand the cruelties of the McCarthy repression in the fifties and the equally brutal suppression of the Communist-led peasant uprising in the Philippines in the late forties and fifties. The symbolic action of the native's laughter at his fate produced a catharsis that helped him recover from disillusionment. Hence the pattern of life for the Bulosan protagonist in his fiction is that of the young peasant who gets his education from community/worker struggles, pan-ethnic solidarity with all the oppressed (including women), and from his conviction that underneath the ruin of his dreams, the temporary deprivations and exclusions, survives the image of "America" as the embodiment of equality, dignity and material prosperity for all, a condition that will be brought about by mass struggles and personal sacrifices. It was a narrative of maturation, learning from collective experience, and a celebration of universal togetherness, a belonging to a redemptive fraternity. Bulosan arrived in Seattle in the thirties without any possessions and died in Seattle in the fifties penniless, but supported and acclaimed by a large vibrant community of workers and colleagues of various ethnic and racial backgrounds throughout the country.

With Philip Vera Cruz, this typical narrative acquired some telling if commonplace deviations. It was a narrative of emancipation, no doubt, but also a story of disenchantment and a caustic tale of reserved affirmation of the human comedy.

In broad outline, Philip's life conforms to Bulosan's in that both were colonized subjects from the Philippines, and both participated in the anti-capitalist reform-minded struggle of multiethnic farmworkers, but they were also two unique individuals. As Sartre once said in wrestling with the problem of how one can define the individuality of members of the same group: "Valery is a petty bourgeois intellectual, no doubt about that. But not every petty bourgeois intellectual is Valery." Philip shared the same subject-position as millions of his countrymen: "Because of our colonial education we looked up to anything American as good" (2000, 11); but he diverged in overturning the dominant hierarchy of values, valorizing integrity and faithfulness to one's words, solidarity, as the universal measure.

Key to the difference lies in Philip's more independent temperament that was manifest early; for example, he defied his parents in going to school despite their refusal or indifference. Philip was able to pay for his passage from the sale of the last piece of family property. His family did not go through the more arduous ordeals of Bulosan's clan in strife-torn Pangasinan province. Philip accepted the beneficent claims of U.S. education, not questioning its ideological function; so he finished high school in Washington in between hoeing beets in North Dakota, earning income as a busboy in a country club in Spokane, Washington, and doing various chores in Chicago. In Chicago, however, Philip engaged in intellectual pursuits, he was active in various community organizations; he also studied for a while at Gonzaga University in Spokane before being drafted into the army in 1942. What is unusual is that even though Philip learned the art of survival in the cities where Filipinos were discriminated and ostracized, he did not experience the violent racist attacks that

Bulosan and other Filipinos suffered in California and Washington in the thirties and forties. Philip quietly accepted subaltern status so long as he could send money to his family back home.

It was not until Philip settled in Delano in 1943 and began working in the grape vineyards that he would be exposed to the overt racial segregation, hostility, and institutional harassment that Filipinos experienced every day. I think it was Philip's knowledge of diverse settings, modalities of survival and adjustment, as well as his uninterrupted devotion to supporting his brother and sister by regular remittances, that enabled Philip to maintain some distance from the plight of the Filipino community even while being categorized as belonging to that politically and economically subordinated group. His civic consciousness was dormant, his capabilities as a citizen untapped by any mediating political or social institution that could turn them into actual powers.

It is also revealing that Philip did not display the more reflexive astuteness that Bulosan showed in his dealings with compatriots, perhaps due to the latter's health problems and physical inability to really earn a living. Philip was able to manage and still save money to send home to his mother, a fulfillment of his vow to his father. Despite accommodation to city life, Philip expressed an appreciation not for the pastoral innocence of the countryside but for the independence of the farmer cultivating productive land, for the self-disciplined industriousness of "simple folk," which contrasted sharply with the deceit and betrayal rampant in urban life. After leaving his birthplace, Saoang, Ilocos Sur, and "crossing the Pacific in search of a better life, wandering around the U.S. for many years," Philip finally returned to a rural place resembling his natal village, though he also was painfully cognizant of the disparity: "Saoang was green, lush, tropical....and there was always the sight of the blue ocean that contrasted so beautifully with the rolling green foothills that came down almost to the water, whereas Delano is flat, hot but dry, with almost no green vegetation except what's planted on the farms, and no bodies of water" (2000, 7).

Philip celebrated the "Saoang tradition of migrant work" in the 1940s when the New Deal was being tested in factories and fields. Despite his direct acquaintance with racism, Philip never showed any tendency to chauvinist exclusivism; he acknowledged the influence of his Anglo friend Bill Berg from New York—Philip would talk to Filipinos about how "white people had also fought for freedom and are also revolutionaries, that the minority in this country cannot fully succeed without the help of all freedom fighters, whatever the color of their skin" (2000, 23). After the victory over fascist Germany and militarist Japan, the U.S. entered the era of the Cold War. Times changed and labor-capital antagonisms, muted by white supremacy and Western chauvinism, simmered under the surface (for a good historical background to the farmworker's movement, see Kushner 1975).

One of the major events that produced a decisive swerve in Philip's life, even if not consciously recognized in words, took place in his witnessing the 1948 Stockton strike led by the veteran labor organizers Chris Mensalvas and Ernesto Mangaong, close friends of Carlos Bulosan. Both organizers were officers of the Cannery Workers Union, ILWU Local 37, in

Seattle where Filipinos predominated. Of great significance to Philip was Mensalvas and Mangaong's successful effort to thwart the government's attempt to deport them under the anticommunist McCarran Act. Earlier in his life, as field help or restaurant worker, Philip never experienced any sustained involvement in strikes or worker protests. Philip is silent about his views regarding the witch-hunt of left activists, nor does he make any mention of the Huk uprising in the Philippines, nor Mao's triumph in liberating China, nor of the Korean War. Instead he comments on why Filipinos who entered the U.S. before 1936 (like himself) could not be deported because they were nationals, not aliens. In any case, he emphasizes the importance of the Stockton strike as "the first major agricultural workers strike" before the 1965 Delano strike.

Philip's education materialized in the school of arduous labor in households, restaurants, factory and field, and in his solidarity meditations. Personal witnessing of farmworker organizing, as well as the testimony of actual participants in the struggle for humane treatment, helped shape Philip's trust in the competence and sustainable strength of the organized masses to influence the course of their lives, even to the point of converting their passive resignation into active self-determination. Before touching on Philip's decision to resign from the UFW as a critique of Chavez's top-down style, I want to introduce the two aspects of identity, the *idem* and *ipse* identity, theorized by the philosopher Paul Ricoeur, as pivotal elements in the construction of an ethnic autobiography.

So far, what I have reviewed are the events of Philip's development as reflexive protagonist of his adventure in the U.S. This is a narrative of the development of character, what Ricoeur calls the "self" (*idem*/sameness) as a permanent structure of qualities or dispositions by which a person is recognized. This structure consists not just of acquired habits but also learned identification with values, norms, ideals, models, heroes, in which the person or the community recognizes itself. This continuity of character should be distinguished from the self as *ipse* (selfhood) embodied in the phenomenon of promise, "that of keeping one's word in faithfulness to the word that has been given. Keeping one's word expresses a self-constancy that, far from implying temporal changelessness, meets the challenge of variation in beliefs and feelings...The continuity of character is one thing, the constancy of friendship quite another" (1983, 106). The question "What am I?" differs from "Who am I?," the former is sameness without selfhood and the latter selfhood without sameness.

The practice of belonging implies accountability. We have seen Philip prove his faithfulness to his father and to his family by sharing his hard-won wages, denying himself the opportunity for an education or even for a relatively comfortable life. He has in effect been fulfilling an unspoken promise to maintain his organic linkage with the community. This is itself a mark of character as well as a sign of self-hood, although the practice of helping the family back home is shared by the majority of Filipino workers in one degree or another. Another sub-cultural characteristic of Philip's generation is what he calls pride, the refusal or failure to convey the forbidding reality of their lives to their parents and relatives back home. Everyone in the colony believed in America as the "land of promise," a place where hard work would reward you with success, status in terms of money and material possessions. Conditioned by this ideological expectation, Philip and the "Manongs" lived a life of suspended utopian longing, if not stubborn self-deception. Philip did not want to

disappoint his brother so he persuaded him not to follow and join him: "I was trying to be truthful but at the same time I didn't want to tell him the details of how hard life was here." Philip confessed the nature of the collective predicament:

"I couldn't tell them some of the truths about my life here because I wanted to make them believe that America was good as I believed before I left. I had to struggle to make it good, at least for myself. Most of my Filipino compatriots felt this way too, and that's why very few of us wrote truthfully about our lives here to our families back home. Many of us were guilty of fooling our families in the Philippines into believing we were something here that we really were not" (2000, 29).

For the most part, Philip never dwelt at length or in depth on the illusions most colonials cherished about the United States. To be sure, the schooling and ideological apparatuses of the state conditioned every native to believe in the equivalence of prosperity and everyday life in the metropolis. So efficient was this mass indoctrination that it had to take the daily ordeals of survival for these young Filipinos to get rid of years of what Filipino historian Renato Constantino calls "mis-education." An emblematic symptom of this may be found in Philip's discovery of his ignorance when he disembarked from the ship that took him to Vancouver: he saw that the wealthy class enjoyed themselves above the deck while hundreds of his companions suffered in the steerage. This "shock of recognition" precipitated a turn or reversal that reinforced the latent streak of independence already manifested in his childhood.

We can speculate then that Philip's narrative of his life is an attempt to explain his character, the habitus of the self shared with his ethnic group. But what distinguishes Philip from the others, and in what way is this selfhood (*ipse*), a departure from the typical paradigm of the immigrant fable of success in America? What kind of moral or ethical subject is exemplified in Philip's decision to reveal his judgment of Chavez as a consequence of his being faithful to the demand of the larger Filipino community that was prior to his obligation to the bureaucratic constraints or rules of being an official of the union?

Philip's critique of Chavez's authoritarian style is nothing new, as Frank Bardache (1993), Rodolfo Acuna (1988), and others have elaborated on this on various occasions. Qualified by profuse praise of Chavez's charismatic stature and his self-sacrificing devotion to the welfare of the farm workers, Philip's objection to Chavez's top-down management was long suppressed for the sake of the public image of UFW unity. However, the struggle for popular democracy in the Philippines and in the U.S. pre-empted Philip's devotion to UFW bureaucracy. It was only when Chavez embraced the brutal Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines, and invited the fascist labor minister Blas Ople to speak to the UFW rank and file in the August 1977 Convention, while muzzling his own vice-president Philip, that Philip could no longer restrain himself.

This crisis is significant for configuring Philip's narrative because it ushered the rupture, the ethical choice, that defined his character from idem-sameness to ipse-selfhood: his opposition to the authoritarian rule of Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines coincided with a national upsurge of radicalism among Filipino-Americans, in particular the second or third-generation youth, who were mobilized in the late sixties and seventies by the civil-rights and anti-war campaigns. This is the youth that he appeals to at the end, his audience, his hope for a new future. No such turning-point can be found in the early stages of Philip's life that equals this episode in intensity and resonance. Patient and forgiving, self-effacing to the point of seeming to be fatalistic or indifferent, Philip finally disrupted postcolonial inertia and connected his present with other moments in his life when he rebelled, contradicted abusive authority, and tried to help sustain a community of honest, dignified, morally capable citizens of equal status.

In the section of his autobiography, "The movement must go beyond its leaders," Philip opposed the irrational cult of a leader and the suppression of criticism which deprived union members of "their right to reason for themselves." Capability for moral choice needs to be actualized by democratic public institutions such as unions, etc. Notwithstanding the praise of Chavez by Peter Mathiessen, the biographers Richard Griswold del Castillo, Jacques Levy, Joan London, John Gregory Dunne, and others, Philip's reservation may be explained by his identification with the plight of his compatriot Larry Itliong who initiated the Delano grape strike and had never really been credited for his part in this historic event. Philip regretted not having been closer to Larry whose self-contradictions, tied to the apathy and suspicion of his ethnic group, limited his efficacy. Responding to those who wanted to preserve the mythical aura of Chavez and the movement, Philip writes: "For me, we need the truth more than we need heroes" (2000, 91). He has broken from the circumscribed locus of family and ethnic kinship; defamiliarized, he joins a larger family of citizens united by the solidarity of civic cooperation and the humanizing telos of transformative political praxis.

Truth, in Philip's eyes, concerned principles, not personalities. Although he resigned from the union after he publicly distanced himself from Chavez's support of the Marcos dictatorship, Philip remained supportive of the UFW and the entire unionizing movement. Although he bewailed the fact that he sacrificed too much in his struggle to survive (a duty to support his family in the Philippines) and maintain his dignity as a Filipino assisting his community and fighting for workers' rights, Philip was never bitter nor cynical. He affirmed an internationalism that transcended the narrow parochial claims of ethnicity, racial affiliation, and nationality: "...I respect the differences between people through their cultures, and I think all efforts, energies, and money should be concentrated to serving the people instead of making profits for a select group or country here and there."

The narrative climaxes with an invocation to his successors, the youthful workers whose representatives here may be the editors, Scharlin and Villanueva. Philip's message to the young generation in whom rests the future of any country clearly serves as the leitmotif of his chronicle: "The success of any positive changes in this country depends on the strength of the workers and the organizations that hold the workers together are the unions.... Nothing will really change in this country without the total support of the working class" (2000, 154). He was seventy three when he chose the popular, democratic resistance against the right-



wing Marcos dictatorship over Chavez's open support for it, a stand that also confirmed his internationalist, progressive spirit of opposing capitalism as a system whose destructive exploitative logic was the lesson and truth that Philip wanted to impart by recording his life.

In retrospect, Philip's life is in search of a narrative scheme that would contradict if not interrupt the commodified story of immigrant success, a narrative that would capture what Sartre calls (with reference to Kierkegaard) "the singular universal" (1974, 141). It would be a narrative that would assume the world-historical objectivity of human character but also recognize the active subject who fills the "holes of history" and opens up the space for global transformation. Such is the lesson I find from studying the autobiography of Philip Vera Cruz, a revolutionary Filipino worker, who replied to the perennial question we often hear addressed to us, ourselves as others: "Why don't you go back where you came from?" He couldn't—until he could account for why he stayed and fought.

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