

## I. MY AMERICAN FAMILY

We are all Americans that have toiled and suffered and known oppression and defeat, from the first Indian that offered peace in Manhattan to the last Filipino pea pickers. America is not bound by geographical latitudes. America is not merely a land or an institution. America is in the hearts of men (and women) that died for freedom; it is also in the eyes of men (and women) that are building a new world. . . . America is also the nameless foreigner, the homeless refugee, the hungry boy begging for a job and the black body dangling from a tree. America is the illiterate immigrant who is ashamed that the world of books and intellectual opportunities is closed to him. We are that nameless foreigner, that homeless refugee, that hungry boy, that illiterate immigrant and that lynched black body. All of us, from the first Adams to the last Filipino, native born or alien, educated or illiterate—We are America!

—Carlos Bulosan (1946),  
*America Is in the Heart: A Personal History*

11. USUAL OCCUPATION <b>Employee</b>		11b. KIND OF BUSINESS OR INDUSTRY	
12. NATIONALITY <b>Filipino</b>		13a. RACE <b>Brown</b>	
14. PREVIOUS DELIVERIES TO MOTHER (Do not include this birth)			
a. How many children are now living? <b>1</b>	b. How many other children were born alive but are now...	c. How many deaths...	

A section of E.J.'s birth certificate indicating his parents', and therefore his, nationality and race.

March 16, 2016

My American Family,

You all know that Pamiuq, one of my best friends from Barrow, just died last month. You know that he was shot and killed by a police officer. You also know that this happened while Pum was in his own house, alone, and that Pum's wife told the police officers to just leave Pum alone. Pum wasn't threatening to hurt anyone. In fact, he even told the police—very clearly—that they had no right to enter his house.

But the police barged in anyway. I wonder how different the outcome could have been if the police had stayed outside and negotiated with Pum, like they seem to do in other similar cases. In fact, just a few weeks after Pum's tragic death, there was a man in Bethel who was alone in his house with a gun, threatening to shoot police and children. The police negotiated with him for thirty-one hours, and the police also requested a Southcentral Special Emergency Reaction Team and relief negotiators from Anchorage. The man eventually surrendered, and is still alive.

I wonder how different things could've been if Barrow police stayed outside, de-escalated the situation, waited and negotiated even for just one hour. Even for just thirty minutes. I wonder how different things could've been if a Southcentral Special Emergency Reaction Team and relief negotiators were flown in from Anchorage or Fairbanks to

help Pum. I wonder if things would have turned out differently for Pum. I wonder.

It's not a surprise to you all how deeply affected and troubled I am by Pum's death. He was my brother. He was me. On the surface, Pum and I may not seem to have much in common. He's Inupiaq; indigenous to these lands. He's also very Republican. On the other hand, I am a Filipino immigrant to this country. And I am not Republican.

Our differences end here, however, as Pum was thirty-six years and four months old when he died, and I am only three months younger than him. He and I cut each other's hair, and gave each other fades. He and I got drunk and freestyle rapped together, badly, many times. He and I shot ducks together. He and I listened to the Wu-Tang Clan together. He and I went to high school together, played in the same basketball team together, and began to grow older together as we matured and started our own families.

He married a Filipina immigrant who was from the same region in the Philippines as my ancestors, and together they have "Eskipino" kids.

And especially in this sense, Pum is—or was—very much just like me. His family is very much just like our family.

You are all Koyukon Athabascans—indigenous to these lands, just like Pum. My love, you have me as a husband, and—Malakas, Kalayaan, and Kaluguran—the three of you kids have me as a father: a Filipino immigrant. The three of you are "Filibascans," similar to Pum's kids.

And so Pum passing away, and my thinking about this tragedy's effect on his wife and his children, naturally

led me to thinking about you. Right now, I am merely two months away from being the same age he was when he got shot. What if something happens to me? What if I passed away suddenly and unexpectedly, perhaps even tragically? How would that affect you?

But my question evolved the more I thought about it. Instead of focusing on how my death might affect you, I began to think about how I should prepare you for the reality that I am going to pass away—perhaps suddenly and unexpectedly and, conceivably, tragically too.

To prepare you for my death, I began to think of the possible risk-factors and threats to my life. I began to think about all the elements that have shaped my life: my habits, my behaviors, my thoughts, my self-esteem, my health. I thought about the factors that have influenced how I've lived my life and so, naturally, I began to think about the factors that may conceivably contribute to my death.

But for me to be completely real, I realized that I cannot just tell you what happened to me directly. I also need to tell you what happened to my parents who produced and raised me, because their experiences shaped them and their shape molded me. I also need to tell you about the generations before, and what happened to them. I need to tell you about our ancestors, what they had and what was violently taken away from them, for you to completely understand the factors that played a role in my life, and therefore, the factors that will play a role in my death.

And as I thought about how the experiences of my ancestors affect me, my question evolved yet again: I began to think about how my experiences will also affect you as my

kids! The three of you are products of me, and my shape will shape you. So these same factors—the risk factors for my death—will be the same for you. So understanding what shaped my life and what may lead to my death will also help you completely grasp the factors that may likewise play a role in your own lives, and therefore, your own deaths.

And this is true for you too, my love. As my partner, factors that affect my life and contribute to my death undoubtedly affect you too, vicariously and distally, but nevertheless still very true.

I hope that by understanding these risk factors better, by at least becoming aware of them, perhaps you can do things now to prevent them. Perhaps you can do things now to address them, to eliminate them. So that—maybe—you can lessen the risk factors in your own lives, lessen the factors that may contribute to your own deaths. So that—maybe—you can lighten the burdens of death that you inherited from me. Then—maybe, hopefully—you will pass on something better to the next generations.

To impact the current, younger, and future generations, I need to go into some history because, as a brown-skinned immigrant man in this country, my reality is different, and it's different because of the historical and contemporary oppression that people like me have experienced. I will probably get redundant, my loves, because oppression is redundant. Oppression has redundantly damaged our Peoples for generations! What our ancestors faced affect us and what we face will affect the future generations. And guess what? What we do with our own lives, our own chance, our own shot, can affect our ancestors as well. You see,

Peoples of Color like me—like us—are connected to our families and our ancestors in a very deep, real way. I don't mean this in a metaphorical, abstract, mystical way. This connection to our ancestors is real. It's tangible. It's visible. You can feel it; all of it. You can feel the joys, but you can also feel the pains.

And I hope these letters help you understand how this is so.



My American family, I am an immigrant, unlike all of you. My first language is not English, unlike all of you. I am brown skinned, darker than all of you. I am a settler in this country, perhaps contributing to the neocolonial oppression of my own family—my own blood—as all four of you are indigenous to these lands.

I am still struggling with this, still trying to resolve this internal conflict between my “settler colonialist” identity and my “victim of colonization” reality. Perhaps I will never resolve it, but let me tell you a little bit about my confusions and why I am struggling. Let me tell you a little bit about why I am not the only one responsible for becoming a settler in these lands. Let me tell you about why my ancestors believed that they are connected to these lands, why they fantasized about coming to these lands, why they felt the need to send me to these lands.

My indigenous lands are now called the Philippines, its colonial name, an archipelago of over 7,000 tropical islands in the Pacific Ocean. My ancestors are from a region in northern Philippines, and they are called Kapampangan—which

means people of the riverbanks, and Tagalog—which means people of the river. My first language is Tagalog, which is why my grammar is still messed up, why I still mispronounce some English words, why my accent still slips out occasionally, why I still mix up my *p*'s and *f*'s, and why I still mix up *he* and *she*, things that make you giggle sometimes.

As I write this, there is an ugly and hateful discourse about immigration in our country, about people with different birth origins, different cultures, different upbringings, different languages, and different accents—people like me. The Republican frontrunner to become the next president of our country is winning because of—again, *because of* and not *despite of*—his explicitly racist and bigoted views against immigrants, against people who are like me.

Not very many people know this, as the national immigration debate tends to be limited to Mexicans and people from Central America, but over 1.8 million out of the 3.5 million people with Filipino heritage in the United States are foreign born. This makes Filipinos the fourth-largest American immigrant group next to Mexicans, Asian Indians, and Chinese, and makes Filipinos the second-largest Asian group in the country after the Chinese. And as recently as 2010, Filipinos were the second largest immigrant group in the country after Mexicans.

In our home state of Alaska, around 9 percent of the population are foreign-born, a relatively low proportion compared to the national average, which shows that 13 percent of the American population are foreign-born. So yes, it is still relatively rare to find a foreign-born Alaskan, like me. Like your Lola and Uncle Bonz. Like your Uncle Pum's wife and her family.



But don't let this fool you into thinking that Alaska is not racially and culturally diverse! Next to Hawaii, our home state is probably the second-most racially diverse state in the country. In fact, the most racially diverse neighborhood in the country is in Anchorage—not in Queens, not in Los Angeles, not in Honolulu. Consistent with this finding that seems to surprise everyone else except Alaskans, the top three most racially diverse public high schools in the United States are in Anchorage. Furthermore, the top four—and six of the top ten—most racially diverse public middle schools in the country are also in Anchorage. Even further, the top nineteen out of the twenty most racially diverse public elementary schools in the United States are in Anchorage!

A big reason for this awesome diversity in Alaska is the large number of Asians in the state, as they are now the third-largest racial group in Alaska after Whites and Natives. Although it is not until the year 2065 that experts project Asians will surpass Latinos as America's largest immigrant group, this is already the case for Alaska right now. This is one of the very few areas wherein Alaska is not behind the rest of the country, as many Alaskans seem to complain habitually. In this case, Alaska is actually fifty years ahead of the rest of the United States.

A big reason for why Asians are the largest immigrant group in Alaska is the state's large population of Filipino Americans, whose presence in Alaska goes all the way back to 1788. So there have been many other mixed-race Alaska Native-Filipino people like you—Malakas Kalayaan, Kaluguran—who were born out of the unions of sojourning Filipino fishermen and Alaska Native women. That's pretty cool, isn't it?

Today, approximately half of the Asian population in Alaska is Filipino; the other twelve-plus Asian ethnic groups split the remaining half. This easily makes Filipinos the largest Asian Pacific Islander group in the state. Filipinos are also the largest Asian group in the most populated state of California, as well as in Arizona, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Washington, Wyoming, and South Dakota. Also, unlike most other states where Mexicans make up the largest immigrant ethnic group, Filipinos are the largest immigrant ethnic group in Alaska. Not surprisingly, Filipinos are also the largest undocumented immigrant group in Alaska. Nationally, very few people know that Filipinos compose the biggest undocumented immigrant population in the United States after Mexicans, El Salvadorians, Guatemalans, and Hondurans.

And today it is a Filipino undocumented immigrant who has brought mainstream national attention to immigration issues.

Jose Antonio Vargas was born in the Philippines in the 1980s, just like me. Then, when he was a child, he was sent by his mother to the United States. I, too, was sent by your Lola to the United States when I was a child. But unlike Jose Antonio, I happened to have the proper documentation. My American family, I need you all to understand that although millions of others are not as lucky as I am to have papers, their lives and experiences are not of any less value.

You see, I didn't earn those documents. I didn't work for them. I was just privileged to have them. Just like you, and how you didn't earn or work for the privilege of being a United States citizen; you are simply privileged to have been born with it.

You all need to understand this, to appreciate this, so that you don't buy into yet another manner of separating yourself from others. There's already too many ways to do that. This country has already created too many ways of dividing people, attaching desirable and undesirable connotations to the created groups, giving some groups privileges while denying it to others, and arranging the groups hierarchically. You need to know this, my loves, and you need to resist this.



Over the past couple of years, since Jose Antonio came out about his undocumented status, he has exposed the holes of our immigration policies, revealing the enormity and complexity of the issue. This has led to a lot of mainstream attention, like the wide-scale coverage on the “border children” from Central America—many of whom are around the same age as you, Malakas, Kalayaan, Kaluguran. Even more recently, immigration has been a central topic of the presidential campaign, and the fears about letting “terrorists who hate America” into our borders have permeated our daily climate.

The sheer attention and passion that millions of Americans have devoted to this issue tell us that the need for comprehensive immigration reform has become apparent and imperative. But, my American family, the reforms cannot simply be about building walls or tightening border security or mass deportation or other exclusionary acts—there's nothing comprehensive about such “solutions.” For immigration reform to be comprehensive, I need you to understand that the process needs to consider and incorporate the fact

that America—or more specifically, our foreign policies and impositions on various countries in the past and in modern times—are also parts of the “immigration problem.”

Let me be clearer and more explicit: Americans themselves are parts—big parts—of the “immigration problem.”

There is nothing new or radical about this statement, and the evidence for this is quite simple. You just need to understand that America “went there” first.

Jose Antonio’s case and the Filipino experience is one example. He was educated in the United States, has paid taxes, employed Americans, and contributed to the common good. Although he is not a United States citizen, the United States has been his home for more than twenty years—and given the United States’ long military, political, economic, and cultural involvement in the Philippines—America definitely has always been in Jose Antonio’s heart. My American family, America has always been in many Filipinos’ hearts—for many generations.

You see, Spain colonized the Philippines for almost 350 years, instilling a Western and White ideal among Filipinos. Then, after Filipinos fought for, died for, and won their freedom from Spain, the United States snuck in and colonized the Philippines in 1898, and established a nationwide school system that inculcated Filipinos with American standards and worldviews.

It’s important for you to know that Filipinos didn’t just welcome the United States with open arms, calling out to be saved, educated, and civilized.

My ancestors desperately attempted to keep their independence from being taken away by the United States

during the Philippine-American War, a war that cost the United States around \$600 million—which is huge for early 1900s money—and approximately 10,000 soldiers—which is always tragic regardless of the time period. Among Filipinos, it has been estimated that around 16,000 soldiers and 200,000 civilians were killed between 1899 and 1902. And although the war was declared to have been won by the United States in 1902, my ancestors continued to fight and resist America's illegal presence in the islands until 1913, a brutal fifteen-year period that includes the infamous Moro Crater Massacre in 1906, when hundreds of civilians, women, and children were executed by American soldiers. Some experts have estimated that about one-and-a-half-million people who were native to the islands died as a result of American occupation of the Philippines between 1898 and 1913, leading some scholars to conclude that Filipinos experienced genocide at the hands of Americans!

Doesn't it make you wonder why such a bloody, traumatic, and costly—in terms of money but more importantly in terms of lives lost—fifteen-year period of American history that includes ethnic and cultural genocide is not widely known? Why is this not taught in schools? Do we not remember and honor the soldiers and the civilians who lost their lives during this war?

The historical amnesia—or should I say selective amnesia—regarding this war is perplexing, because it got quite the national attention during the early 1900s. This war was so brutal and controversial that many Americans, led by Mark Twain and the Anti-Imperialist League, were criticizing America's presence in the Philippines, questioning

why so much money and so many lives were being lost in the Pacific islands. As a response, President William McKinley used the ideas of Manifest Destiny and Benevolent Assimilation to defend his motivation and intentions for colonizing the Philippines, explaining “that there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them.”

President McKinley wasn't the only American leader who held such inferiorizing sentiments about Filipinos, with Republican Senator Albert Beveridge of Indiana providing the following rationale for why the United States needed to colonize the Philippines and its Peoples:

We must remember that we are not dealing with Americans or Europeans . . . We are dealing with Orientals who are Malays. They mistake kindness for weakness, forbearance for fear. It could not be otherwise unless you could erase hundreds of years of savagery . . . They are not capable of self-government. How could they be? They are not of a self-governing race . . . Savage blood, Oriental blood, Malay blood, Spanish example—are these the elements of self-government? We must never forget that in dealing with the Filipinos we deal with children.

You need to know that many Americans, including their highest leaders such as its senators and even its president, saw Filipinos as inferior. They saw Filipinos like me as childlike, unenlightened, and as dirty savages, and that it was their benevolent duty—their rightful destiny—to give me my first bath using the waters of civilization and the brush of education.

Even though my ancestors had already declared their independence, developed a constitution, and elected their leaders before the United States even got there, Filipinos were still perceived as not civilized enough to govern themselves. Even though most of my ancestors were already Christians before Americans even got to the islands, the United States still felt that it was their manifest duty to “Christianize” my Peoples. Even though the Philippines already had a well-established university—the University of Santo Thomas was founded in 1611—long before the first American university was established—Harvard was founded in 1636—the United States still felt that it was their destiny and benevolent burden to educate my Peoples. America’s demeaning view and conduct toward my ancestors are similar to how African Americans and America’s First Peoples were perceived and treated by the United States, as noted by ethnic studies scholar Yen Le Espiritu:

Theodore Roosevelt . . . repeatedly linked Native Americans to Filipinos, employing words like “wild and ignorant,” “savages,” “Apaches,” and “Sioux” to refer to the Filipino people. In the same way, white American soldiers in the Philippines used many of the same epithets to describe Filipinos as they used to describe African Americans, including “niggers,” “black devils,” and “gugus” . . . If we positioned Filipino/American history within the traditional immigration paradigm, we would miss the ethnic and racial intersections between Filipinos and Native Americans and African Americans as groups similarly affected by the forces of Manifest Destiny. These common contexts

of struggle were not lost on African American soldiers in the Philippines. Connecting their fight against domestic racism to the Filipino struggle against U.S. imperialism, some African American soldiers—such as Corporal David Fagen—switched allegiance and joined the native armed struggle for independence.

My American family, I hope that you see the similarities and links between America's First Peoples, African Americans, and Filipinos—similarities that are lost in popular presentations of American history and even Filipino history, which often simplistically portray Filipinos as one of the largest "voluntary immigrant" groups in the United States. And I am forever thankful and indebted to the leadership of the Native American and African American communities, and the struggles and movements of our Native and Black brothers and sisters—struggles and movements that many of them literally lost their lives for—because it is their work that woke me up to the complex truths of Filipinos' relationship with the United States. This true history reveals to us that, similar to the experiences of our Native and Black kapwa, it was not the Filipinos who initiated contact and tried to begin a relationship with the United States; it was the other way around through American colonialism, imperialism, and oppression!

The true history also reveals to us that, similar to what the United States did to America's First Peoples and African Americans, the Filipino culture and body were also systematically degraded and inferiorized using the ideas of Manifest Destiny and Benevolent Assimilation as the



primary motivators and rationale. Unfortunately, very few bothered to pay serious attention to the flip side of these ideas—that for Americans to see themselves as being responsible for civilizing the rest of the world, they also had to believe that everyone else was inferior and uncivilized. Or maybe people did see this flip side; they just bought into it and believed it. Perhaps White Americans have developed internalized superiority to justify their oppression of other people, to make themselves feel good about the injustices and inequalities they create.

One of the more egregious attempts to convince Americans of their superiority over Filipinos, demonstrate the savagery and uncivilized nature of my ancestors, and rationalize America's civilization and benevolent intention in the Philippines took place when the United States brought 1,200 Filipinos to the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904, and sequestered them in what was called "The Philippine Reservation." This forty-seven-acre exhibit presented a range of Filipino "civilization levels," with Aetas and other indigenous tribes being portrayed as the most savage and American-trained Filipino soldiers being the most civilized. A poster advertising this human display stated that it included 40 different Native Filipino tribes, 6 "Philippine villages," 70,000 exhibits, 130 buildings. Further, the poster boasted that the Filipino exhibit was "The overshadowing feature of the world's fair," and that it was "Better than a trip through the Philippine islands." The exhibit was very popular, as Americans curiously watched, observed, and inspected the captured Filipinos as if they were a display of animals in a zoo.

So my American family, you need to know that America wanted so badly to be in the Philippines that it spent millions and lost many of its citizens' lives to get to the islands. It was as if America had a "I gotta get to the Philippines and colonize and control it, even if it means killing millions of people and spending millions of dollars" instinct. Perhaps this intrinsic motivation was due to Manifest Destiny, to America's distorted sense of superiority. We know now, though, that there were also external motivations; that America occupied the Philippines to exploit my homelands' resources—including its Peoples and its strategically advantageous geographic location—to benefit America. We know now that my Peoples were used as the primary source of cheap labor for the fields of Hawaii, California, Oregon, and Washington, as well as for the canneries of Alaska. And we know now that after America got what it wanted, then all of a sudden it discarded the Philippines, developed laws to send Filipinos in America back to the Philippines, and established policies to keep Filipinos from coming into the United States. We know now that America was violently and deviously built in large part on my Peoples' backs.

My American family, my mixed-heritage Athabascan-Filipino family, it is important to me that you know this history. You need to be aware of the fact that the United States owned and controlled, used and abused, ravaged and exploited the Philippines and its peoples—my Peoples.

And you need to be aware that such ugly and painful experiences are going to be hidden and erased from our collective memories, and you need to resist this amnesia. You need to know that Filipino banishment goes back to the

fact that there was a Philippine-American War that lasted for fifteen years and during which thousands—some say one-and-a-half million—Filipinos were killed by Americans, yet such a war seems to be unacknowledged, hidden, and forgotten. You need to know that Filipino marginalization goes back to the days of the manong generation, whose struggles in the farms of Hawaii, California, and Washington—as well as in the canneries of Alaska—continue to be unknown to many. It goes back to how the hard work and leadership of Larry Itliong, Philip Vera Cruz, and other Filipino farmworkers were overshadowed by the celebrity of Cesar Chavez. You need to know that the dehumanization of Filipino Americans and the devaluation of their lives go back to the early to mid-1900s, when mobs of White men bombed, torched, and threw dynamites into buildings where Filipinos lived, worked, and played—and how White men shot, maimed, burned to death, beat to death, and hanged Filipinos—yet no one seems to remember nor care. It goes back to how President Franklin Roosevelt pledged that Filipinos who fought for the United States during World War II would be granted citizenship and military benefits—so over 250,000 Filipinos heeded the call—but shortly after the war ended that promise was taken back with the Rescission Act of 1946. You need to know that the willful ignorance and forgetting of Filipinos goes back to the many ways in which Filipino people have contributed to this country's rise as a global power, but the American masses remain oblivious to such historical and contemporary reality.

You need to remember that a part of your identity—the American, privileged part of yourselves—exploited,

dehumanized, and inferiorized my Peoples, my ancestors, me. You need to know and remember that the American part of yourselves oppressed another part of you, so that you are always reminded that—despite the loud proclamations of American exceptionalism—America was not, is not, and has never been perfect. Please don't ever believe the notion that being American makes you superior to others, or that you are perfect. My loves, American superiority is a delusion; we are not perfect.



The ugly legacies of America's imperfection continue to be strong in the islands to this day, despite the fact that the United States "gave" the Philippines its independence back in 1946. You can see evidence of this sad reality very easily today, with the continued presence of American soldiers in the Philippines to "train" Filipino soldiers in suppressing terrorism, insurgency, and foreign threats, and the continued use of English as the primary language in Philippine education, law, government, business, and science. Also, Filipino schools today—like the nursing programs, for example—are designed to meet the needs, certifications, and cultural mores of Western nations such as the United States and Canada, making it the norm for Filipinos to dream for and work toward jobs in Western countries. Did you know that the Philippines is the world's largest supplier of nurses? Did you know that the Philippines's biggest export is its people?

And even among those who do not leave the Philippines, many are still working for—or serving—the United States as American-owned businesses continue to outsource