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Reuben Ramas Cañete

Masculinity, Media, and Their Publics in the Philippines: Selected Essays

Review Author: Miguel Antonio N. Lizada

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Masculinity, Media, and Their Publics in the Philippines: Selected Essays

Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2014. 216 pages.

How does one go about theorizing the construction of contemporary Philippine masculinities? What insights can we learn about ourselves—our postcolonial conditions, our neoliberalized disposition, our place in the circuit of the globalized market—through an examination of such constructions? In his book *Masculinity, Media, and Their Publics in the Philippines*, Reuben Ramas Cañete interfaces the problematic notion of masculinity in the Philippines and the political economy that enables, mobilizes, and is ultimately interrogated by such constructions.

Drawing on a cross-section of works of notable scholars on postcolonialism and globalization studies (such as Benedict Anderson and Arjun Appadurai), Marxism in the study of popular culture (such as Fredric Jameson, Raymond Williams, and Rolando Tolentino), and queer theory (such as Judith Butler and J. Neil Garcia), Cañete develops a critical analysis that interrogates the economic conditions and technologies of power that are complicit in the ways in which the male body is imagined and reimagined, coopted, and subverted. Cañete's collection of essays is not so much a descriptive commentary on masculinities, but a searing critique of how hegemonic apparatuses of contemporary political economy are given form through the deployment of masculinity within visual culture.

Cañete enacts this critique through eight essays that explore the various representations of contemporary Philippine masculinity. Admirably the essays are sequenced such that the attentive reader can see how one critical engagement leads to another. This rhizomatic interconnection is one of the book's strengths as it exposes the web of power relations that are the subtexts in the production of gendered and sexualized subjects.

The opening treatise on macho culture ("Revisioning the Macho: Masculinity in Philippine Visual Culture") is followed by a longer foray into the sexual politics of the macho within cinematic space ("The Macho Machine: Male Sexual Commodification of the Post-EDSA Period in Philippine Homoerotic Cinema and Video"). Particularly interesting is how Cañete strategically situates the homosexual politics in the films of Lino Brocka and Mel Chionglo within the political realities of these films'

milieu. He ties the appropriation of macho culture to, among others, the rise of videos in the 1980s, the influx of gay foreign tourists, and the presence of American servicemen. Having established the cultural power of the circulating cinematic text, he proceeds to the sexualized private spaces of pornography (“Sexscapes: The Spaces of Philippine Pornography”). This chapter differs from the previous discussions on macho culture not only in the choice of material but also in the way he directs his analysis. Cañete’s focus here is on how pornography functions as a kind of political resistance. Pornography, as this is performed within private space, is an opportunity to reactivate individualized modes of masculinity as a resistance to “institutions [that] hegemonize individuals into obedient servants” (67).

The positioning of pornography as resistance prepares the reader for the book’s second half, which engages overt public spaces (“Ang Gusto Kong Lalaki [The Man That I Want]: Bench Billboard Ads and the Male Body” and “Selling Manliness: The Supermall and Male-Oriented Consumerism in Selected Philippine Clothing Stores”) and public figures (“Man[n]ly Spectacles: Manny Pacquiao and the Rise of the ‘Postmodern’ Pinoy,” “From the Sacred to the Profane: Ritualizing the Oblation,” and “Sacrificial Buyers: An Ethnography of Queer Publics and their Reception of the *Oblation* and the APO Oblation Run”). The themes of agency here are more apparent. Particularly impressive is how Cañete links the post-EDSA economic scene with the proliferation of retail shops to account for the rise of a new kind of masculinity and the shift in the viewing public’s participation in meaning making. Such an accounting not only enriches the historicization of masculinity, but also opens analytic spaces for those interested in queer studies. This linking informs the problematic tension between the so-called “global gay” and the *bakla* vis-à-vis globalization. In these conversations, the term *bakla* cannot be easily translated as “gay” as it is precisely in this turn in Philippine LGBT scholarship that *bakla* has been problematized as a kind of identity inflected by class and, to a certain extent, geographic positioning. This tension is at the core of Bobby Benedicto’s *Under Bright Lights* (2014), where he discusses at length how market forces and globalization paradigms inflect the trajectory of male homosexual identity. Elsewhere, Martin Manalansan IV, in his groundbreaking *Global Divas* (2003), locates the various ways in which Filipino gay men in New York negotiate the complexities brought about by their gay identities in diaspora in order to highlight the “fissures” in globalized modernity. Although both these works are not engaged explicitly

in his book, Cañete makes a timely contribution to this conversation as he is able to focus on the radicalizing potential of masculinities largely neglected by Benedicto. Rather than the affluent bars of Greenbelt, Cañete brings us back to the everyday world of the lower middle class, where subjects have not quite lost their agency. This affinity with everyday Filipinos sets up a complementary relationship with Manalansan's book, which highlights the reifications and ruptures brought about by global capital in localized spaces and in diaspora.

The last two essays build on this tension between the male body and the problematic and contested narratives of nationalism inscribed onto the public figures of the boxer-turned-politician Manny Pacquiao and the University of the Philippines's oblation figure. Here, Cañete explores the various ways in which the male body, as a moving and stationary spectacle, embodies notions of violence and violent domination to mobilize its narratives of nationalism. Of particular interest is how participants in the oblation run use it to negotiate discursive meanings implied by the oblation.

This brief survey of the essays' core issues highlights the contributions that Cañete brings to the multifaceted academic conversations in the Global South. *Masculinity, Media, and Their Publics in the Philippines* is a rich reference material for gender and queer theory and postcolonial and globalization studies. In using masculinity as the focal corpus of these interpretative exercises, he shows how complicity is enacted even in the most private of activities (desiring, gazing, consuming). Moreover, a crucial subtext in his essays is an invitation to locate the creative ways in which masculinity—and by extension the totality of minoritized positions in gender and sexuality—can be utilized as a viable form of political engagement to interrogate, if not undo, the imbalances and inequalities of the present political economy. The male body is thus a hegemonic nexus of competing structures jockeying for articulations of power. He rebalances the two sides of the term “economy of desire” by placing pressure on the latter. The book is a much welcome addition to the works of scholars such as J. Neil Garcia, who has done groundwork on the historicization of male homosexuality in the Philippines, and Rolando Tolentino, whose voluminous works on cinema and popular culture have invited readers to reflect on the reification of geopolitical climates, most notably neoliberalism. In giving airtime to other forms of subjectivities, Cañete reiterates the radical potential of gender and queer theory as a politics of transformation and, to a certain extent, transgression.

Regrettably Reuben Ramas Cañete passed away in February 2017. The task of advancing his scholarship falls on his students at the University of the Philippines and those who have been influenced or at least encouraged by his works. One way is to extend his framework in the analysis of other prominent male figures, especially as the current political climate sees a return to strongmen figures who rely on performativities to strengthen their political momentum. These figures also embody various narratives of nationalism and power that Cañete addresses in his writings.

A glaring limitation of the book is that it is too Manila-centric. This is not an entirely bad thing as Manila is a critical node in the entry and exit of global and nationalist flows, but Cañete's arguments can be extended by examining various postcolonial revisionings of masculinity beyond the center. This "moving away" does not just refer to urban centers or the ruralized spaces outside Metro Manila but also to the diaspora. Such an investigation would complement the extensive work done on female and feminized labors. This point brings me to another limitation: the absence of femininity and feminization in this reading of sexual politics. In the discourse of masculinity and masculinization, where does feminization as an oppositional concept (if it can be read as such) come in?

As this book demonstrates, masculinity is a problematic, ever-changing, yet consistently powerful facet of identity politics. Cañete has left us a timely and significant jumping point. It is up to us scholars in this terrain to take up the conversation to new and exciting directions.

Miguel Antonio N. Lizada

Department of English, Ateneo de Manila University
Department of Comparative Literature, The University of Hong Kong
<mlizada@ateneo.edu>