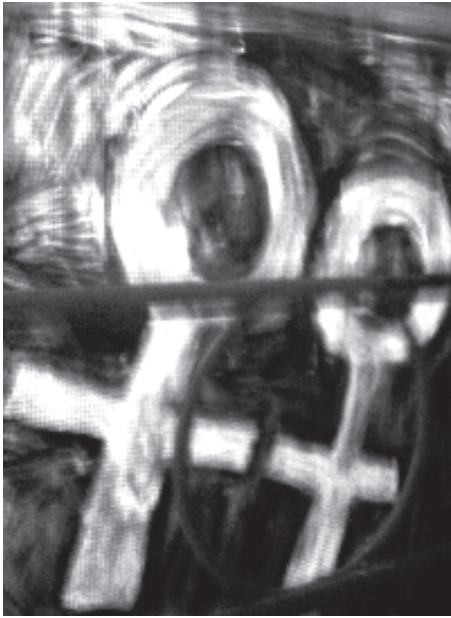


Forcible Homonormativity and the (Truly Free) Lesbian Existence

by libay linsangan cantor



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In her classic piece “Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Experience,” American author Adrienne Rich was able to further the cause of lesbian rights by theorising about how heteronormativity fuels patriarchy which, in turn, renders lesbianism as invisible. She said that compulsory heterosexuality is a key mechanism perpetuating male dominance, which inculcates and then enforces a heterosexual preference in women by a variety of mechanisms (Humm, 1995, p.120).

While these kinds of statements and theorising have strengthened the gynocentric body of works for lesbian feminists, some aspects may need reinvention, re-evaluation and, more practically, rethinking, as some thoughts may sound good in theory but not necessarily advisable in praxis, especially for individuals in the Global South.

Holy heteronormativity!

In the Philippine context, lesbians and bisexual women have endured for ages the struggles of living in a Catholic patriarchal society. The concept of role-playing, for one, is a dominant strategy that I feel has proven to be useful for some lesbians whose identities are more of the transgender kind. Women who develop same-sex attractions mimic the heterosexual construct in relationships and therefore pass themselves off as men. These “men” cultivate relationships with “straight” women and therefore assume all the heteronormative male roles in their relationship (financial provider, head of the family, etc). This kind of transgender identity has maintained a level of acceptance-tolerance in society as it is seen as a “promotion to the ‘higher sex’” (elevating the woman to the near-status of a man).



Heteronormativity

A pervasive and institutionalised ideological system that naturalises heterosexuality as universal; it must continually reproduce itself to maintain hegemony over other non-normative sexualities and ways of identity construction.

Source: Urban Dictionary

Homonormativity

normative regulations, normalisations, sanctions of certain practices and lifestyles, and even exclusions within lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT)-communities and subcultures.

Source: www.genderstudies.unibas.ch/pdf/QueerCulturalStudiesWorkshopAbstractsBios.pdf

There are many other ways by which lesbians and bisexual women live out their lives and sexualities whether discreetly or openly. But by default, the “homonormativity” of same-sex life in the Philippines always leads to the construction of a partnership centred on building a common household and preserving the relationship until the partners grow old together or a falling-out happens, resulting in the separation of living spaces. But no matter what the ending may be, the point to ponder is the process/system in which same-sex relations are structured.

With the example above, I believe it is clear that the goal of the partnership is to have a kind of “American picket fence suburban life.” Thanks to decades of Hollywood exposure, we are aware of this kind of existence: having a steady partner for life with whom you will share a household, keep pets and, if possible, have children while continuing with both of the partners’ careers. In short, it is an aspiration to have a happy fairytale-

like happily-ever-after existence. Couples like these tend to gravitate toward similar couples whose domestic fixations mimic that of the average heterosexual household: going out on picnics/vacations and holding parties/events together as (so-called alternative) “families,” making sure that the children receive good education, paying the bills on time, and so on. I believe that this system/process of how lesbians and bisexual women structure their lives contributes largely to the homonormativity of lesbian existence in the Philippines (particularly among urban, middle-class lesbians), a homonormativity that is subconsciously felt as “the model.”

Perhaps most humans—not just lesbians—nurture this kind of existence as ideal, and consciously or subconsciously strive to meet this goal. But what about those who do not share this kind of worldview? What if their goal is not as picture-perfect as the one being strived for by everybody else?

Keeping up with the Bridget Joneses

In this age of neo-liberal globalisation, the world is seeing more single people postponing relationships in favour of personal-professional advancements, often crossing transnational borders to pursue intellectual or economic advances/development. Establishing one’s self financially seems to be the prevailing mode of ethic especially for urbanites in their twenties and thirties.

However, no matter how modern, post-modern, or post-post-modern our societies have become, societal pressures still remain the same

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throughout the ages. In this context, the heterosexual single woman has always been pressured more to partner with a man in order to have a “family,” whereas men can lead hassle-free bachelor lives up to their forties. Numerous books and films, such as the highly popular *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, have solidified this pressure on women as real, very tangible, and universal (at least within societies that follow a western/westernised norm).

Perhaps the reason why single women are being rushed to race to the altar more than men has something to do with their role in the procreation process: that as women grow older, it will get more difficult to bear a child. Very simplistic thoughts often produce stressful repercussions among those at the receiving end, but they remain a valid practice in this heteronormative state. Thus, single women, whether they are aware of it or not, carry around this procreation baggage that somehow fuels their search for potential mates—but disguised as palatable concepts such as “finding *the one*,” “looking for love,” “searching for happiness,” “soulmates,” or “settling down to a contented life.”

Locating the single homosexual woman in this scenario is not that difficult. She shares this kind of

pressure with her heterosexual counterpart, only this time, without the procreation baggage. The load that lesbians seem to carry, however, is the pressure to find a single partner with whom she will settle down—possibly for life or, in palatable concepts, “for keeps.” They will have that aforementioned picket fence life—a household of their own while they share each other’s lives.

With such a fragile taboo identity as a woman-loving-woman in a patriarchal society, I think that lesbians often face the challenge of finding someone who will stick around long enough to have a stable relationship. And once “the one” has been found, they also face the pressure from their own community to have that relationship last, as in truly last, for a long time.

The reasons for this could vary, but the primary one perhaps still stems from an activist lineage: that there is a distinct sociopolitical statement to be made in having a woman-to-woman relationship last, a relationship deemed as “doomed from the start” because of its very “unnatural nature” according to moralistic patriarchal police. In short, if the heterosexuals can do it, so can the homosexuals—lifetime partnerships, strong household, happily shared lives together forever and ever. Their lives and how they construct these are somewhat similar to our lives and how we construct these, so we should *all* enjoy the basic concepts of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. To quote that slogan, “we’re queer, we’re here, get used to it.”

While these strategies proved to be useful in terms of creating a local “collective homonormativity,” the

Films like *Bridget Jones* codify pressure on single women to partner with a man and have a family.

BRIDGET JONES:
THE EDGE OF REASON
SAME BRIDGET. BRAND NEW DIARY.



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lesbian community itself may have developed a point of dissention that could contribute to a new kind of othering of the lesbian identity *within* the community, especially towards that of the single lesbian.

This “new othering” bears implications that leave negative thoughts in one’s psyche. For instance, I have observed that older lesbians tend to “travel in groups,” and most of the mini-groups within the group are couples. This also happens in the younger generations. Thus, if there is an uncoupled individual in the group, there is the tendency to feel left out, alone and, eventually, lonely. Even if a single lesbian’s friends do not say it out loud, the fact that she sees she is a minority in the couples department could produce unhealthy repercussions, leading to having low self-esteem and the blind desire to find a partner immediately “no matter what.”

The immediate urge to become part of a couple is, of course, not exclusive to the lesbian community alone. This is a very universal predisposition. However, the urge among homosexuals tends to be stronger, perhaps due to the fact that it is harder to find somebody similar with whom they can share their lives. With the heterocentric surroundings, it might be harder to cope with life within the margins of society. Finding a partner lessens that burden, lightens the load (which can be shared equally), and makes life more meaningful.

Single (non)blessedness

Not all people are after the picket fence picture-perfect life. Single people, especially single women, have

endured numerous name-calls or labeling pertaining to their civil status especially if they are reaching middle age. In the Philippines, the concept of “*matandang dalaga*” (old maid) is a derogatory term that is still being used to taunt straight single women. Older women (at least 40 years and above) who choose to remain single for various reasons use the neutral, often non-loaded term “*soltera*” (“*soltero*” for men) to describe themselves. Some single lesbians, at one point in their lives, have also been the subject of these name-calls. However, lesbians do not have similar terms that pertain exclusively to single lesbians.

Still, term or no term, there are women out there who would prefer not to have steady girlfriends or partners. They say they want to keep their relationships simple, casual, and uncomplicated. It might be hard to believe but there *are* women who find life meaningful enough without a partner. In this sense, they do not see their lesbianism/bisexuality as being defined solely by their civil status (whether they have “life partners” or not) and their ardent self-definition is positively reinforced *from within*, not from external attachments.

For these people, alternative forms of coupling seem to be the ideal way to satisfy romantic and sexual urges— one-night stands, flings, short-term partnerships, even brief affairs. But this casual take on “alternative couplings” tend to be looked down upon by the majority of lesbians in the local community. For instance, having steady flings can earn a woman the branding of “sex toy of the lesbian community.” Others dismiss it as

plain promiscuity without the benefit of learning about the individuals' sincere intentions and motivations.

the **L** word

Having been exposed to the American culture for nearly a hundred years, Filipinos tend to mimic/assimilate American cultural practices. But when it comes to sex and expressing sexuality, Filipinos seem to be "lagging behind," if I may call it that, in our "assimilation" of the Americans' practices of these aspects. Perhaps the call of the Catholic conscience is really that hard to shake off.

Lesbians like Shane, whose mantra is "I don't do relationships," goes against homonormativity.

A feminist activist encapsulated it best when she shared her observation about how this issue may have a larger cultural context. "Is it harder to have flings here? It's more like it's more 'invisible' or hidden. But in the context of culture and tradition, generally speaking, women in the Philippines find it culturally inappropriate to have flings or extramarital affairs because of the double standard of morality. We are assuming here that lesbians and bisexuals still operate and are socialised into the same [heteronormative] culture and expectations of them are more or less the same in terms of sexuality and sexual behaviours."

However, there *are* people in this country who *do* engage in sex outside marriage all the time—heterosexuals and homosexuals alike. But where are they?

The Shane in Juana

In the popular American cable television series *The L Word*, Kate Moennig's character, Shane, embodies this kind of non-attached lesbian identity, with her mantra being, "I don't do girlfriends." Thus, she has flings and one-night stands all the time.

Here in Metro Manila, even lesbians and bisexual women tend to see differently these activities. A bisexual filmmaker said that engaging in these practices has nothing to do with culture but individual choices and character.

To counter this, a lesbian professor said that having flings with fellow Filipino women is different as opposed to having flings with foreign nationals. "The flings I have here have this tendency to get emotionally attached [to me] which is very different from the flings I have with Americans, Europeans, or even Filipino-Americans." A lesbian university student has similar observations. "We might not like to admit being open to flings, but we engage in them. Pinoys (Filipinos) are more exclusive as compared to Americans and other cultures. Here, you're mine and I'm yours. In other cultures, unless there is consistency, there is no exclusivity."

A lesbian office worker elevates the hypothesis more definitively. "About cultural differences, I have noticed that more 'advanced' cultures (that is, Europeans and Americans) take flings more lightly than we do. They aren't as sentimental as we are where even something as fleeting as a 'fling' could prove to mean much more than what

the word ‘fling’ connotes. We Pinoys need our flings to have some sort of hint at love or caring or even just the possibility of something more meaningful, while our western counterparts don’t have much of a problem with the casualness of a fling. I can only assume that with Pinoys, it has a lot to do with our upbringing—at home, in school, and within society. Old-fashioned beliefs, monogamy, close family ties, Catholicism, polite society—all cause us to curl our lips at the occasional fling.”

The smallness of the lesbian circle, at least in Metro Manila, also has something to do with limiting one’s sexual behaviour as observed by a lesbian magazine editor. She also feels that the local culture does not have that “cruising” framework like westerners (or local gay men) have, seeing how such behaviour is not treated as common in this context. “It is harder to have flings here because the ‘circle’ is small and if you hang out with [one] person, someone is likely to see you at one point, and Pinoys are very gossipy. I feel Pinoys are not only gossipy but [are] also on the judgemental side.”

R.E.S.P.E.C.T.

Perhaps in hindsight, there is nothing else to say but “to each her own.” No matter what each lesbian or bisexual woman does with her love life or sex life, it should also be considered as part of the “collective practices” of the community. Even if these practices go against “the usual” same-sex currents, we should be reminded that engaging in women-to-women relations is going against a bigger current in itself. Of course, we should take into consideration that these practices should not harm individuals who practice it or are affected by it. As long as no one is stepping on another’s toes or ruining other lives/relationships, then those who prefer these practices should be respected and left alone.

Thus, perhaps we need to cease looking down on others’ sexual practices/behaviour if we are to embrace a truly solidarity-like diversity. Simply put, if we do not want to be judged, then we should ourselves not do any judging, in the first place. ♻️

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