

# MASKS AND MERIENDA: TRANSFORMATIVE CARE CENTERED CULTURAL SHIFTS IN FILIPINX-CENTRIC VIRTUAL SPACES

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As our *kasamas* in past presentations have broken down, these connections through rest and care as revolutionary, and the ways in which we are in resistance to the colonial histories of universities are ingrained in the work that we do. We reflect on how we engage as the Bulosan Center, particularly our internship program, in response to the transitions and shifts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the past few years, we have looked at the following questions:

- How is/are student community/ies formed through pandemic virtual spaces in a way that challenges past experiences of hyper-productivity, burnout, and isolation?
- How did Filipinx youth and students engage in collective care during the pandemic through strategic (online) spaces of healing and resistance?
- What does collective care look like when we are physically isolated from each other, and how does collective care address the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth and students' wellbeing?
- How does collective care factor into youth and students' radicalization and into movement building? In other words, how is collective care & community building a form of praxis in Filipinx youth/student spaces?

Through this experience we held one-on-one interviews as well as collective small-group discussions with interns across the diaspora from California, New York, Chicago, Atlanta, Seattle, and Toronto here in North America, to Barcelona and Manila.

The Bulosan Center is a grassroots, community-engaged research center engaging issues pertaining not just to the Filipinx (diasporic) community, but also communities of color at large. We center political engagement, education, social justice, and history alike. Like many other community-centered spaces, the pandemic shifted us to distance learning and virtual ways of being in community.

For a little history about where our internship program came from, we started with 12 in-person UC Davis-based students who met several

weeks out of the month. The program has grown to become a massive virtual community—it's not perfect, but it's really beautiful to see it grow into a space which holds over one hundred virtual interns from across different backgrounds, experiences, and engagements with Filipinx Studies. We wanted to break away from the hyper professionalization of what an internship experience may or can or has been looking like for many folks—and center not just wellness, but community, capacity, and the ability to be present with one another.

Through this we follow the teachings of elder bell hooks, who said “When we choose to love, we choose to move against fear, against alienation and separation. The choice to love is a choice to connect, to find ourselves in the other.” Further down we'll discuss how, through our interventions, we choose to connect rather than just produce.

### **Beyond Productivity in a Pandemic**

The challenges we faced from the pandemic included challenges to mental health (such as, but not limited to anxiety and depression), isolation, lack of community, and feelings of powerlessness. These challenges came up for students both with their own work as well as community and movement work. We had so many folks feeling tired and burnt out, and this came up many times both in one-on-one conversations and group interviews.

While building off the challenges that we mentioned, what we were trying to grapple with while we were building our program—both from an intern/student perspective and staff perspective—we asked ourselves how to go beyond productivity in a pandemic. We grounded ourselves in pedagogies of revolutionary love and collective care, not only honoring the late great bell hooks and other brilliant Black feminists, but also looking at radical care and resistance from the first communities of our Filipino diaspora. We look towards communities that were built here in the United States, towards the Third World Liberation Movement with our Black, Indigenous, Chicax/Latinx, and other Asian American comrades, and into the present. These were the things we were really engaging with as we asked how to create transformative designs for this program.

### **Interventions from Wayne's Perspective**

As a staff member who had the privilege of being able to build with students and alumni alike around their experiences of being in organizations (Filipinx-centered or not), we wanted to center the internship experience/program around wellness over capitalistic means of productivity. It was less about how much program we are putting out there, and more of how can we be present with one another and honoring relative capacities. We looked at the ways we could engage college

students who only knew, or would know, “Zoom University” for their first one or two years of college experience.

What does seeking and building community space look like? Being nervous about being the one who’s sticking out of a space in community, especially when we’re on Zoom almost every single day; looking at the ways we build transnational community across lived experiences in diaspora. Again, we honor and thank the amazing community members, femtors, mentors, and collective spaces that were a part of building this together. Some of the people we collaborated with to hold space for our interns include the Filipino American Educators Association of California (FAEAC), LEADFilipino, and Little Manila Rising HEALING PusO.

## **Interventions from Nelle’s Perspective**

I wanted to discuss the different interventions we took through community building and collective leadership, specifically as an individual who engaged with the Bulosan Center as an intern and eventually a student leader. I was brought in to the Bulosan Center by Wayne and Dr. Rodriguez, and was met with an extraordinary amount of understanding. I had come into the program nervous, wondering whether I’d have to put on a performance of productivity. Upon reflection I see how my nerves were the result of internalized capitalism, and how internalized capitalism affects the ways in which we navigate spaces.

To be met with radical care, radical understanding, and community was paramount to me; As a student who lives with psychiatric conditions, I work best when I can operate outside the rigid capitalistic structures and expectations of work which come with them.

### *Community Building*

Radical community building was thus something I wanted to extend when I became a student leader, and I wanted to create the space that I was met with when I was in my interns’ shoes. I wanted them to be able to resist the need to perform and produce, as well as uproot the internalized -isms which can get in the way of genuine community building. With my fellow student leaders, we met to discuss how we wanted to shape our programming not just from a productive aspect, but a care aspect as well. We asked how we could open up genuine and vulnerable conversations, make our student teams feel supported holistically, and center our interns’ needs in this time.

With my team, I created an environment where students could come as they were, opening conversations where we could name our feelings and apprehensions amid the shifts of pandemic online learning. We discussed the dissonance we felt in our bodies as institutions such as the university demanded that we continue with business-as-usual. The impact of our care-centered spaces was articulated by Vince, an intern, in a one-on-one discussion after the end of program:

“This internship was different . . . I felt like I wasn’t being asked about how I’m doing because our lead cared about whether or not I could get something done—I was asked how I’m doing because they genuinely want to know; it’s a rough time and our projects and other stuff came second.”

As the COVID-19 pandemic forced us through grief, isolation, and depression, the Bulosan Center’s commitment to community-building was a rejection of capitalist performance culture and the ways in which production-based internship structures force interns and students to bury these feelings to their own detriment. Replacing this with collective healing, we grounded ourselves in the notion of radical love, which bell hooks quotes from M. Scott Peck: that to love is to extend ourselves for the purpose of nurturing our own or another’s spiritual growth. We found that in isolation, the virtual spaces we created were some of—if not the only—places where we could express ourselves, and by extension, feel spiritually, emotionally, and holistically nourished.

### *Reflective Creation, Collective Leadership*

Another central aspect to our programming was a collective leadership approach, which empowered interns to take ownership of their projects—and by extension, the Bulosan space itself. When the internship launched in 2020, we spoke to interns at their onboarding meeting and emphasized the role of engaging with the self in order to do this work. Given the fact that the Bulosan internship was one of the first—if not the very first—Filipinx-centric space which our students were able to join, it was paramount to us as leaders to let them know that they have a say and space in the virtual community.

After encouraging students to bring their talents into their internship experience, we watched as Bulosan interns created student-led initiatives. Students reflected on their needs, launching virtual study halls, socials, and community watch parties. These Zoom gatherings gave participants the opportunity to be present with each other while also addressing the isolation they felt during Shelter-in-Place. While engaging with classes via distance learning “didn’t feel real,” as many students shared, the online gathering spaces gave them a place to experience the small interactions they were missing while being away from the classroom.

Reflective creation and collective leadership also shaped many intern-driven projects. For example, my Transnational Research and Activism team (TRAT) was presented with a variety of sociopolitical issues to examine: the Philippine Anti-Terror Law, connections between American and Philippine police violence, mental health stigmas, etc. As a lead, my role was to set the direction our team would go; However, by centering collective leadership, I asked my team how they wanted to engage with these issues and what questions they wanted to explore in relation to them. Additionally, my interns also gave feedback on what

medium they wanted to use for their projects in order to use their passions and engage their communities in ways they deemed effective. By the end of the summer, the TRAT had created Instagram resources on the Anti-Terror Law movement and “Philippine Prisons & Policing,” a zine examining the connections between American anti-colonial surveillance and the development of U. S. and Philippine policing.<sup>1</sup>

Arguably, the most significant impact of the collective leadership approach was the empowerment it provided students. As mentioned previously, many interns faced a sense of powerlessness amid the pandemic. Through the opportunities to shape their internship experience via projects and events, Bulosan Center interns learned to reflect on their needs and creatively address them in the ways they wanted to. As leaders, we often said, “you know what you need at this time, better than anyone.” Through collective leadership and mutual learning, we rejected the hierarchical and white supremacist cultures that often permeate work and/or internship spaces. Rather than demanding a performance of professionalism, avoiding difficult discussions, and framing the need for help as weakness, we opened Bulosan to our full selves. In turn, both students and leaders expanded our capacities for not only heart-centered work, but full joy, true community, and unbridled humanity. It was through this model that we built a culture beyond productivity.

### **Wayne on Transformative Capacity-Culture Change and Building Community Amidst the Pandemic, On Centering Wellness**

When building out the Bulosan Internship program, I reflected upon my time in student led spaces and community organizations, both within and outside of campuses. What stuck with me were the great aspects of community building, finding a space to call home, and the ability to be vulnerable and trusting with those around you. I also reflected, though, on what harm and hurt came up: overworked student organizers, cliques and exclusion, burnt out participants and interns and student staff. We created this space and program with these reflections at the forefront, centering the wellness, capacity, and intentions of both interns, staff, and community members. We want to stray away from the hyper-capitalistic and performative experiences of organizations solely focused on the quantity of programming produced each quarter. We want to challenge this notion of what productivity means in the sense of our internship program. It is less about producing “work” or material programming, but creating a space that nourishes growth,

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1. Bulosan Center for Filipino Studies. *Philippine Prisons and Policing: A Mini-Zine* (2020). <https://bulosancenter.ucdavis.edu/sites/g/files/dgvnsk8126/files/inline-files/PIC%20Mini%20Zine.pdf>

individual goals, and the collective well-being of this chosen community. Success in this program is not defined by who creates and establishes programming within their time here, but more-so how interns engage one another, learn with each other, and challenge themselves to grow throughout, both in-the-program and out-of-program experiences.

### **From Radical Care to Radical Action**

Since the Bulosan Center is situated in the Ivory Tower of Academia, we have strived to question the standards by which we act within such a white supremacist system. What has resulted is a model centering radical care. It is from this culture of care that we witnessed students develop their own praxis. When asked to reflect on how Bulosan's culture fostered praxis, former intern and team lead James shared the following:

“Bulosan shapes how we practice care and build that in spaces beyond. And even if [some people express that] there's a radical approach to politics, *Bulo* doesn't necessarily push people into that box. The politics and pedagogies are radical, but there isn't a push to force someone into that! It's a space that encourages tenderness and exchanges of care, little things like affirmations, acts of service like providing rest and study spaces and even just [offering] acknowledgment. *You don't necessarily realize you're being radicalized, you're just practicing radical care by virtue of the culture of the space.* You're asking, 'how are peoples' needs met, and by extension learning to ask, how are the movements' needs met?'”

James's thoughts articulate how the culture of radical care allowed Bulosan interns to expand empathetically. While engaging with fellow interns and tackling questions of social justice, our students created what we view as a microcosm of movement work; they asked what their needs were as individuals and as a community, reflected on the barriers that challenged their needs being met, and creatively built towards solutions to meet those needs. We as leaders see this as a form of praxis, especially since many interviewees noted that their experiences at Bulosan impacted the ways they transform other community spaces they are a part of. After the internship, some students have organized for ethnic studies at their own universities while others pushed for more transparent, politically radical, and care-centered cultures in their Filipinx student organizations.

Informed by our experiences as activist-organizer-scholars, the work that we do in Bulosan transforms our ideas of what academic and movement work can look like. Amid paradigms that often demand fast-paced productivity or urgent mobilization, our models of collective care, community-building, and transformative change have fostered reflec-

tive and reflexive ways of thinking and acting. In the same ways that we build communities toward radical solutions in grassroots organizing, our team at the Bulosan Center organized our students to address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, these collective solutions challenged hyperproductive, capitalistic, and white supremacist cultures of internships. What resulted was a virtual space where people could come as they are, build relationships in a time of isolation, take ownership of social justice projects, and heal in each others' presence

Moving forward, we leave you with the following questions:

- As we re-enter in-person community spaces, how do we recenter collective wellness over tireless production?
- How do we view membership and engagement beyond expected labor?
- How do we engage healthier conversations regarding accountability and shared capacities?

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