

My Personal, Your Political, Our Lesbianism

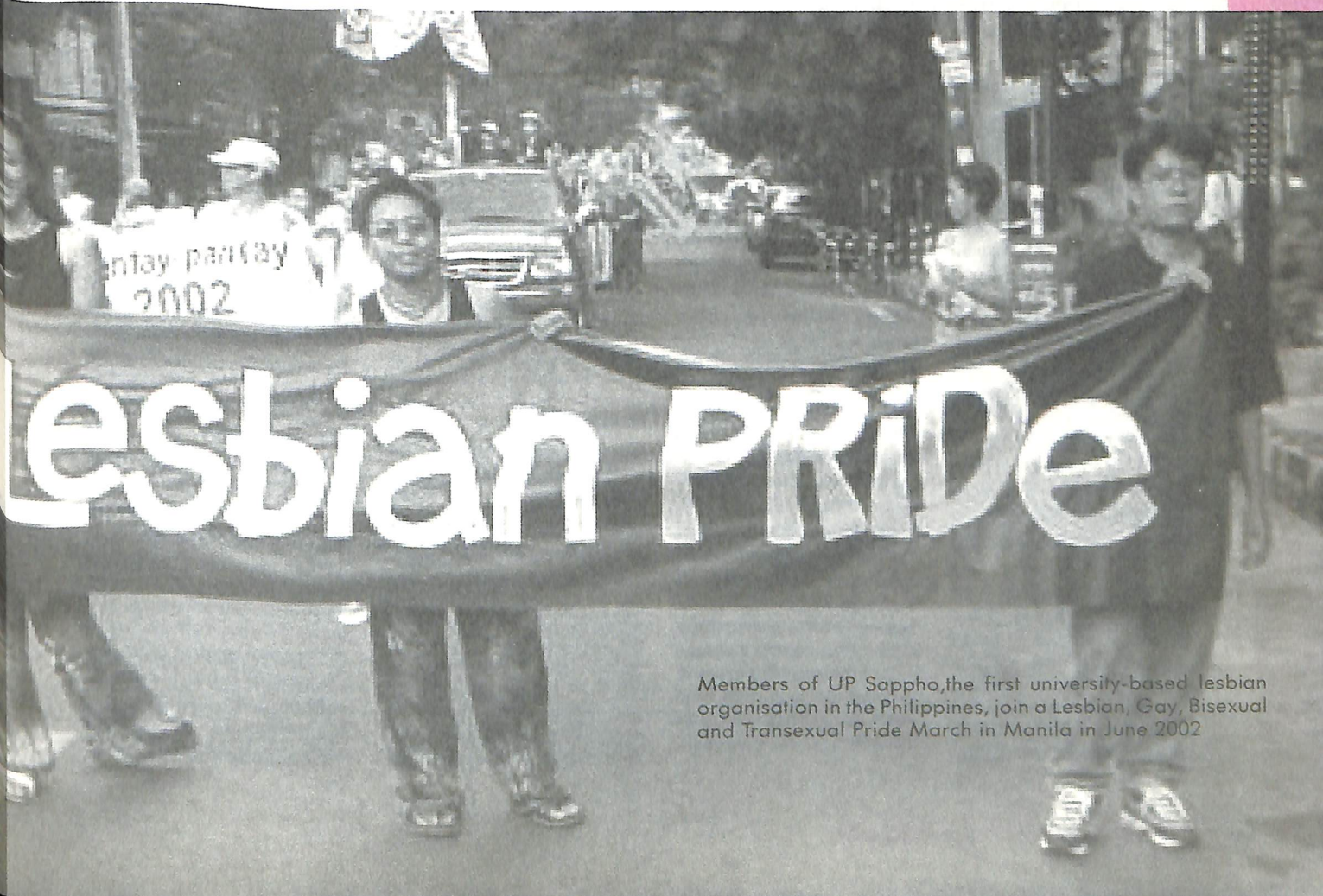
by libay linsangan cantor

The feminist phrase “what is personal is political” applies not only to feminists but to lesbians as well. The phrase has come to mean that distinctions between the personal and the public realms are fallacious (Humm 204). But can the phrase also be applied to lesbians—particularly young lesbians—who do not identify themselves as feminists?

Women who love women still face discrimination in Catholicism-dominant Philippines, and the lesbian movement has been fighting this discrimination since the 1980s

alongside their heterosexual feminist counterparts. Although most lesbians readily subsume themselves under the women’s movement, they still have distinct concerns that can be addressed only by breaking out into another movement. Young lesbian advocates who started this struggle in the 1980s and 1990s have been lying low these days, focusing on other aspects of their personal lives and contributing to the political struggle when time permits. And while the younger lesbians have entered the scene to continue what was started, they basically come and go—a phenomenon that began at the start of this decade.

Today’s society is indeed less strict and forbidding when it comes to homosexuality. With the rise of new technology and more intelligent social mores, Filipino lesbians and bisexual women—especially the younger ones—seem to have more “weapons of adaptation” in their arsenal today such



Members of UP Sappho, the first university-based lesbian organisation in the Philippines, join a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transsexual Pride March in Manila in June 2002

as organised lesbian groups, exclusive parties, chat rooms, SMS communication, and independent publications on print and the web to strengthen and expand their community. Young lesbians are not afraid to speak their minds out about their sexuality—they come out as early as high school, explore the lesbian nightlife while still in college, including women-only dance parties and designated ‘women’s bars,’ and discuss common issues over the Internet with other lesbians from around the world.

But do these young lesbians use these tools to enhance and push forward their feminist ideals? Do they have such feminist ideals?

Different Concerns

Definitions of feminism by feminists tend to be shaped by their training, ideology or race, but in general, feminism is defined as the ideology of women’s liberation since intrinsic to all the strands of feminism is the belief that women suffer injustice because of their sex. Consciousness-raising is seen as the quintessential method of feminism (Humm 94-95).

Although aware of what feminism is about, the young lesbians, however, seem to have more personal things to deal with, and feminism is sometimes not one of them. They associate feminist advocacy with women rallying in the streets and carrying “women-power” slogans. Though this description is true to a certain extent, the

young lesbians do not understand that this kind of activism is a historically important picture of early feminism and that such forms of protest, for paving the way for certain liberties women experience today, have their own legitimacy and should be respected.

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Some young lesbians do not want to be associated with the “grim and determined” stance of rallying feminists. In the age of wireless communication and the World Wide Web, young lesbians consider these early modes as “outdated and very 1980s.”

Roselle Pineda, a 27-year old art teacher and lesbian advocate, believes that this kind of stance by young lesbians of today is not helpful to the lesbian or the feminist movement, pertaining to her observation that most of these young ones have an “underdeveloped” social consciousness. “Not all lesbians are feminists, especially in the Philippines, because a lot of them are not exposed to feminism. Feminism is as much an identity as it is an ideology.”

Xanthe,* a graduating senior at the University of the Philippines, is an example. “No, I don’t consider myself a feminist. I don’t have to parade in the streets to voice out what I am and what my rights are. I may sound selfish in the eyes of feminists because I don’t act

the way they do, but at least I am sure that in my own discreet ways, I am able to redeem myself.”

Xanthe’s opinion represents a dominant sentiment of her generation, the “Gen-Y” or the college-age and post-college population under age 29. Most of them are concerned with personal issues, struggling to go it alone or with a few kindred spirits lending emotional support. Even if these personal issues somewhat straddle social issues, they still do not try to address them from this wider perspective.

Rianna Mercado, a 21-year old Philosophy graduate and professional model, has a ready explanation. “I think most young lesbians are still unaware of the issues that concern us because they lack opportuni-

ties to broaden their knowledge and are more concerned [with] their social activities. Also, most young lesbians are still struggling to come out and this limits them in so many ways, especially in becoming a politically aware individual.”

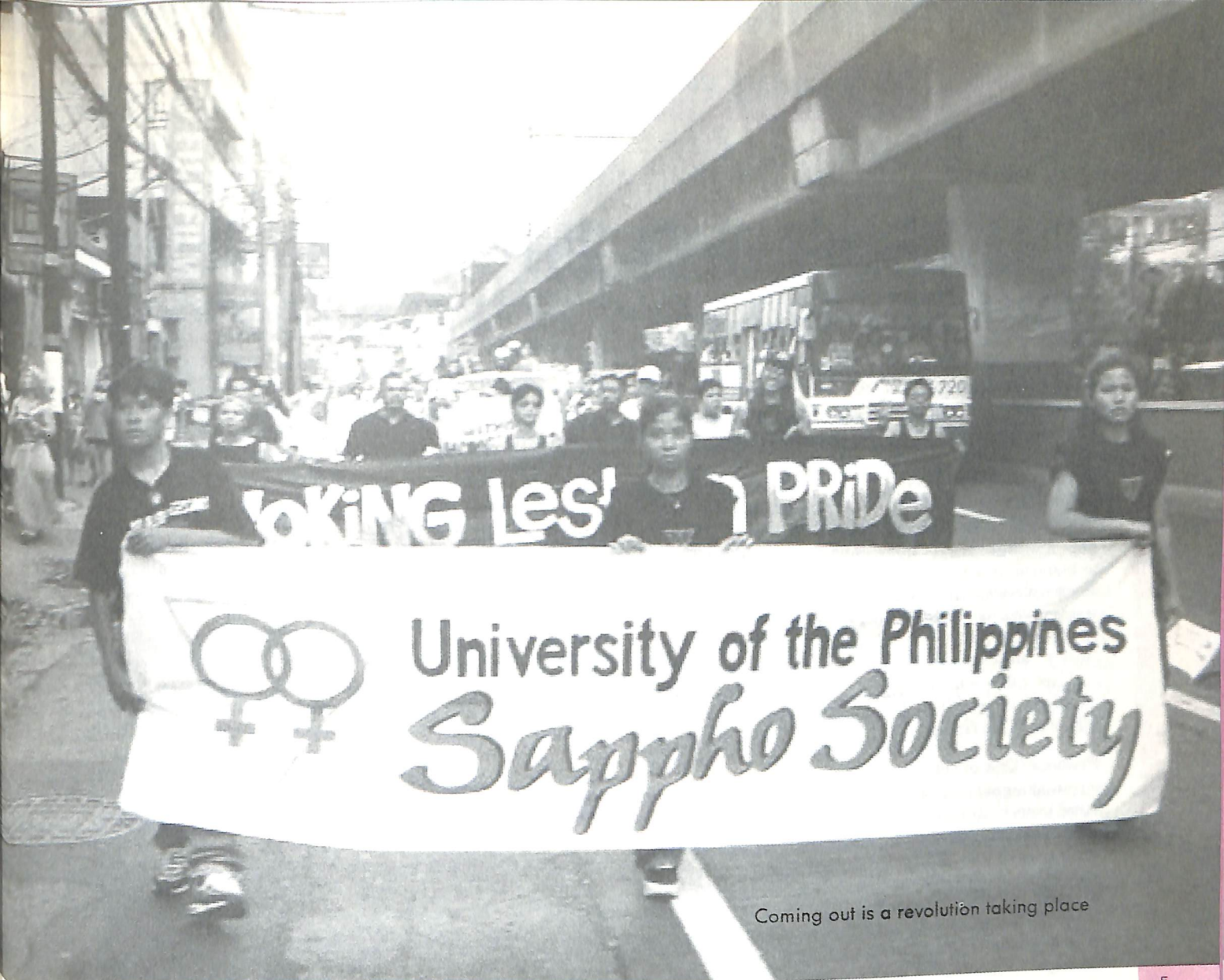
Still, young lesbians like Rianna are aware that their lesbianism remains connected with feminism, and they do not have problems identifying as both. “Yes, I consider myself a feminist because my issues as a lesbian are somewhat the same as other women’s issues in general, only more complex.”

However, there are some who make finer distinctions between the two identities, lesbian and feminist, giving more weight to one than the other. “I think I’m a feminist but not because I’m a lesbian. I was a feminist first before I discovered I’m a lesbian,” says Lavender,* a 23-year old graduate from Ateneo de Manila University.

For Dré Tavanlar, a 29-year old engineer working for Pilipinas Shell Oil Company, the motivation is somewhat different, but contributes to a more dynamic and diverse viewpoint of lesbianism and feminism. “I am essentially a feminist who has chosen to advocate lesbian ideologies because of my sexual orientation.”

Issues

Unsurprisingly, the young lesbians still face the same issues that their “foremothers” grappled with: coming out, moving in



Coming out is a revolution taking place

with a partner, sexual health, relationships, religion, to name a few. But these days, even if the focus seems to be on relationships and “related matters”—such as where to meet other lesbians, how to get a date, and how to handle break-ups—the issue that concerns young lesbians the most is still the basic question of coming out.

To come out means to acknowledge one’s homosexuality either to oneself or to others, and it is most often a public declaration. Public does not necessarily mean broadcasting one’s

sexuality to everyone; most young lesbians are concerned with coming out to smaller groups, particularly friends and family.

Coming Out and Identity Politics

By coming out, gays and lesbians challenge the authority of traditional family, religious doctrine, and state power. Coming out is a revolution taking place, for its aims and practices are bringing on radical changes in traditional precepts and customs to accommodate new ways of seeing and being (Likosky xv). Thus, it is not surprising that young

lesbians consider coming out to their families as one of the most excruciating experiences they have to undergo for this tests the strength of family ties. Plus, it can also make or break friendships.

Some lesbians have had it easy because of the way they look. The more “masculine” one acts or the more butch a lesbian appears, family members tend to accept them more easily, branding them as “tomboys” and treating them as men rather than women who look like men. This has been the general view of lesbian feminists in Philippine society. For in-

stance, Ice,* a 20-year-old fresh college graduate, identifies herself as butch. She is referred to by her father as a boy, and even gives her money for dates with “straight” girls. Paps,* a 29-year-old café owner, did not feel the need to come out formally to her parents because, she says, her butch looks already did that for her.

But for the feminine-looking lesbians or the femme types, families can react very differently. Xanthe, for instance, was only in her sophomore year of college when her parents found out about her

lesbianism. Of conservative Filipino-Chinese lineage, her parents tried to pull her out of school and keep her in the house so that she would not be "exposed" to butch lesbians. Kee,* a 27-year old veterinarian, is always asked by her siblings why "she is like that" even if she wears dresses, uses make-up from time to time, and had a boyfriend before. She concluded that maybe her siblings treat her lesbianism as a phase one snaps out of eventually. But lesbians no longer bristle at the idea that lesbianism is "just an adolescent phase," and Kee will live her life as a lesbian with or without the approval of her family.

Probably One of Us

Coming out is a complicated issue in itself, but for some lesbian advocates, with their groups that espouse lesbian consciousness and public personas that are already out, have been a tremendous help to young lesbians just beginning to venture into their politics of identity.

Dré believes the formation of a lesbian awareness is somehow similar to the feminist ethic of consciousness raising? "Young lesbians are more aware of the issues and the struggle of the feminist movement because of the advent of various media like the Internet and publications, but they are limited in pursuing advocacy or activism due to the lack of opportunities of representation, and the limited number of lesbian youth groups and organisations."

Thus, it is no surprise to find young lesbians engrossed in Internet chat rooms with other lesbian chatters or who go clubbing every women's night at lesbian-identified bars like Ladida in Makati and Third Dimension in Quezon City. After coming out, the next step to take is to go out there and meet new people. And as there are few people in position or power they know of and can identify with, the search for icons begins in the most accessible sources: the media. In short, Gen-Y lesbians look for music, film, books and artworks that will "talk" to them in this "new" mode of theirs called lesbianism. This search may start from a purely personal level but could evolve into bigger things once like-minded Gen-Y lesbians commence gathering on a regular basis. Thus are lesbian-specific groups and organisations born.

Groups: Us and the World

Seeing the lack of lesbian representation within the youth sector, Dré acted upon this need by forming the first university-based lesbian organisation in the country, the University of the Philippines Sappho Society (UP Sappho). Established in 1999 with other young lesbian advocates, Dré set out to help young lesbians in the UP Diliman, Quezon City campus by shaping UP Sappho into both an advocacy and a support group, making sure not to appear too grim and determined but not weak in its lesbian ideals either. Within this space, student lesbians

got to interact with one another, share experiences, talk about issues and hang out as friends. Although the group will be separating from the UP system this year in order to branch out into a community-based organisation, UP Sappho will still continue to address the needs of Gen-Y lesbians.

UP Sappho joins a young tradition of Manila-based groups actively pursuing lesbian advocacy since the 1990s. While the Lesbian Collective (TLC) has disappeared, some are still around, such as Womyn Supporting Womyn Centre (WSWC), Lesbian Advocates Philippines (LEAP), Indigo, Can't Live in the Closet (CLIC) and the gay and lesbian organisation of UP Babaylan. Most of these groups are also involved with two major lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) networks, the Lesbian and Gay Legislative Advocacy Network (LAGABLAB) and Task Force Pride (TFP). Both networks work on Pride Month activities and engage in political goings-on that concern the LGBT community.

Your Political, My Personal

With the existence of these politically motivated groups and networks, there are still those who do not want to identify with the lesbian movement, much more with the feminist movement. And in order to celebrate true LGBT diversity, perhaps the non-political young lesbians—as well as their politicised counterparts—should not be

quick to judge the other for believing in things the way they do.

However, in choosing to come out a lesbian while going about life in the Philippines, these Gen-Y lesbians may not be aware that such an act, in itself, is a political statement. In their younger years, they struggled with their identity, accepting their own selves for who they are, and more important, not being ashamed of their sexuality or person. Sounds like feminist consciousness-raising? Perhaps it is, for the arrival at a personal identity is necessarily a political process, even if they are not conscious of it being so. But with all the new nuances, beliefs and viewpoints of the 2000s, maybe it is time to develop another kind of lesbian-feminist theory, or coin a new phrase, for that matter." ☺

*Not her real name.

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