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Coalitions, Race, and Labor: Rereading Philip Vera Cruz

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Coalitions, Race, and Labor: Rereading Philip Vera Cruz ¹

Introduction: Rereading Philip Vera Cruz

A few years ago, in teaching Philip Vera Cruz's oral history in an Asian American labor history class, my students and I talked about Vera Cruz's long involvement in the United Farm Workers (UFW), and his efforts on behalf of farmworkers. As part of our discussion, we also covered Vera Cruz's description of Filipina/os in the UFW as a "minority within a minority," and Vera Cruz's criticisms of César Chávez, the head of the UFW. In the text, Vera Cruz tries to balance his portrayal of both Filipina/o and Chicano/a participation. He also is quite open in his criticisms of Chávez's leadership style, and addresses controversial events like Chávez's trip to Manila through the invitation of Ferdinand Marcos.² Because of his differences with the union leadership, Vera Cruz eventually left the union after twelve years of service, although he remained supportive of the farmworkers' movement as a whole.³

One of my students, a Chicana, spoke up during the course of the discussion because she was upset. She said it was very difficult to read these criticisms because of the reverence that her family, who were longtime agricultural laborers in California, held towards Chávez. Despite Vera Cruz's negative comments about Chávez and the UFW, she reminded the class that Chávez and the union had done much for farmworkers. Her distress and anger at reading about the events discussed by Philip Vera Cruz were very real. **[End Page 139]**

The student's comments have stayed with me. They reveal not only some of the difficulties of teaching Vera Cruz's text, but also how his words open up important issues about coalitions, race, and labor, particularly between Chicano/as and Filipina/o Americans. It is challenging to raise these issues of conflict, particularly when this commentary might be interpreted as criticisms against the movement as a whole. In their introduction, the book's authors, Craig Scharlin and Lilia V. Villanueva, reveal that the manuscript for the book was well on its way to publication two decades ago at a university press, when it was rejected. The authors later found out that the project was refused by a reviewer "who did not agree with the criticism of the UFW leadership--and more important, any specific criticism of Cesar Chavez" in the Vera Cruz book.⁴ In the face of these kinds of silences, particularly in dealing with these two communities that have been economically and politically oppressed, how do we open up spaces to speak openly about differences within political movements?

These issues speak centrally to political dynamics long debated and discussed not only within the Asian Pacific American community, but also in the relationship of Asian Pacific Americans to other communities. Social movements provide opportunities to analyze the concentrated mobilization of resources by different groups, and the ways that these groups do and do not coalesce. By doing so, they not only provide a window of opportunity to consider community formation on an internal level, but also allow us to explore how community formation is shaped and determined by other groups, and by American culture at large.⁵ This is one reason, to give an example, why strikes are such illuminating sites of inquiry for Asian Pacific American studies.⁶ These issues take on increasing urgency as we begin the next century, particularly because of the continued economic hardships that many face, hardships that are regularly compounded by racial discrimination.

In this essay, I want to use Philip Vera Cruz's text as a vehicle for exploring some of these complex issues by analyzing the relations between Filipina/o American and Chicano/a workers in the context of the United Farm Workers. While this article is primarily focused on Philip Vera Cruz's voice and the Filipina/o American community, it is part of..

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*Rereading Philip Vera Cruz*¹

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