

***Five Faces of Exile:
The Nation and Filipino American
Intellectuals***
Augusto Fauni Espiritu

Gerald Burns

Back in 1990 I had occasion to hear Filipino novelist Bienvenido Santos speak at a conference in Hong Kong on Asian writing in English. I'd been in the Philippines for the better part of a year then, had begun to read some of the country's writers, Santos included, and I was interested not only in hearing what he'd have to say but in seeing how he would stack up against the other conference headliners, some of whom were impressively big names. He stacked up pretty well: head and shoulders above the others, in fact. He gave a mesmerizing talk, by turns challenging, charming, laugh-out-loud funny, and deeply insightful, all delivered without a note in sight. I remember one moment in particular very well. It came not during the talk but in the question-and-answer following. Someone from one of the other countries represented at the conference asked: "Mr. Santos, what has been the reception of you and other Filipino writers outside the Philippines?" The reply was as blunt as it was immediate: "We haven't made a dent." To illustrate, the speaker went on to cite, unflinchingly, his own inability to find a publisher for his work in the United States, where he had resided for many years.

Of course, during the intervening time I've become aware of developments that have at least qualified the substance of Santos' answer. As he was speaking, Jessica Hagedorn's *Dogeaters* must

have been just coming off the press at Pantheon. A number of Frankie Jose's novels were republished in the States over the course of the 1990s. And Ben Santos' own fiction, along with that of other Filipino and Filipino American writers, began to appear with increasing regularity in anthologies of Asian American or multicultural literature. But the spirit and tone of his reply stayed with me, helping to define the writer in my mind. What I took to be its refreshing candor stood out in sharp contrast to the prevailing sentiment of self-congratulation at the conference. And it seemed to bespeak a security in the man's sense of his own talent and achievement that was of a piece with the bravura lectern performance.

Now, though, having recently read Augusto F. Espiritu's *Five Faces of Exile: The Nation and Filipino American Intellectuals*, I'm prepared to understand that moment a little differently. What the author shows in his chapter on Santos, one of the five "faces" whose portraits he offers in this book, is first of all that the writer's skill in oratory—which Espiritu characterizes by the term "performativity"—was the product of both native traditions of eloquence and American tutelage in his early school days; as such, it represented a deeply ambivalent heritage. Secondly, he shows that Santos' writing career was haunted by fears of being a "loser," and an "excluded outsider" (149-50), fears Espiritu links to the larger feelings of "shame" which are said to have constituted one principal driving force in the writer's literary productivity and his life. By that account, the seemingly straightforward reply, "We haven't made a dent...I haven't been able to get published in the U.S.," must have come only after a hard swallow of personal pain and a quick summoning of intellectual courage. On the other hand, Espiritu also notes in Santos a lifelong "penchant for self-deprecation" (147), so perhaps the admission needs to be chalked up as much to the speaker's desire to be charming as to face squarely his private demons.

This is the kind of intriguing complexity that greets the reader of all five of Espiritu's portraits of venerable figures in Philippine letters: Carlos P. Romulo, Carlos Bulosan, Jose Garcia Villa, N.V.M. Gonzalez, and Santos. Or, as the saying goes, Is it