

# philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

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## **Sa Loob at Labas ng Mall, by Tolentino**

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*Philippine Studies* vol. 50, no. 1 (2002): 135–136

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Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

**Sa Loob at Labas ng Mall kong sawi/kaliluha'y siyang nangyayaring hari: Ang Pagkatuto at Pagtatanghal ng Kulturang Popular.** By Rolando B. Tolentino. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2001.

This is Rolando Tolentino's most erudite work in cultural studies to date. Veering away from the paradigm of oppression and victimage which the earlier cultural studies used, this book articulates how cultural studies are a site of struggle. For Tolentino, however, cultural studies should still be situated within the larger framework of modern formations of power. In other words, it should still accommodate questions that seek to challenge the hegemony of patriarchy or probe ways that transgress the limits imposed by transnational capitalism.

Florante, the hero of *Florante at Laura*, a Philippine metrical romance, becomes a convenient trope in this book. Tolentino uses the scene where Florante, fettered to a tree, decries the subjugation of his kingdom by forces from both within and outside. The title of Tolentino's book is culled from Florante's complaint beginning, "Sa loob at labas ng bayan kong sawi,/ kaliluha'y siyang nangyayaring hari" (There, hapless state and even beyond, / treason has flung his tyrant-bond).

Replacing "bayan" with "mall" (the infernal forest of the present), Tolentino aligns cultural studies with our ethical struggle for emancipation. Hence, cultural studies is a politico-ethical stance: political because it interrogates various relations of domination and control and ethical because it seeks to articulate the possibility of transgressing these forces of domination. In other words, this book is part of an advocacy for a possible social change.

Tolentino provides us not only with a map but also with a vocabulary with which to understand the often conflictual terrain of cultural studies both in the local and global contexts of the emerging Philippines. Tolentino adds that cultural studies is neither an academic enterprise, in which the main purpose is the accumulation of knowledge, nor an attempt to speak for the dispossessed or disenfranchized. For him, the task of the cultural studies scholar is to assert one's subject position to explicate the conditions involving the Other.

Movies, novels, juridical texts, and statistics are the primary texts for investigating power play. Consider, for instance, the chapter "Narko-analysis" where he discusses how the problem of narcotics provides a spectacle that legitimizes state control. Drawing from various sources, including an enigmatic scene in *Noli Me Tangere*, Tolentino sees the history of solving the drug problem as a process of exclusion. The Chinese has been the perennial victim.

In the Rizal novel, Kapitan Tiyago (of Chinese descent) and Quiroga were suspected of peddling illegal drugs. During the Marcos era, Lim Seng, again a Chinese, was sentenced to death for being a drug pusher. The spectacle created justifies state sinophobia. Although we do not associate the Chinese with the drug issue any longer, our avowal of a drug-free environment is a function of excluding certain people in our society.

Drug addicts nowadays are the *tambays* (loafers) in the nearby retail/variety store or the gangs in ghettos, squatter and urban poor communities. They become easy targets for state control and domination. These people are depicted as aberrants, their place a breeding ground for criminals. The media has also capitalized on these people; a segment devoted to their crimes being allotted in national news tv programs. It is quite ironic, Tolentino observes, that the state uses lethal injection to execute criminals. Using drugs to solve the drug problem only shows the absurdity of state control and power.

In another chapter, Tolentino discusses the ambiguous role that the media played in the Doña Paz, Flight 387, and Ozone tragedies. Media anaesthetizes us by bombarding us with gruesome images of dead or mutilated bodies, with the sad result that one ceases to question and becomes numb to violence. However, Tolentino observes that our fascination with movies that deal with tragedies may still indicate that we still try to make sense of living and that despite the amnesia caused by sensationalism, we retrieve memories lost. Media become the liminal where one begins to ponder on the issues. We recall the other tragedies that have befallen the nation. Remembering becomes a counter-memory. Although we see how media capitalizes on sensationalism, counter-memories generated by movies transform us. To quote Walter Benjamin, this counter-memory "flashes up at a moment of danger" and for Tolentino this counter-memory becomes a signifier for a transformative history.

From what we can gather from Tolentino's work, cultural studies can be the nexus in which business, the state, and various sectors in society meet and negotiate, creating a history of the present in the day-to-day struggle for survival. Our way of life is both taught and performed for us, by us, and to us. As the title of the book implies, cultural studies is pedagogical and performative.

It is important, therefore, that we pay attention to these intersections to work out an ethos or a philosophical life. We need to scrutinize and be ever vigilant. By investigating various modes of subjections, Tolentino has actually articulated the means of transgressing them. Indeed, this book advocates a possible social change. When the intellectual map of critical studies in the Philippines has been drawn, this book will be a landmark.

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