

Necessary History

Patrick F. Campos

Book Review of

***Constructing the Filipina:
A History of Women's Magazines, 1891-2002***

By Georgina Reyes Encanto

Quezon City: The University of Philippines
Press, 2004 (111 pp)



Reading Through: What is Said

Georgina Reyes Encanto's *Constructing the Filipina: A History of Women's Magazines (1891-2002)*, published by the University of the Philippines Press (2004), is a necessary articulation of a hidden history, a breaking of a long time silence. It is the first historical survey of Philippine women's magazines from a feminist perspective, spanning 111 years. Written in a journalistic manner, each page of Encanto's writing is clear, succinct, and accessible to the general reader. She is always focused and never highfalutin.

Her book aims to trace the popular cultural representation of women in women's magazines and its impact on women's consciousness in particular junctures of history. She divides her historical survey into five manageable periods: the Spanish colonial period, the American colonial period, the post-World War II years, the Martial Law years, and the post-Marcos regime up to 2002. She reads the contents of women's publications from each period through Marxist lenses, adapting Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony and Louis Althusser's theory of ideological state apparatuses (ISAs). She highlights the assumptions and differences of Gramscian and Althusserian concepts from the Frankfurt School's pessimistic conception of ideology as imposed by the dominant class from above and uncontested from below, and popular culture as merely "culture industry" or "mass culture". She asserts that a more progressive and optimistic interpretation of ideology is possible, and that popular culture, at the same time that it is purveyor of ideology, can be a vehicle

for social change. She argues that social formation is dynamic, allowing space for constant negotiation between opposing socioeconomic forces, and accommodating the subordinate group's ideas of resistance within the dominant ideology.

With these concepts given, Encanto launches into a descriptive analysis and appraisal of women's magazines published during the five specified historical periods. Consequently, she demonstrates how women's publications reinforce the dominant patriarchal ideology in order to sustain an imperialist and capitalist setup. What she underscores as significant cultural mis-representations of women in the magazines of the Spanish colonial period at the onset is what she uniformly recognizes and exposes in each and all of the other periods, concluding each chapter with the condemnation of the development of patriarchy and capitalism, as propagated and reinforced by "the Spanish or the American colonial administrators or the dominant class in Philippine society" (4), in collusion with the family, the Church, and the educational system (i.e., the ISAs). For instance, referring to nineteenth century magazines, Encanto writes,

Magazines served to spread the myths of patriarchy, to romanticize and make women's subordinate roles within the home glamorous and palatable to them, to mask the contradictions between what the ideological state apparatuses...propagated...and the reality. (18)

And toward the end of the book, referring to magazines of late, she writes,

Contemporary women's magazines have become so diversified and competitive...driven by commercial motivations, which underscore their capitalist orientation... Women's magazines since 1986 have increasingly become instruments of the dominant ideology, propagating patriarchal images that confine her. (105)

While Encanto stresses the uniform misrepresentation of women across time, she also stresses the varied forms of resistance accommodated and made evident in hegemonic magazines in different junctures of history: articles that aimed at the erudition of women in the sciences and the arts during the Spanish period; feminist articles that lobbied for equality between sexes, in terms of educational opportunities,

wages and benefits in the workplace, provisions in the law, and women's suffrage during the American period; political articles that opposed tyranny, consumerism, and discrimination against women during the martial law period; and liberated and liberating articles regarding sexuality, at present.

However, in the same breath and in true Marxist fashion, albeit with some unevenness in emphasis, Encanto dismisses these forms of resistance as ultimately incorporated in dominant ideology. The underlying implication all through out the survey is that a unified conception of female sexuality and the marketing of women's bodies underlie the capitalist enterprise, and this must remain so.

Reading Between: What is Not Said

The historicizing of women's magazines is long overdue, and Encanto's tightly framed history necessarily sets the stage for further critical appraisals. She raises questions not just about cultural representations of women *per se*, but whose interests these representations serve, how these representations are constructed and circulated, and how social subjects are positioned. However, although she harks back as far as 1891, the purview of her treatment is narrow, and as such can only be surmised as an overview, an initial attempt, as she herself admits.

Noticeable is that in spite of Encanto's self-conscious decision to write from a feminist perspective, feminist categories of gender and sexuality are downplayed, in favor of socioeconomic class categories. Furthermore, in terms of transnational and inter-national relations, in the colonial past and in neo-colonial present, postcolonial categories of race are elided and viewed completely within capitalistic terms. Such evasions of the interlocking categories of race, class, and gender are made, I assume, to keep the writing of this history compact and unified in vision. The elided categories complexly and simultaneously transform multiple systems of domination and meaning, and therefore if considered in great detail, would confound an initial effort at historicizing.

Necessarily, the systematizing and generalizing of a hundred-year history in a little more than a hundred pages leave in-between gaps and unproblematized assumptions. For purposes of this review, I will highlight three such gaps/assumptions: first, like many Filipino scholars, Encanto privileges Marxist criticism as the quintessential and all-important framework in which to frame all other categories; second, she assumes

that feminist aspirations are monolithic; and third, she completely evades questions of race and transnational (as opposed to class) negotiations and contestations. Encanto's conception of the relationship of experience and subjectivity hinges upon assumed theories of fundamental causation — that capitalism is patriarchal, hence the battle of feminism is against capitalism. This is no new position, which is why it begs the question, does class analysis alone still hold all the water?

Her history refuses nuances, reversed-readings, and subtle forms of resistances (such as postcolonial concepts of subversion, like mimicry and hybridity), and allows only blatant resistances. For instance, referring to women's magazines of the American period, Encanto writes:

Although they were published by women who belonged predominantly to the upper middle and elite social class, it is wrong to dismiss the magazines of this era as vehicles of the bourgeoisie, for the gains they achieved for Filipinos marked a turning point in their struggle for liberation from oppression, within a society that was itself struggling for its own liberation from the stranglehold of its American colonial masters. (50)

While this viewpoint congregates women regardless of class around one rallying point — that is, around patriarchal ideology — the hyphenated positionality of women's magazines' publishers of the American period was not problematized, but glossed over. These women publishers were not only elite, but also schooled under great American influence. It is no wonder that during this period, women fought for the same rights as the first wave feminists in the West fought for. But in the West there have already been a second wave of feminism and, now, postfeminisms, questioning the unproblematized white, Western, middle-class, mainly Northern hemispherical, conception of hegemonic feminism.

Shifting to the mode of the “post-”, implying a process of ongoing transformation, engagement, and change (such as in post-structuralism, post-modernism, post-colonialism, and even post-Marxism), unquestioned classical materialist presuppositions are increasingly harder to apply. This kind of shift in reading to a self-consciously non-hegemonic feminist viewpoint can include not only women with “cultural capital” (e.g., publishers, academics, elites), but also marginalized women who are silent in the production, circulation, and/or consumption of popular literature.

Nevertheless, the value of Encanto's work lies in its necessary position, its necessary articulation, its necessary publication, because no more nuanced, more problematized history of popular literature, no moving away from the theoretical concept of structure and metahistory toward discourse and its various formations and technologies, are possible without this initial systematized historical survey. The trajectory of Encanto's initial effort is away from the Frankfurt School toward Gramscian and Althusserian theoretical concepts; any next work must pick up from here, presumably toward the identification of power struggle as highly dispersed, rather than concentrated in easily identifiable places or groups. In this sense, the necessity of Encanto's work is in making possible the first reading and on taking the first position in the contest; the first reading necessarily leading to the second, and the third: a solidarity among scholarship of sorts.

Reading Beyond: What Remains to be Said

Being a seminal history, Encanto's work illuminates several areas for further study and research. For instance, beyond the detailed but shorter textual and content analyses of relatively new magazines, which have been published before, Encanto's analyses of the magazines of the colonial periods are now available for comparative studies; threads, continuances, and ruptures can now be detected within a larger context. As Luis V. Teodoro comments (on the blurb), the book is "an invaluable resource" for students and researchers who want to undertake studies that necessitate knowledge of what has been published in the not so accessible past.

More significantly, the historical survey sheds light on wide-ranging possibilities of enquiry. For instance, her class-based and gendered cultural model that allows for the articulation of the patterns of resistance in the process of cultural representation can be a model for communication research on subcultures. As she does it in her historicizing on a larger scale, this means studying not how subcultures and its individual members are (passive), but what they do (active) with commodities that they encounter and use in everyday life, and thus how they subvert dominant culture, in smaller groups. From her analyses of what the publishers have done actively in the past to exhibit resistances within the hegemony, attention can now be turned to a) the micrological level of dispute, and/or b) the contestation within the reception of readers, then and now. Encanto's challenge at the end of the book – "to enable

[Filipinas] to resist the ‘oppressive texts’ being peddled and fed to them...and to be more active participants in their self-liberation” (111) – must be heeded by a leap from her necessary history in general to the dignity of the specific Filipina.

Patrick F. Campos is a faculty member at the Communication Arts Department of Miriam College. He is also a freelance videomaker, musical scorer, and independent filmmaker. He earned his Bachelor of Arts in Film and Audiovisual Communication (cum laude) from the University of the Philippines (UP) where he is currently enrolled in the Master of Arts in Comparative Literature program.