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Comprehensive and authoritative

FOUR primary waves of Filipino immigrants have streamed into America beginning in the early 1900's. These immigrants were driven "not only by the promise of unlimited opportunities, but also by the force of their own colonial mind," according to Reuben S. Seguritan in his highly-informative book, "We Didn't Pass Through The Golden Door: The Filipino American Experience."

With the venerated Manong generation being the first main category of immigrants,

Filipinos subsequently proceeded to settle in America in large numbers after the end of World War Two, during the "brain drain" phase in the mid-1960's, and following the imposition of martial law in 1972 in the Philippines.

Seguritan belonged to that last major immigrant wave. Deciding to reside in the United States rather than live under the Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines, where he was ostracized for his political activism, Seguritan became a practicing lawyer in the state of New York in 1974.

He has worked as a counsel for several Filipino American organizations and as a tireless spokesperson on discrimination and immigration matters. A dedicated activist in the FilAm community, Seguritan has methodically gathered his collection of essays in a concise, 200-paged text that is a valuable reference point for anyone interested in the Filipino American experience.

Seguritan's essays, composed over a 25-year period, are nothing out of the ordinary in terms of their immediate, straightforward style, but are unquestionably comprehensive and authoritative when it comes to their substance. The essays lay out key aspects of what Filipinos have historically gone through in painstakingly building a life for themselves in the United States.

Resembling other contemporary FilAm writers in their endeavor to rediscover their people's collective past, "We Didn't Pass Through the Golden Door" attempts to fill in the empty stretches that have been proliferating in FilAms' historical and cultural consciousnesses. The book tries to inspire FilAms to take it upon themselves to define who they are, as well as understand where they came from, what they have endured, and what future direction they should take.

Seguritan writes that shaping and maintaining an autonomous Filipino identity, as it is negotiated through the sticky web of America's commodified and consumerist culture, is more complicated than simply declaring something conveniently succinct as "I am Filipino, therefore I am."

He makes a compelling argument that life in America, while perhaps more prosperous for Filipino immigrants, can also become an environment in which the Filipino identity is subverted for another that is totally alien and artificial. As Seguritan warns, the Filipino identity runs the risk of becoming submerged under the "rigors and ordinations, as it were, of Western, particularly, American life, culture, and society."

The author laments the fact that the majority of immigrant professionals from the Philippines have "taken to the lifestyles of the American middle class" and in the process have allowed their ethnic and cultural identity to decompose into a shadow of its former authentic self.

Speaking of the Filipino American self, Seguritan writes that it is stuck at a perplexing crossroads between its Filipino and American identities. With the latter pulling intensely and beguilingly, and the former calling desperately to be saved before sinking below

the surface, Filipino Americans find their selves planted on two opposite shores mired in confusion: "That crisis of the self becomes all the more painful for the Filipino American who is hard put to assert-

Book Notes

Allen Gaborro
reviewer



We Didn't Pass Through the Golden Door by Reuben Seguritan

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ing his identity as American while at a loss in finding his own roots."

Seguritan is pretty even-handed in administering blame for the marginalization of the Filipino identity. He depicts the American colonization of the Philippines as a "root cause" of the estrangement between Filipinos and their identity. Eager to fit the image of what was considered right and proper in the American colonial ethos, and allured by the promise of riches in the imperial center, many FilAms forswore much of what was truly original about them: their nationality, history, ethnicity, and culture.

At the same time, Seguritan attributes the negative imagery, or to be more precise, the invisibility, of Filipinos in America to what he complains is their propensity towards division rather than unity, their tendency to feud rather than reach any kind of lasting reconciliation, and the absence of national pride among far too many of their countrymen.

To his credit, Seguritan does not harp on Filipinos' past shortcomings or misfortunes. He chooses instead to be more encouraging than critical, more hopeful than pessimistic, and more proud than disappointed when he puts forward constructive ideas for reinvigorating and redefining the Filipino identity.

Seguritan should be commended for stressing that FilAms "need to take stock of themselves and reassess their various missions and roles in helping form multicultural America...not only must we unite to define and redefine our identity in an increasingly diverse society, but we must project this identity to America and the world."