Philip Vera Cruz

A Personal History
of Filipino Immigrants
and the
Farmworkers Movement

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LILIA V. VILLANUEVA

third edition

With a New Foreword by Elaine H. Kim

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Personal history is one means by which the politics of the recent past can be made relevant to present history. —Carey McWilliams
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Buried lives. We all know that history is usually a story told by its “winners.” We learn about the Great Wall from the perspective of the Chinese monarchs, not from the viewpoints of the nameless peasants whose worn out and discarded bodies lie buried along its curves. Several years ago, Imelda Marcos, wife of the former and late Philippine president, wanted a palatial exhibition hall built in Manila in a hurry for an international film festival she was sponsoring. When part of the building collapsed, burying some laborers beneath it, she would not allow their bodies to be recovered. Instead, she ordered that construction be continued so that the event could be implemented as planned. Ironically, the event was poorly attended, and the exhibition hall has not been much used since. Some say that it is haunted by the ghosts of the workers who were sacrificed to it.

In the recent Hollywood film The Sixth Sense, the young main character sees ghosts that are invisible to everyone else. It may be that we Americans are also surrounded by ghosts. Occasionally archaeologists and construction companies unearth the bones of Native people who inhabited this land, of nameless slaves, coolies, and peons whose unrecognized labor made America rich. How many people have lived, labored, and died without leaving any record of their existence, not even a scribbled trace? Today, for the most part, we do not know who built the roads and bridges we travel; the buildings where we work, reside, and shop; the water and sewer systems we use daily. We don’t usually think about who made our furniture and clothing, let alone our toothbrushes, nor about who tends, harvests, and transports the food we eat every day.

Philip Vera Cruz calls forth into cultural memory some of the people who have made American life possible, shining floodlights into dark corners and unearthing layer upon layer of buried stories—not just stories of workers, but stories of racialized Asian and Latino immigrant
agricultural workers and the complex and little-discussed difficulties of multi-racial organizing.

An American story. I never actually met any Filipino Americans until I came to California in 1968, although I had heard about them from my parents, especially my mother, who had worked in the California fields herself. I remember her saying that when she was growing up, East and South Asians, Filipinos, Mexicans, and African Americans were restricted to movie theater balconies and not permitted to use public swimming pools except on the day before the pools were to be cleaned.

Shortly after arriving in the Bay Area, I attended a meeting of Women for Peace in San Francisco because I wanted to be involved in the movement against the U.S. war in Vietnam. It happened that Larry Itliong and another man from the United Farm Workers union were there, soliciting support for their lettuce boycott. I remember being surprised that they seemed so happy to see another Asian face in the room. Back then, especially for those of us who grew up on the East Coast, being Asian was simply an unfortunate disadvantage to be overcome or compensated for. It felt odd to be treated as though being Asian was a good thing. I learned much later that these Filipino farm labor leaders were accustomed to thinking in terms of ethnic alliances and collectivities.

Though they grew up in the Philippines, men like Larry Itliong and Philip Vera Cruz lived quintessentially American lives, inhabiting innumerable rural and urban locales, working at the most crucial hubs of production, trying to put democracy into practice through labor organizing. Moving from the cantaloupe fields of Chula Vista to the canneries outside Anchorage, they worked alongside people of many different racial and ethnic backgrounds. They were veterans of some of America’s most spectacular labor movement activities on the plantations of Hawaii and in the fields and canneries of the Pacific Coast.

For many today, the American farmworkers movement is synonymous with Cesar Chavez and Mexican immigrant labor. But it was Filipino workers who laid the groundwork for the UFW. “Whatever happened to the Filipinos in the union, or to the Filipino farmworkers in general, is a question you don’t hear being asked or read about in
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books about the farmworkers movement or the UFW,” Philip Vera Cruz observes, “But . . . it’s a question worth asking” (pp. 87–88).

Lateral lines. Before the demise of the USSR or the “evil empire,” many Americans accepted the commercial news media’s “good guys/bad guys” view of history and dualistic simplifications of the complex and layered relationships among diverse communities: majority/minority, mainstream/margin, native/immigrant, white/non-white. American life was a black/white story, with racialized people of many backgrounds swept into the black category. Historically, the central figure in the story was a white American. Even in today’s more tolerant environment, people of color, if they appear at all, are the faceless crowds that constitute the exotic backdrop, the faithful servants who drive Miss Daisy, and the helpful sidekicks with no lives and hopes of their own. Even Hollywood films about slavery (Amistad), the Civil Rights movement (Mississippi Burning), or the Japanese internment (Come See the Paradise and Snow Falling on Cedars) center on the white characters. Likewise, most studies about “race relations” have been about a particular racialized group’s relationship to whiteness or white society.

Americans of color share long, complex, and little-discussed relationships reminiscent of the relationships between villages linked by colonizers’ roads—not to each other but to the sea, from which natural resources were taken and into which manufactured goods were pumped. The political, economic, and cultural histories of Mexico and the Philippines have much to share, but the discussion, instead of being direct, has been siphoned through the United States and Spain. Likewise, there are many parallels between Asian Indian and Korean American histories rendered invisible by British, Japanese, and American narratives. And unlike the assimilationist attempt to study Japanese-Anglo interracial marriages in recent decades, a long history of Chinese-Native American, Filipino-Native American, Filipino-Mexican, Sikh-Mexican, Chinese-African American, and indeed Japanese-Filipino and Chinese-Korean intermarriage was simply swept aside and ignored, so that we know about it mostly from our own experiences or from stories the old-timers tell us.
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For the past several years, pundits have been talking about “the browning of America.” It already seems that demographic shifts are resulting in more attention being paid to lines of affinity and difference among and within various ethnic and racial groups. We need to unearth the buried history of conflicts and coalitions among these groups. For instance, Afro-Asian friendship has hidden roots in our society. No one talks much about how people of the African American community stood, practically alone and certainly at no direct gain to themselves, against the abrogation of Japanese Americans’ civil rights during World War II. Or how three-quarters of a century ago the mostly black Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters issued a public statement of solidarity with Filipino workers who, they said, “have been used against the unionization of Pullman porters just as Negroes have been used against the unionization of white workers.”

Americans of color have a proud if subterranean legacy of working together to fight economic and social injustice. Since the nineteenth century, Chinese Americans fought every piece of discriminatory legislation, sometimes all the way to the Supreme Court. Indeed, Chinese and African court cases against segregation inspired and propelled each other forward over the decades. The spectacular pan-ethnic labor organizing activities between Japanese and Filipinos in Hawaii at the turn of the century and the cross-racial labor organizing between Japanese and Mexicans in California in the first decades of this century have provided a legacy for labor organizing taking place in various parts of the country today, such as the multiracial San Francisco hotel maids’ strike in the early 1980s and the pan-Asian American boycott of the Jessica McClintock clothing company in the 1990s, which included many Asian American participants and was strongly supported by Latina garment workers. The movement beyond narrow nationalism was clearly seen several years ago in Los Angeles, when Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates (KIWA) organizers fought against the South Korea-based corporation that acquired the Radisson Plaza Hotel and planned to replace unionized Latino workers with cheaper, non-unionized immigrant workers. Today, it is evidenced in the work of Asian American women in-
volved in the San Diego-based movement against exploitation of women workers at Korean and Japanese-owned maquiladoras across the border with Mexico.

While it is important to divest ourselves of the old dominant-versus-marginal binary thinking, we have to resist the temptation to view relationships among racialized groups through rose-colored glasses. We will not be prepared for a new future if we ignore conflicts and differences. We have to scrutinize and understand anti-black prejudice among other people of color, anti-immigrant sentiment among African Americans and U.S.-born Asians and Latinos, exploitation of Asian and Latino undocumented immigrants by Asian and Latino employers, domination of smaller and poorer groups by larger and more powerful ones. Philip Vera Cruz’s forthright and thoughtful account of what happened to Filipino farm workers in the UFW under Cesar Chavez is an important lesson about hegemony, about how one subordinated group can become subject to another and why it’s important to protest and struggle even when some goals and concerns are shared.

The importance of Filipinos in Asian American history. Among Asian and Pacific Americans, Filipinos are unique because they share cultural space with both Latinos and East and Southeast Asian Americans. At the same time, they occupy a central place in Asian American history, which has been shaped by labor exploitation and U.S. imperialist wars in Asia. The U.S. national narrative disavows the fact of American military, economic, and cultural colonization of the Philippines, Korea, or Vietnam, but the immigrants’ return to the imperial center to speak back from their very different positionalities, challenging racial categories and hierarchies, bringing back buried stories and images, disturbing the smooth silences that obscure ghosts and subjugated knowledges, contradicts and destabilizes America’s fictions about itself.

Philip Vera Cruz’s story bridges early and recent Asian American history, in terms of both the labor exploitation and U.S. political domination in Asia, which have differed in form rather than in substance during the past century. Vera Cruz’s consciousness emerged from his participation in the Filipino manongs’ agricultural labor movement that
spanned the decades from the 1920s to the 1980s, when he actively op-
posed the U.S.-supported Marcos dictatorship and pressed for an end
to martial law in the Philippines.

Global capitalist developments have brought flexible accumulation
practices, mixed production systems, and multiple sites of economic
opportunities in countries all over Asia and the Pacific, with profound
effects on Asian and Pacific migration and diaspora. As old concepts of
nationhood and the geographical boundaries around Asian and Pacific
workers melt away under the powerful search lights of global capital-
ism, sites of potential exploitation have become more diverse. In the
1990s and at the turn of the century, Asian and Pacific women are work-
ing on electronics assembly lines in both Asia and America and doing
piece work at home as well as toiling in garment factories, sometimes as
virtual slaves, like the Thai workers in El Monte, California, and some-
times in indentured servitude, as in Saipan, the American island of sweat-
shops. Today, the technology industry is avoiding the cost of training
and maintaining permanent workers in the United States by sending
work to cheaper skilled laborers in India and by sponsoring skilled work-
ers from South Asia as temporary or “rotating labor” in this country. In
recent years, Silicon Valley’s famed high-tech empire has displaced the
fields and orchards of the Santa Clara Valley where farmworkers like
Philip Vera Cruz once toiled. Who knows? Perhaps like the peasants who
built the Great Wall or the laborers crushed under the collapsing Phil-
ippine exhibition hall, they are ghosts whose bones lie buried, in this
case beneath the glass and steel buildings that are the future’s new “fac-
tories in the field.”

What has always been most impressive to me about Filipino Ameri-
cans is the leading role they have taken in struggles for justice, both in
the labor movement in the United States and in the movement for de-
mocracy in the Philippines. They have provided inspiring models for
other Asian Americans to follow. Philip Vera Cruz is such a model, him-
self an embodiment of the spirit of caring about community that comes
from an understanding of history and appreciation of the world beyond
and from his compassionate but critical reflection in an age of celebrity
and materialism. Embracing his spirit of caring and interest in community, perhaps we can also dedicate ourselves to working towards a society that would recognize and reward all those whose labor and creative genius have given America its real greatness.

Elaine H. Kim
University of California, Berkeley
January 2000
Introduction

Wen Manong: “Yes, Older Brother”

Among the Ilocanos of the northwestern Philippines, Wen Manong means respectfully listening to an elder during conversation. Ilocano was the language spoken by the majority of Filipino men who first arrived in America in significant numbers. It was the first language of Philip Vera Cruz. This phrase became a symbol of our commitment not only to listen to Philip’s story, but also to remember those who came before us, to listen with respect to their stories and to learn from the past.

One hundred thousand Filipino men left the Philippines for Hawaii and the mainland United States during the first thirty years of the twentieth century. The earliest groups of these men were recruited to work in the sugar cane and pineapple fields of Hawaii. But many also made their way to the mainland, arriving primarily at the ports of Seattle and San Francisco, and found work on farms throughout California and the Pacific Northwest and in Alaska’s canneries. Many eventually found their way into major metropolitan areas across the United States where they worked as menial laborers, such as busboys and bellhops, in restaurants and hotels and as domestic helpers. This book is about the life of one of these pioneering Filipinos in America, Philip Vera Cruz.

To understand why this group of Filipinos left their homeland in a major exodus to the United States, it is useful to look at the close relationship that developed between the Philippines and the United States from the time of the Spanish-American War in 1898 when the United States took over colonial rule of the Philippines from Spain. A very heated debate took place across the United States as to just exactly what role, if any, the country should play in the Philippines. Although the United States was just emerging as a world power, it had a long history of isolationism and anti-colonial attitudes were strongly felt. To become a new
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colonial power was not an easily acceptable idea for many Americans at the
time.

At the height of the debate in the U.S. Congress over just what the
U.S. relationship to the Philippines should be, President McKinley pur-
portedly knelt down in his White House bedroom late one night to pray
for guidance. As the story goes, he claimed to have received a reply from
God that it was America’s “Manifest Destiny” to take care of its “little
brown brother,” the Filipino. The actual validity of this story may be
questionable but there is no doubt that the attitude it embodied ended
up being the guiding force behind American policy toward the Philip-
pines. This policy was carried out with an American zeal, continuously
championed by the newly emerging American ethic that whatever is good
for America is good for the rest of the world. The Filipinos, in effect,
became the early recipients of the first massive American-styled coloni-
zation program. One hundred years of association with the United States,
colonial and post-independence periods, have left a powerful imprint
on the culture, lifestyle, and psyche of the Filipino people.

With U.S. colonial rule came American administrators and business-
men. American educators and missionaries also descended upon the
Philippines to help “Americanize” the archipelago. As early as 1900, thou-
sands of Filipino children were already being educated through the U.S.-
styled free public school system established by American authorities
throughout the country. The introduction of universal public educa-
tion was one of the cornerstones of American colonial policy. Along
with the new public school system came the introduction of the English
language as the medium of instruction. The adoption of English was
the master stroke of American colonization because “any Filipino who
wanted employment or [sought] to get ahead was forced to learn the
language. Opportunities for employment in government and in Ameri-
can firms were based on competence in English. From 1911 on, English
became the official language of the courts.”1 With the use of American
textbooks, “Filipinos began learning not only a new language but a new
culture. Education became miseducation because it began to de-
Filipinize the youth, taught them to look up to American heroes, to
regard American culture as superior to theirs and American society as the model par excellence for Philippine society. The new textbooks gave them a good dose of American history while distorting, or at least ignoring, their own.\textsuperscript{2} Benigno Aquino, Sr., father-in-law of former Philippine President Corazon C. Aquino and a pre-eminent spokesperson for independence during his time, remarked in 1928 on the use of the English language in Philippine society:

To my mind one of the tragedies of present-day thinking in this country is the desire to use our general plan of public instruction as an instrument for the Americanization of our customs, our mannerisms, and our way of expressing ourselves. Even our hearts are now speedily beating and our souls sighing in the Anglo-Saxon way.\textsuperscript{3}

It is not surprising then that the most notable book written by one of the early Filipino immigrants to the United States, Carlos Bulosan, was aptly titled America Is in the Heart (University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1973). It was only natural that Filipinos would soon start making the reverse trip across the Pacific to take advantage of the better educational and economic opportunities that were purported to be waiting for them in their benefactors' home country.

Filipino laborers first started to leave their country as early as 1906, partially through the recruitment efforts of the Hawaiian Sugar Planters Association (HSPA), to work in the sugar cane and pineapple fields of Hawaii. The immigration of Filipino laborers was slow for the first few years. By 1909 only a few hundred Filipinos had actually been recruited by the HSPA. More significant numbers did not start to arrive in Hawaii until after 1910 following the signing in 1907 of the Gentlemen's Agreement between the United States and Japan, which restricted the availability of Japanese workers as a cheap labor force in the Hawaiian fields.

The large influx of Filipinos to the American mainland started in 1924, the same year a major strike of the Hawaiian fields by Filipino workers, led by Filipino labor leader Pablo Manlapit, crippled the Hawaiian plantations. Following the strike many Filipino workers were blacklisted from

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the Hawaiian fields and their search for work on the mainland began. In addition to labor disputes in Hawaii, the U.S. Immigration Act of 1924, which barred Asian (primarily Chinese and Japanese) immigration, caused West Coast farmers and canneries to turn to Filipinos as a valuable alternate source of labor. Filipinos were a perfect group to fill this void since they were exempt from the exclusionary policies of the act because of their status as “U.S. nationals.” By 1930 about a hundred thousand Filipinos, almost exclusively single men, were living in Hawaii and the mainland United States.⁴

Although Filipino laborers were actively sought by West Coast farmers and canny operators, many American labor organizations, including the American Federation of Labor, were against this influx of foreign workers, arguing that like the Chinese and Japanese before them, “the Filipino had acted like a cancer in American private and public life, destroying American ideals and preventing the development of a nation based on racial unity.”⁵

In 1934 the U.S. Congress passed the Tydings-McDuffie Independence Act. This act called for the Philippines to establish a constitutional form of government copied after the American prototype. The Philippines was to be granted its independence following a ten-year interval of preparatory “self-rule.” The Tydings-McDuffie Act changed the status of all Filipinos from “U.S. national” to “alien,” which quickly turned off the steady flow of Filipino migration. The U.S. Congress, concerned about high unemployment in the 1930s and sympathetic to the fears of conservative U.S. labor unions, argued that foreign workers were taking away jobs from white workers. In 1935, Congress passed the Filipino Repatriation Act, which offered mainland Filipinos free transportation back to the Philippines.⁶ Although only a small number of Filipinos took advantage of the offer and returned to the Philippines, the passage of the act reflected a recurring bias in American society against foreign workers and in this case, Filipinos.

Not all of the Filipinos in the United States during this period came as laborers. Prior to 1920, around five thousand Filipino men attended American universities and colleges through the U.S. Pensionado Act of
1903. Under the Act, promising young Filipino men were selected for special education and training and then returned to work in the Philippines as industrial leaders, public school administrators, teachers, and government bureaucrats. These students were known as “the fountain pen boys.” They returned to well-paying positions in the Philippines and their success stories inspired many young Filipinos to seek similar opportunities through an American education.

Philip Vera Cruz arrived in the United States in 1926. Although he came to earn a better living to help support his family in the Philippines, he also aspired to be a part-time fountain pen boy. Like many of his peers he believed in the American dream of success through better education. Tutored by American teachers and missionaries on the advantages of an American lifestyle and driven by the poverty of their rural upbringing, leaving for the promises of America was a natural conclusion for thousands of Filipino men at that time. To many provincial Filipinos, Hawaii and the mainland United States became meshed into their consciousness as one illusory windmill that appeared too wonderful not to pursue.

We met Philip Vera Cruz for the first time in Delano, California, in 1974 when we joined a group of student volunteers to help in the construction of the United Farm Workers’ Agbayani Village, the union’s retirement complex for elderly farmworkers. Delano, and for that matter most of the surrounding San Joaquin Valley of central California, is home to the “factories in the fields,” a phrase coined by historian Carey McWilliams. The industrial style of farming perfected in the San Joaquin Valley has helped define the term “agribusiness.”

This vast agricultural area is not a bucolic farm landscape. There are no rolling green hills, quaint farmhouses, red barns, or picturesque villages. It was once a vast desert, transformed into an agricultural megafactory only when water was brought in by massive state and federally funded irrigation projects in large man-made cement canals from the water-rich, green and lush, northern parts of the state. The sun can bake the valley in the summer to temperatures up to 115 degrees Fahrenheit.