

## Book Reviews

***Sacrificial Bodies: The Oblation and the Political Aesthetics of Masculine Representations in Philippine Visual Cultures.*** Reuben Ramas Cañete. 2012. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press. xii, 380 pp., figures, appendices, notes, bibliography, index. Paperback, Php 750.00.

SCULPTURE, UNLIKE PAINTING, does not normally carry its frame with it and does not open into a virtual space of say, a landscape, a portrait or a nude. It moves into a site, takes up its space, obtrudes it and changes it, to borrow from W.J.T. Mitchell (2005). As the sculpture takes its place in a location or station, it demands to be seen, felt, held, beheld, and encountered by other bodies in that space; it wants to be touched and attached, dressed up, mimicked (e.g., the Oblation Run), re-performed, reproduced, re-formed, to be our friend and companion. And when the sculpture takes the form of a lithe, tanned, and toned male body, the space is all the more activated, and becomes a highly charged site of ambivalent and “heteroglottal” political effects and actions. The sculpture is a desiring, vital, animated, and relatively autonomous agent that has a political and social life of its own (Appadurai in Mitchell 2005, 146) and whose artistic body, form, and symbolisms impact into the body politic and its multiple publics.

The political effect of artistic actions—in this case the *Oblation*—is the project of Reuben Ramas Cañete’s comprehensive study aiming to investigate the *Oblation* as a social, political, and aesthetic phenomenon. Anchoring his theoretical position around the term “political aesthetics,” Cañete premised his study on the notion, as was already hinted at, of “politics being produced as a result of aesthetic interventions in the social space” (3).

---

To develop and en flesh this theoretical position, Cañete deploys four more terms to complement the key concept of political aesthetics: “*sacrificial, embodiment, masculinity, representations*” (2). The idea of the *Oblation* as a *Sacrificial* body threads and structures the book and its chapters. From this idea, we deduce—taking the cue from Mitchell again—that the *Oblation* wants to give itself away in “total servitude” in the service of an imagined communal identity. Carefully disciplined and shaped according to noble and classic proportions, it projects strength, restraint, self-control, and service to a higher, messianic mission. Drawing on Christian imagery and the idea of the value of pain and abjection offset by the nobility of sacrifice and the spirit reigning over the flesh, the *Oblation* wants to be deified to be purged of dross humanity.

However, instead of a singular, homogenous, hegemonic heterosexual body, the *Oblation* wants to be many *bodies*, embodying the competing, intersecting heteroglottal positions, feelings, and expressions of its multiple publics. For the founding fathers, the *Oblation* functions as a totem of the UP “tribe,” bound by its laws and political aesthetics; and as the stand-in victim, sacrificed at the altar of UP-as-postcolonial-and-modernizing nation. For the mysterious group that conducts a ritual at its foot in the Oblation Plaza at UP Diliman, the *Oblation* is an idol who desires things: flowers, rice, “blood,” adoration, respect. Like its stance, the *Oblation* stands open as a seat of contradictions—vulnerable yet brimming with health and contained energy, receptive yet elusive, sacrificial yet monumental.

Cañete’s ably argued construction of the *Oblation* as a hybrid figure that eludes easy interpretation deconstructs monolithic masculinities, and opens up spaces for alternative models and politics of manhood: less individualistic, less self-absorbed, and more giving than older male stereotypes. It is also from this strength that I *want*—as a feminist critic—to reclaim this study’s theoretical maneuver as an offshoot of feminism. Though implied in the claim that the study lies at the intersection of cultural studies and masculinity, the feminist context and feminist origins of masculinity studies are not fully and explicitly articulated and credited.

Unlike for instance, in his earlier essay on billboards, where the author's context is clearer when he wrote that he "comes from a position sympathetic to (because originating from) the feminist experience," (Cañete 2012, 52) feminism in this study appears to have been subsumed under more macrodisciplinal contexts and theoretical categories: postcolonial studies, cultural studies, visual culture, which in their turn are methodologically enabled by anthropology (particularly ethnography), political economy, aesthetics, and art history. I could only presume that these methods are reconfigured and reframed by an unacknowledged feminist viewpoint, evident in his very critique of the Sacrificial's encoding as male, and its *representation* as *masculine*, two other key terms that expose the erasure of other "sexed/gendered/embodied agents of the field"(3) within a patriarchal visual culture.

Similarly, feminism in this study also tends to disappear under comprehensive and overarching concerns about race and "being Filipino" when it locates the *Oblation* as the "'anticolonial/anti-imperial' but silenced sacrificial body..." (Cañete 2012, 298). As such, this manifests what Kavita Daiya (2006) would describe as the "vexed relationship" in "much of current scholarship between nationalism and gender, especially feminist cultural criticism and the postcolonial critique of nationalist discourses"(1).

As a comprehensive survey, the study is understandably diffused and horizontal. Perhaps, had the study grounded itself in the emerging yet still under-investigated field of masculinity studies, around which other key terms and methods would have revolved, then fresher political directions and effects could have opened up all the more for the *Oblation* as a Sacrificial masculine body. Judith Newton (2002) refers to one such direction as a new "politics of feeling," which involves "the massive reconstruction of dominant masculine behaviors and ideals" such as obsessive competition, avoidance of the "lowly labor of doing for others," and eschewing the building of relationships around "trust and care," among others (190). As earlier stated, Cañete's study has hinted at but not fully

---

moved towards this direction in masculinity studies, and it is one towards which the sculpture of a lithe, tanned, and toned male body can move more productively as it transforms the space it occupies with other desiring, wanting, and sacrificing bodies.

Flaudette May V. DATUIN  
University of the Philippines Diliman

### References

- Appadurai, Arjun. 1986. "The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective." In *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Image*, William J. Thomas Mitchell, 145–168. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Cañete, Reuben Ramas. 2012. *Art and Its Contexts: Essays, Reviews and Interviews on Philippine Art*. Manila: UST Press.
- Daiya, Kavita. 2006. "Postcolonial Masculinity." *Genders* 43. [http://www.genders.org/g43/g43\\_daiya.html](http://www.genders.org/g43/g43_daiya.html).
- Mitchell, William J. Thomas. 2005. *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Image*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Newton, Judith. 2002. "Masculinity Studies: The Longed for Pro-feminist Movement for Academic Men." *Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory: New Directions*, edited by Judith Kegan Gardiner, 161–175. New York: Columbia University Press.