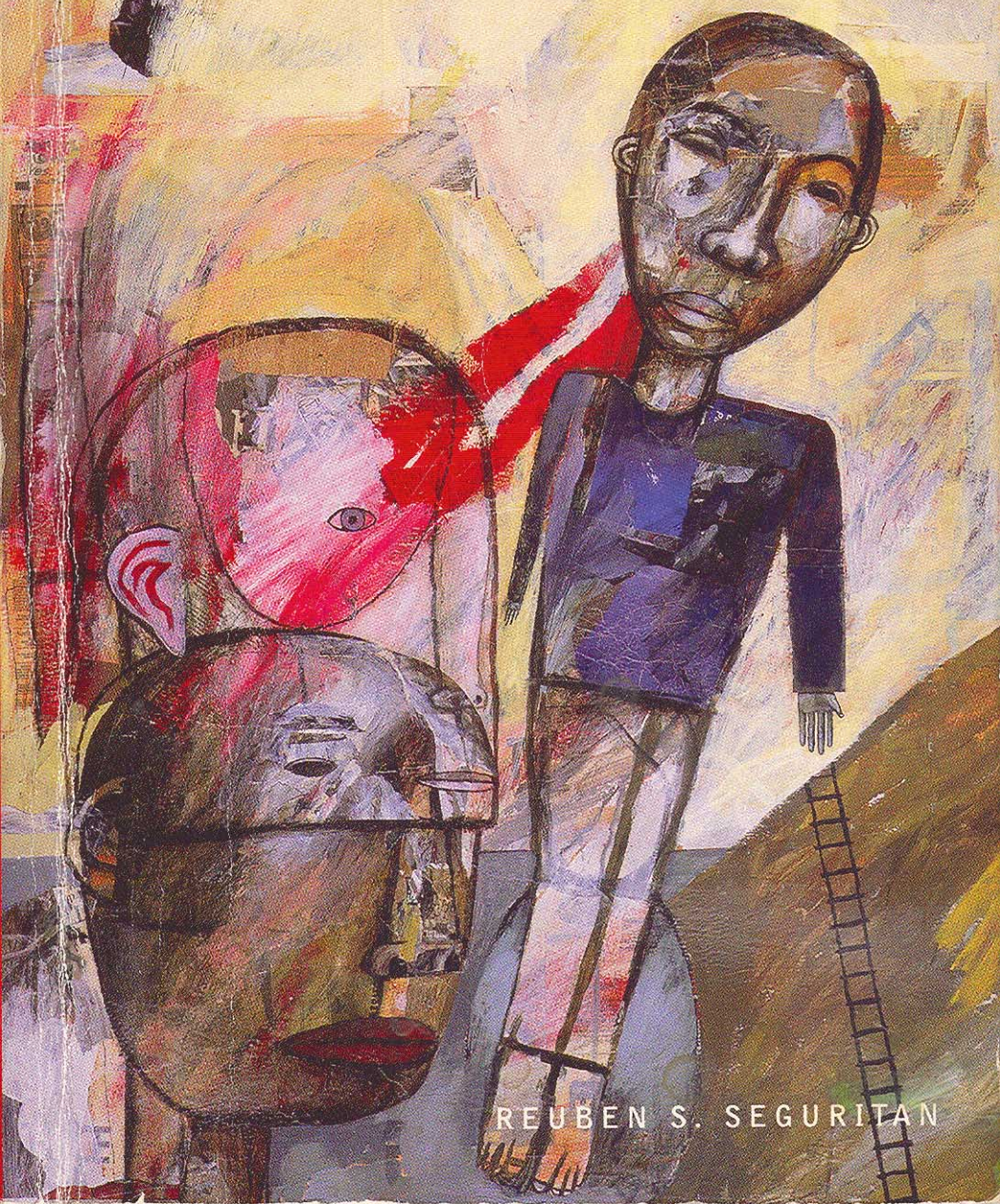


WE DIDN'T PASS THROUGH THE GOLDEN DOOR

THE FILIPINO AMERICAN EXPERIENCE



REUBEN S. SEGURITAN

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FOREWORD



The saga of the Filipino expatriate in America has been told and continues to be written about in stories, socio-historical tracts, and dissertations a great many times. Some of the most poignant appear, for instance, in the sentimental tales of Carlos Bulosan or the quiet, nostalgic narratives of Bienvenido Santos. In most of the early writings, the accounts tended towards a kind of emotionalism, with the pain of separation from the motherland commingled with suppressed anger and bitterness at, oftentimes, being objects of racial discrimination. It was a difficult time, especially for new immigrants.

This book promises to be a significant contribution to the literature on migrant Filipinos and Filipino Americans. As more and more accounts get written down, not only of Filipino Americans, but also of Asian Americans, however, there is a noticeable shift in tone from that of pain or bitterness to forthright complaint. The tone

Foreword

shift is partly due to the changing times itself as well as the growing confidence which writers have found as the body of immigrant discourses and histories grow.

The author draws from his personal experiences as lawyer, community leader, and as Filipino immigrant professional himself to expatiate on the particular issues and dilemmas encountered by Filipinos in a foreign land. Although the usual theme of racial discrimination and cultural displacement underlies most of the accounts and discussions, the author remarkably scurries on top of the issue and focuses on the particular details: mistreatment of immigrant workers and professionals and veterans, conflicts among Filipino organizations, political empowerment, success stories of prominent Filipinos and Filipino Americans. Subsequently, the point gets across effortlessly, without the author's having to overstate the obvious but rather worn-out phrase, racism or discrimination.

For the most part, the author minces no words in criticizing not only some unfair legislations and practices of the American system, but the shortcomings and failures of Filipinos and Filipino Americans themselves. He points out the causes and defects, plays upon the nuances of particular issues, and gives learned suggestions on how problems could be resolved.

A "guide book" on how to live your life in America is one way to describe it. Filipinos and Filipino Americans could pick out invaluable insights—lessons, if you will—from the varied experiences among Filipino communities and organizations narrated and described here. There is an effort to trace a bit of history—to the days of his grandfather, granduncle, and the *manongs*—although most of it consist of direct, straightforward references to

contemporary events. The author draws a critical portrait of the distinct character and ways of the Filipino and, indeed, we could not agree with him more on many of the things he points out, particularly, concerning our extravagance and love for fun, our need to unite and get politically involved, but also our courage and indomitable spirit.

The value of the book thus lies in the documentation of Filipino immigrant experiences and then in what it purports to say about our character as a people, our need to unite, communicate, and assert ourselves in multicultural America. If we only take heed, then perhaps, taking off from the words of Wordsworth, the poet, we could then say, "the world (should not be) too much with us."

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THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

AN INTRODUCTION



This book was inspired by an account of my grandfather's journey to America in the 1920s, just before the Great Depression. Originally from the woodlands of Northern Luzon, Philippines, he packed his bags one day, left, and ended up a railroad track worker, joining other migrants in developing the American countryside.

My mother's brother came at about the same time, worked as a sugarcane cutter in Hawaii and later, grapepicker in Stockton, California. Then the husband of my father's sister arrived, joined the U.S. Army in 1942 and it was through him that my father immigrated. My turn came five decades after my grandfather's sojourn in America.

But the circumstances of my coming to America were different. I did not come to work, to seek a space in the countryside nor eventually be an American. I came to participate as a resource speaker in an international youth

seminar in 1972 on invitation from an American ecumenical group. I had just started my law practice then. Back in Manila, student revolts rocked the major universities and colleges after the writ of habeas corpus was suspended following the bombing of Plaza Miranda in August 1971. The streets were littered with pillboxes and reeked with smoke from gunpowder. I was in the military blacklist for my work as a lawyer for the student and labor movements.

I did not intend to stay in America. But in September 1972, Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law and I could not go home. News of arrests, tortures, assassinations, and salvagings hounded me as I stayed on and overstayed. I had to pass the New York Bar in 1974 and then pursue my law practice in New York City.

Thus, the few weeks of my stay stretched to more than two decades of working with the Filipino American community in New York. Perhaps, too, it was as my relatives wished, that I stayed longer, nurturing dreams as they had. After all, I come from a family of migrants claiming a space in the vast expanse of America. Maybe I needed to suffer a little like the farmworkers of Hawaii and California or experience the adventure—at once thrilling, nerve-wracking and frustrating—of workers who maintained the railroad tracks in the Pacific Northwest.

I believe there are others like me who are still in America today. We were exiles of a repressive regime who have chosen to seek home in this land.

For some reason, I stayed in America. As I wrote regular columns for Filipino American newspapers, gave orientation seminars to newly arrived Filipinos, mingled with the Filipino American community and joined fellow

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countrymen and women in solving various problems related to our forced and willful exile, I came to realize that Filipinos in America have a mission. There are ties that bind us if we only try hard enough to reach out to each other.

It is not easy to remain Filipino in America. Most of our immigrant professionals have taken to the lifestyles of the American middle class. Similarly, among ordinary Filipino American communities, the spirit of being Filipino often gets overridden by the rigors and ordinations, as it were, of Western, particularly, American life, culture, and society.

Nurturing my heritage of culture from the homeland, I have tried to speak out for Filipinos. I have written on the plight of our veterans, nurses, doctors, domestic helpers, "mail-order brides," and other countrymen and women in distress. I have felt it my duty as a lawyer to expose oppressive U.S. laws that discriminate against Asian Americans, Filipinos in particular.

At the same time, I have pointed out our lack of national sentiment and pride, our predisposition to factionalism, petty squabbling, and disunity that have impeded the formation of a genuine Filipino American community in the U.S.

What does it mean to be a Filipino in America? The answers to these questions are varied. We have been told that our immigration to America began as part of conquest. Early immigrants came as colonial subjects. Stories of their struggles have been passed from generation to generation. But whether life has been tough or kind, it can also be said that early Filipino migrants were as adventurous as the *conquistadores* who had set out to discover new worlds and new lives across the Pacific; that our immigration has been

fired not only by a struggling for survival but also by an adventurous spirit.

The Filipino diaspora is phenomenal. Thousands of Filipinos leave the islands every year in search of jobs, new homes, new environments.

Immigration to America has the longest history, the most challenging, and the one most sought. Despite fifty years of American colonization of the islands—including documented accounts of American atrocities against Philippine Independence forces, especially in the early part of this century, despite anti-American sentiments spawned by the student activist movements leading to the dismantling of the U.S. military bases in 1991, Filipinos have not stopped coming to America. Thus, latest statistics show that we have become one of the fastest-growing ethnic minority groups here. We are sure that there is a Filipino American community or at least a family in every state and every major city.

There will be no end to it, as there is none to our struggling to locate ourselves within this foreign setting. During the last decade of this century, Filipinos have made themselves felt in many areas of life in the U.S. Some have gone into politics. Filipino American organizations continue to grow in number, just as Philippine newspapers hold fort, and Filipino cultural centers and groups rise in many places.

This continued growth is reason enough why the Filipino American communities need to take stock of themselves and reassess their various missions and roles in helping form multicultural America. Further, 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.

The Journey Continues

This is a crucial juncture in our history as a people. As more and more Filipinos get transported to every nook of the seven continents, it becomes more and more imperative for us to reflect upon the phenomenon and impact of migration on both the home front, as well as, the host countries.

Assertion of ethnic identity and solidarity has become a battlecry in many parts of the world. But in the U.S., a backlash against these efforts is also being felt.

In 1994 for instance, the U.S. elected its first Filipino American governor in Hawaii; but California also enacted Proposition 187, intended to cut off medical, educational, and other public services to undocumented aliens. Two laws were enacted in 1996, particularly, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act which resulted in substantial reduction of the benefits to legal immigrants. Even those who become naturalized Americans have been affected by the cutbacks.

A nationwide drive to cut back, if not eliminate, affirmative action is also in full swing. California voted in 1996 to end it. If this makes headway, it will set back past efforts at overcoming the effects of racial discrimination on minorities, including Filipinos.

The move to make English as the official and only language to use in the workplace does harm to ethnic culture and identity. America, even if it becomes culturally diverse, wishes to retain the hegemony of the English language, but it must recognize that real diversity could only be realized if Americans become less hostile to other cultures, other languages, other lifestyles.

These developments invite serious reflection and introspection. Who are we? What are we like? How have we come together? What circumstances brought us over? Are we happy? What will become of us in the 21st century?

There are no easy answers to these questions: only conjectures, speculations, dreams, and aspirations. As the Filipino nation rises from a disturbed past, we are called upon to contribute to the shaping of a story told from the viewpoint not only of a handful but of all who consider themselves Filipinos wherever in the world they may be.

This collection of essays culled from twenty five years of speaking and writing, I offer as a modest contribution.

PART I

**ON THE ROAD
OF THE
DIASPORA**

THE LEGACY OF THE MANONGS

The story is told of how on December 20, 1906, a group of fifteen Filipinos arrived in Honolulu aboard the *Doric* together with 130 Chinese, a few Sikhs, and 288 Japanese. As the Philippines was a United States colony at the time, the Filipinos, unlike the rest, did not have to go through immigration but were only fumigated before being allowed entry.

Fred Cordova in his book, *Filipinos: Forgotten Asian Americans*, derives from research made by Dr. Ruben R. Alcantara, American Studies professor at the University of Hawaii, and lists down the names of these first-wave immigrants as follows: a family of five including Simplicio Gironella, 56, and sons Mariano, 23, Vicente, 19, Francisco, 18, and Antonio, 14; two sets of brothers, namely, Mauricio Cortez, 21, and Celestino Cortez, 19, Prudencio Sagun, 28, and Cecilio Sagun, 27; and six others, namely, Filomeno Rebolido, 30, Marciano Bello, 28, Emiliano Dasulla, 26,

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Apolonio Ramos, 26, Martin de Jesus, 22, and Julian Galmen, 20. Simplicio Gironella's son, Francisco, spoke excellent English and acted as interpreter for the group. The first fifteen Filipino recruits for the Hawaiian plantations all came from Ilocos Sur province in Northern Luzon, thus they were called *manongs*, an Ilocano word meaning older brother. Although there were other Filipinos who had come to Hawaii before then, this group of fifteen has been identified, particularly in Dr. Alcantara's pioneering work, as having constituted the first wave of Filipino immigration to the United States.

Our immigration history thus traces back to the *manongs* and then continues through the second, third, and even the fourth wave, with the same running theme of racism and discrimination which, of course, we share with the rest of those who come from Asia and the Third World.

At the time of the U.S. annexation of the Philippines in 1898 after Spain left, the Filipino people was a disembodied lot, ready to submit if only from exhaustion from the long war against the previous colonizer, no matter if the spirit of resistance never died.

More than three hundred years of Spanish and several decades more of American colonization have not only devastated the culture and consciousness of the people but brought suffering and poverty to the Filipino masses. No development or progress was expected, of course, under colonial rule.

The Spaniards exacted tributes, introduced the torrens title system and the hacienda system which served to widen the gap between the rich landowners and the peasant and laboring masses. The Americans took over as the new colonial master, establishing the English language as

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medium of instruction, and deceptively presuming the people ignorant of government so that they could hold them at bay even as they figured out what to do with their newly acquired colony.

It could be said that except for those in Mindanao in the South, the Filipinos had lost almost everything they had to the colonizers and were left with almost no choice but seize the opportunity to migrate to other places in their struggle to survive

Filipino immigration to the United States followed as a matter of course, especially with reduced migration rate among the other Asians, particularly, Chinese, Japanese and Koreans. After the U.S. annexation of the Philippines, tens of thousands of Filipinos were recruited first to the Hawaiian farms in the early 1900s and then the mainland in the 1920s.

Among Asian immigrants, the Filipinos had the most familiarity and kinship with the West. The first wave which arrived in Hawaii in 1906, as mentioned above, consisted of Ilocanos. From 1920 up to 1929, more than 30,000, mostly under thirty years old, entered California, with the men outnumbering the women a hundred or even a thousandfold.

Ronald Takaki in his book, *Strangers From A Different Shore*, recounts a story by a Filipina migrant, Genevieve Laigo of Seattle, and how she "never forgot how the Filipino men greatly outnumbered the Filipino women on the ship carrying them to America in 1929—"There were three hundred men and only two women!" The account reports further that in 1930, only 16.6 percent of the 63,052 Filipinos in Hawaii were female and on the mainland, there were only 2,941 or 6.5 percent of the 45,208 Filipinos.

The *manongs* who came or were brought to Hawaii

and the U.S. mainland during the early period of the American occupation of the Philippines had, for all intents and purposes, lost their memory of struggle. They could only look up to a dream of a golden door of opportunity in the new land. Most left with promises that they were coming back readily or as soon as they had accumulated the money that they needed to pay off their debts, buy their families lands of their own, build them a decent, if not, luxurious-looking homes, and perhaps coming home as Takaki points out, "like peacocks ... strut down the dusty streets of their villages, proudly showing off their 'Amerikana' suits, silk shirts, sport shoes, and Stetson hats." In most cases, especially among the farm and cannery workers, it took a lifetime to fulfill, if at all, those promises or the dream remained a dream. Most sojourners never returned home.

Thus, unlike the rest of the Asian migrants, the Filipinos were brought to the United States not only by the promise of unlimited opportunities, but also by the force of their own colonial mind.

Worth mentioning here which deviates somewhat from the typical story, though still within the colonial framework described above, is that of *Manong* Severino Foronda Jr. Now 92 years old, he recounts of how he was recruited from his hometown in Santa Lucia, Ilocos Sur. Barely 18, he arrived in Seattle on May 20, 1928. He worked in the fruit and vegetable farms in California during late Spring and early summer then went north to Seattle and the salmon canneries in Alaska during the summer months. A year later in July 1929, Severino ventured to Chicago for better opportunities but did not have much luck either, especially when the stock market

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crashed in October 1929.

He then moved to New York in December of the same year. In not a few places where he applied for employment, he was met with the warning, "we only hire whites here." Finally, he found work in a restaurant then, later, at Commodore Hotel where he was assigned to the food and the coffee and pantry departments. He lasted four years there and had good memories of his job. Despite some painful experiences of discrimination, he appeared better off than those who remained in the farms and canneries on the West Coast.

Four years before the outbreak of the second world war in 1941, he had settled in Garden City, Long Island in New York. He attended Defense school during the war, then was offered by the head of the same school a job at Republic Aviation which involved "secret work" and 11 hours of work a day with the air force. He recalled how he was sent to Germany on a secret mission for eight weeks during the Cuban crisis. Severino held his job until his retirement in 1970.

Severino married a Filipino American, Laverne, with whom he had three children. Laverne, who was born of Filipino immigrant parents in the United States, has her own tale of bitter experiences of racism in school and her place of work—she had a mighty hard time, in fact, finding work, because she was colored—that, paradoxically, looked even more painful than that of Severino's. The fact is that, especially in the early stages, for Filipinos and other people of color, being born in the United States was no shield against racism.

Few stories have come up about *manongs* on the East Coast and Severino Foronda's perhaps represents an

undercurrent of the Filipino diaspora which would later connect with the stories of the second and third waves.

The *manongs* who stayed in the farms and canneries on the West Coast had their typical narratives of racial discrimination and oppression. Yet, for the most part, they could only think in terms of submission and self-preservation. For one, there was no ideology onto which they could hold to arm or strengthen them and many never really had a chance to perceive beyond the confines of their socio-cultural environment.

Nevertheless, political consciousness developed somehow and inevitably, especially among agricultural and cannery workers, and as Susan Evangelista writes in her book, *Carlos Bulosan and His Poetry*, "Filipinos were good organizers and fearless strikers, despite the forces of vigilantism brought to bear against them." The Filipino workers figured in major strikes in California in 1934 and much later joined with Mexican grape pickers in the great Grape Strike of 1965 which, although led by Chicano labor leader Cesar Chavez, was actually started by Filipino workers.

It could be said that strong and committed as the struggles were—except perhaps for the great Grape Strike of 1965—the fact that they were migrants, strangers in a white man's world must have rendered it extremely difficult for them to even figure out the right approaches to struggle.

Then there was loneliness. A *manong* who was closest to this writer comes to mind, my uncle, Simeon Sajor, who migrated just before the Depression. He picked grapes and worked in the sugarcane fields, and asparagus, pea, and grape farms first in Hawaii, then in Stockton,

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California. He lived mostly alone, except for moments when he went out for fun with fellow workers. In his later years, he lived near the same farm where he worked all his life. Uncle Simeon, one of the last of the *manongs*, died a lonely man in 1987.

This "legacy of loneliness" for the Filipino migrant is certainly tied up with racism itself. As competition between white workers and Filipinos grew fierce, racial hatred intensified, sometimes resulting in violence and riots. Takaki gives a good account of it in his book, particularly referring to white men's attacks on Filipinos in Reedley and Watsonville, California in 1929.

The white men saw the Filipinos not only as economic rivals but were also jealous of their sexuality. This conflict would lead to the application of the California anti-miscegenation law to Filipinos. The original California law "prohibited marriages between whites and 'Negroes, mulattoes, or Mongolians.'" When the law was successfully challenged in a case involving a Filipino—since the Filipino was not Mongolian but Malay—"the state legislature amended the anti-miscegenation law, adding the 'Malay Race' to the restricted category."

Thus, it is partly on account of restrictions such as embodied in the anti-miscegenation law and because there were not enough Filipino women to woo that such loneliness took root.

It is to the *manongs*, or the Filipino immigrant laborers, that we trace our history as an immigrant group in America, and as mentioned, a lot of that migratory impulse or need goes back as well to Philippine colonial history. All that pain, bitterness, racial oppression, and

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nostalgia, while exacerbated by the basic hostility of the white man's world to people of color, also inheres in our own failure to achieve true freedom for ourselves. The same basic failure accounts for our continuing crisis of identity and nationhood.

Indeed, it would seem like there was not a moment in our history when it felt like the Filipinos were one people or that we understood the exact ideology that we live by or even the language to use. One wonders how we could even then find confidence in ourselves. And where a sense of insecurity abides, so would disunity and disequilibrium occur. For most, it is still like living from day to day, partaking of the bounty as much as we could, and taking care solely of our own. That crisis of the self becomes all the more painful for the Filipino American who is hard put to asserting his identity as American while at a loss in finding his own roots.



THE STORY OF MY GRANDUNCLE



This is the story of my granduncle, Numeriano Seguritan, although it could well be the story of migrant Filipino intellectuals who came to the United States before the Depression.

He came to the United States in 1924, at age 19, right after graduation from Vigan High School in Ilocos Sur, Northern Philippines. He comes from Cabugao, Ilocos Sur. Like the rest of the starry-eyed migrant dreamers, he came to America with earnest hopes of making it big.

Starting out as grapepicker and farm worker, first in California and later in Seattle, he put himself through college in the hope of eventually finding a better, less punishing job. In the winter, he worked at the canneries in Alaska.

Somehow, fortune smiled on him when a professor of his took him in his employ as a houseboy and saw him through his college education.

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In no time, he earned his degree in Linguistics and Philology at the University of Washington and even at a time when racism was strongest, his grades were mostly A's. His story was published in the *Seattle Daily* when in 1931 he graduated magna cum laude, above that of the ordinary Phi Beta Kappa scholar. For his feat, a Filipino businessman rewarded him with \$50.

As a student, he had been conscientious and diligent. He would spend his time in the library reading, poring over every good book that came his way. Soon he would discover his great interest in and talent for languages, for newspaper accounts of him emphasized his being a linguist.

Granduncle Numeriano studied 17 languages, including Arabic, Hebrew, Russian, Greek, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, German, French, Danish, Dutch, Swedish, Norwegian, Latin, Roumanian, Japanese, and Sanskrit, in addition, of course, to English and Malayo-Polynesian philology to which his own native tongue belonged. He could write and speak nine languages fluently.

Even with his Bachelor's and later a Master's degree in Languages, he could not land the right job that he envisioned for himself. He was discriminated against, as with the rest of the migrant, non-white workers, and ended up hopping from one, mostly manual, job to the next. The college degrees that he earned did not help much during the Depression years and it was an arduous struggle that he had to wage to survive from day to day. At one time, he even tried applying with the U.S. Navy but did not make the grade because of his height.

It was the same story for my granduncle as that told

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in Bulosan's *America is in the Heart*. Even then, he was in the same class of Filipino intellectuals as the eminent writer and was described in a newspaper article published in California in 1931 as "one of the most brilliant among the luminaries of the Filipino intellectuals of Seattle."

One great thing about him was his faith in the Filipino, his belief in unity which would send him one moment acting in a Christmas drama before a Filipino community gathering together with the only Filipino woman student in the school, Belen de Guzman, the next parleying with his compatriots on what best to do to keep Filipinos together as one "homogenous body."

As the English language was prescribed as the medium of instruction back in the Philippines, the language issue became a topic of debate. It was a time when, although Tagalog was officially proclaimed national language by Commonwealth President Manuel Quezon, English became so dominant that not a few Filipino writers wrote in it and thought themselves superior to Tagalog and vernacular writers for having done so. Of course, the colonized mind was acting up and until things cleared up during the period of radicalism in the sixties, there was this lingering attitude of arrogance and prejudice against things native, including language, by some misguided writers and intellectuals.

My granduncle always believed that the Filipinos should develop a language of their own, whether Tagalog, Ilocano, or any of the Philippine languages; he did not think that English would ever become our national language and, of course, he was right. He thought that Tagalog was dominant and should thus be adopted as the common language of Filipinos. In much later years,

Tagalog would yield to Pilipino which, although still based on Tagalog, would incorporate the various other Philippine languages, including English.

The degree that he obtained with high honors from the University of Washington helped him little in his hunt for an appropriate job in California and in other places. Yet, he always nurtured the hope that the Filipino would emerge triumphant. His faith never wavered and he saw through the phantasmagoria of cultures and racial biases that America and the Western world imposed on him. It was not easy for the colonial mind to see through all that but he did.

Sometime in the mid-fifties, he left to apply for teaching with the universities back in Manila. It was tough at first adjusting to the new environment after such a long period of absence. He was offered the post of Philippine Ambassador to Germany, but he declined.

He felt displaced but gradually found fulfilment where he belonged and although he had already adopted American citizenship by then, he lived a good part of his productive life from the fifties to the mid-seventies, teaching language courses at the University of the Philippines and in other universities in Manila. He had been shuffling back and forth, but always there was that sense of purposiveness and unflinching national pride which guided him through all that journeying.

The last time I saw him was in 1990: an old man sporting that wistful look of wisdom and still the independent, extraordinary soul that he had always been, charting his own course precisely through the vertigo of racism, oppression, workers' strikes, McCarthyist paranoia, and all the events and forces that weighed down

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on the battered soul of the immigrant. It was difficult but he found his way. In April 1996, he passed away.

My granduncle's story reflects an accompanying theme to that of the *manongs*, the migration of Filipino intellectuals which resulted in what came to be known as "brain drain." It should be noted that during the American colonial period, Filipino migrants included not only the agricultural farm recruits but also U.S. government pensionados or scholars sent for training in the United States. This would start the exodus of intellectuals—writers, teachers, university professors—and would-be intellectuals, including foreign exchange students, known as American Field Service (AFS) scholars.

Much later, after the formal "granting" of Philippine Independence in 1946, scholarship grants such as the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations grants would take the place of the pensionado program, with the same result of systematically converting the Filipino intellectuals into propagandists of American culture. Needless to say, the structures of neocolonialism were firmly in place even long after the Americans left in 1946. Filipino professionals followed suit and "the song has remained the same" ever since.

My granduncle was part of that phenomenon, although, like the great Carlos Bulosan, he came on his own. It may be that it served him well to be an independent traveler without particular sponsorship from the U.S, like it did Bulosan, because then, although economically hard up, he could move and think freely.

A good number of scholars stayed in the U.S. for good or became staunch propagandists of American and Western culture. Of course, there were a lot of them, too,

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who went home, some dying in battle, some still locked in struggle against oppression and exploitation.