

Express Yourself: "Exclusive Discos in Manila"

By Roselle Pineda

I had been hearing about the existence of exclusive places for lesbians almost all my lesbian life, but it was only in 1997 when I actually entered one. At the time, "The Sports Zone" was probably the only place in the country where women-only parties were being held, once a week. It was a small bar in Mandaluyong, in the eastern section of Manila.

After that experience, I started thinking seriously about lesbian spaces, and how these spaces empower lesbians amidst a heteropatriarchal society. Moreover, I experienced how visceral activities such as dancing play a role in expressing lesbian aesthetics within these spaces.

Dancing and other visceral activities have always been crucial to the expression of lesbian sexuality. This is evident not only in the popularity of exclusive discos that serve as venues for freedom and bonding for us, but also in the use of dance as a metaphor for lesbian sex, eroticism, love, union, communion and spirituality. Exclusive discos have long existed in the city—the first ones opening in the early 1980s, about a decade earlier than the formal establishment of lesbian activism in 1992.

This close relationship between lesbianism and visceral activities, particularly dance, is of course due to the body being a primary medium of communication both in these activities and in expressing sexuality.

This is a preliminary study. While conceptualising and writing this paper I realised the lack of published sources and related literature on this subject. Thus, I had to rely on surveys, subject interviews, and my ethnographic researches and experiences in the field.

Moreover, finding the subjects for my interviews proved to be even harder than identifying what methodology I would use for researching and writing. Very few people were willing to be interviewed for the record. Those who did agree—bar managers and event organisers—asked me not to mention their real names for the time being.

I was compelled to write about this journey because for so long, lesbians have been finding solace in exclusive discos, yet nobody has articulated their language of resistance. As a dancer/performer, an artist, and a lesbian advocate, I recognise this need to study and emphasise lesbian venues of resistance in a conservative culture and socioeconomically backward society like ours. And so, I write this.

A Brief History

Even before lesbian activism formally introduced itself in the Philippines, exclusive discos had already existed in Manila.

Located on Roxas Boulevard along scenic Manila Bay, the Power Station was one such pioneer in the early 1980s. It provided a space for lesbians to connect and communicate with each other, and at the same time, to move along with the rise of transgenderism. This was the time of androgeneity and cross-dressing: sexual



liberation manifested through clothing and fashion. Television screens and the streets were filled with cross-dressers following the fashion style of rock stars and other musicians like Boy George and Annie Lennox. Lesbian cross-dressing, especially as butches, became a legitimate fashion and a trend.

After Power Station was destroyed by a fire in 1990, the disco scene lost a central venue. Many groups began holding their own exclusives. Some masqueraded as “ladies’ nights” in places like the Ozone Disco (Wednesdays), Maribeth Bichara’s Danz Café (Wednesdays), Kudos Disco (Saturdays) and the Sports Zone (Saturdays).

It was only in the mid-1990s when reconcentration was revived and for a while, there was only Shescapes, where discos were organised every other Saturday. Today, aside from Shescapes and Third Dimension, a number of individual organisers and lesbian organisations still hold exclusive parties at various bars especially in the Quezon City area.

Third Dimension

It was an E-mail that informed us of this place. It said: “Finally! A bar exclusively for women, all throughout the week.” Finally, we did not have to wait for the weekend to be able to feel free in a space dominated by our kind. And so, one day, we decided to pay a visit to Third Dimension.

That first time, the feeling of seeing a sign saying “Exclusive Bar for Women” was both relieving and weird. In-

side, it felt even weirder. It was dark and nearly empty, the menu still incomplete. The spinner at the bar was playing that irritating album by Mariah Carey. But we didn’t mind these first impressions, for all we could think about was the potential of the place.

Third Dimension is relatively spacious, with a dining, drinking and bar area on the first floor and a dance area, slightly darker, upstairs. Erotic sculptures and murals are installed on the second floor. The menu features such dishes as Garlic Nipples (garlic mushroom), Sticky Fingers (cheese sticks), Potato Peck (french fries) and Girlie Nuts (peanuts).

In a lengthy talk with Melissa, the bar manager, we finally got an inner look into the history and concept behind the bar.

Melissa is the bar manager of a gay-owned exclusive bar for women called Third Dimension. It claims to be the first exclusive bar in the Philippines. Ironically, however, it is owned by a gay man, although Melissa says that he leaves most of the decision making, managing and

planning to her. Being old friends, they trust each other, and it has been agreed that the relationship would be strictly business as far as running the bar is concerned.

Aside from being a full-time bar manager, Melissa is also involved in cause-oriented foundations based in the entertainment industry. They produce concerts in other countries like Japan to promote campaigns on the awareness of sexuality and against the use of drugs, among

Recognising the need to reach out and bond with other women in this society where all women are marginalised, Third Dimension does not limit its clientele to lesbians only. Rather, they seek to welcome other women by providing a venue for the discussion of issues like battery, rape, and single motherhood.

The place, according to Melissa, offers women a sense of freedom. "Here, they can do whatever they want, and no-one will judge

them," which is not usually the case elsewhere. Undeniably, however, most of those who come to the bar are lesbians. You only have to read the name of the place, or if that's not enough, take a look at the art works upstairs to know that the place caters to the so-called "third sex."

A big come-on for the clients of Third Dimension is the privacy it offers. When I asked



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others. It was on one such trip to Japan that Melissa and her friends first thought about putting up an exclusive club back home. They happened to be strolling along the busy streets of Shinjuku when they came across a club called "Mayonnaise." To their surprise the guys in the group weren't allowed to enter or even peek inside the club. "We realised that it was a lesbian club. Okay, from that time on, we thought, why not put up a club like this in the Philippines?" Months after that, Third Dimension was born.

Melissa what happens inside the bar, she quickly answered, "Whatever happens here, whatever may be seen here, is nobody else's business." One is reminded that society still considers lesbianism to be a delicate topic, and most people going to exclusives not only seek freedom and fun but also a sense of safety and privacy. Not all lesbians are out and not all the people around us are supportive when we do come out. The bar is sensitive to this and the management tries to keep the place as private as possible.

In exclusive discos, ...we may create a relatively autonomous world with ample space for our lesbian sexual expression. It is here that we may reclaim our rights, our marginalised community, and our territory. It is here that our resistances as a marginalised sector are articulated.

The Language of Exclusive Discos

Exclusive discos exist mostly in urban centres like Manila. From my interviews and survey findings, I would say that this can be explained by the fact that urban dwellers have access to a relatively higher level of education and sexual liberation. More often than not, conservatism in the rural areas prevents people from enjoying such bodily exploration and sexual freedom as are afforded by the movements of dance as well as the opportunity to socialise.

However, I do not think that education and a liberal mindset are the sole factors that encourage people to frequent exclusive discos. It's rather a question of economics. Most of those who go to exclusive discos belong to the middle- and upper-bourgeoisie. Minimum-wage earners wouldn't blow their money on expensive food and drinks in one night of dancing, sweating and smoking. Thus, it is safe to say that exclusive discos are primarily a cultural practice among the urban bourgeoisie but not for most of the lesbian population in the Philippines, especially the poor.

However, it is undeniable that for lesbians who can afford to buy a sense of security, freedom and sanctuary for at least five hundred pesos a night, it is worth the money. Just to be able to feel that you are safe with your girl

friend and with your lesbian friends for even just one night, is definitely a big satisfaction.

Moreover, what happens in exclusive discos provides parallelisms between lesbian experiences and aesthetics. I will reiterate that these parallelisms are due to the direct connection between such activities as dancing, flirting, kissing, holding, etc., and the semiologies of the disco like its murals, sculptures and menu. This only shows that basically, the aesthetics of lesbianism is the expression of freedom through the body.

Conclusion

It is very important for the lesbian movement and advocacy to recognise and utilise exclusive discos as legitimate lesbian spaces. We can empower ourselves by creating a space where we can be free from the discrimination of society, our families included. These venues allow us to connect with other sisters and strengthen our bond. In these safe places, setting ourselves apart from the lesbophobic community, we can act on and advocate our issues as lesbians. Here, while remaining in constant relationship with the rest of the society, we may create a relatively autonomous world with ample space for our lesbian sexual expression. It is here that we may reclaim our rights, our marginalised community, and our territory. It is here that our resistances as a marginalised sector are articulated.

In any movement and political advocacy, these resistances are crucial in strengthening the foundation of our unity. Our languages may be well hidden in the heterosexist society but they are definitely articulated in such underground venues as exclusive discos.

Lastly, allow me to end my point by telling another story.

Once, I went out with some cousins and girl friends to a techno bar called The Lobby, where one beer will cost you at least eighty pesos or US\$2 (this was in 1998). This was a place for rich young partygoers who are liberated enough to do what they want. Inside, I saw at once that it was a sexually liberated crowd—erotic dancing, women wearing expressions of jouissance, beer galore, the air thick with smoke. Then I saw a woman, cute and sexy enough for me to want to know her more. I approached her and told her how cute she was. Disconcerted, she turned away and hurried to tell her friends about me! I felt so small. It was a harsh reality check, yet another reminder that society is not as lesbian-friendly as I want it to be. I only wanted to say how nice she looked in her simple clothes, or what a pretty smile she had, and yet I was made to feel so small for expressing my appreciation, because I had expressed it to another woman...in a heterosexual crowd.

A week after that I went to an exclusive disco called Gills and Fins, and danced the night away from nine o' clock to 3 a.m. I went home, still alone, with a few calling cards from the people that I had met. Then I went to bed, my thighs and legs aching, the stench of smoke on my dress and in my hair, the sweat on my body now dried. But I went to sleep with a smile of fulfillment.

I never went back to The Lobby. ☺

Roselle Pineda is a performance artist, art educator, critic and lesbian activist. Over the past years, her scholarly works and performances were devoted to the expansion of lesbian theory in the Philippines, specifically in the culture and the arts. As a writer, her narratives were recently published in *Mirror Magazine* and *Likhaan* on-line, the web magazine of the UP Creative Writing Center. She is currently teaching humanities at the Department of Art Studies, University of the Philippines (UP) in Diliman,

Quezon City, where she is also finishing her MA in Art Theory and Criticism. She is also a member of the lesbian advocacy group, *Womyn Supporting Womyn Center*.

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