



# **Tibo, Tivoli,<sup>1</sup> Lesbiani: What the Filipino Lesbians Are Not**

by Danton Remoto

## **1 Ugly as sin**

The stereotype is that lesbians turned “that way” because they have faces only their mothers could bear to love. They have coarse hair cut close to the scalp, they have bodies like Kelvinator refs, and they have legs more curved than any bows you could see. No man would court them, send them chocolates and roses, marry them and gift them with ten kids and a house with three SUVs<sup>2</sup> in the suburbs.

Well, then, I’ve got some news for you. Many of the lesbians I’ve worked with are some of the prettiest, most charming people on earth. I know of some who have long, silky, black hair—the kind of hair that Mother Ricky Reyes, the Empress of Philippine hairdressing salons, would call “*para kang nagpa-salon*” (“like you’ve been to a beauty salon”). Others have 24-inch waistlines and legs that could make heads turn—

without help from beauty mogul Vicky Belo and her smart-sharp-nip-and-tuck group of cosmetic surgeons.

## **Difficult to work with**

The stereotype is that lesbians are difficult to work with because they are like bullies in the schoolyard. They look tough, they act tough, they hang tough. Step aside when they come, those elbows can dig a hole in your tummy. Do not engage them in debate or discussion—they will whip out their knives and turn your sides into faucets dripping with blood. They only hang around with fellow lesbians like themselves, muttering about their deep and dark conspiracies in low voices.

Well—*hindi*, no, *nada*, *nyet!* Unlike perhaps other lesbian and gay groups in the world, the Filipino versions work *together*. True, the gays are louder,

more intrusive with their jokes and puns and so-called one-liners. But the lesbians, they are always there to bring everybody back to earth. They're the easiest persons to work with in the world. Then and now, one of them would facilitate and/or take the minutes of the meetings—a move to take charge and steer the meetings back to their course, when the gays begin to talk about their weekends full of romance and love. Another would offer to be the marshal during Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Pride Marches—riding on her motorcycle that va-va-vooms on the street, clearing the lanes so that the beautiful could walk without any distractions.

### 3

#### Lethargic as molasses

Another stereotype is that since they think like men, they would form committees, hold endless meetings, bicker and dither hither and yon, and then arrive at no concrete action.

Think again. Some of the lesbians I've worked with are so decisive they would make the gills of my Management teachers in my Jesuit university turn green with envy. Yes, we meet but we do so only when we have a clear agenda for discussion. Yes, we form committees and discuss but not the whole day long and until the cows come home. After the committee members have reported to the committee head, there is updating before the group, followed by a consensus. Leadership, after all, means forming a group that eventually arrives at that golden moment when everybody—or almost everybody—has reached the point of common agreement. Only then would we map

out the action plans—specific, practical, doable, within a time-frame. So no time really for lethargy, for slowpokes, for endless committee meetings. The lesbians and I know that words are worthless unless backed up with work. With this equation—words with work—do my lesbian friends and I walk down the merry path of LGBT advocacy.

### 4

#### Lack a sense of humor

The stereotype is that, like spinsters, lesbians have no sense of humor (which is another stereotype, for “spinsters,” that is). Because they are ugly, dour and sour. The comparison would be to that of vinegar.

But this vinegary quality is lacking among my lesbian friends. I'm always amazed at our meetings where the lesbians know the current gay speak; where they act “more gay” than the gayest, most flamenco-pink denizen of Manila; where they could impersonate the latest hilarious character in the country's endless gallery of lunatics—politicians, movie stars, or us.

I almost died laughing at what happened when two of my lesbian friends applied for different jobs. One was as a flight attendant in one of the country's top airlines. She went through the rigmarole of the application and the interview Q & A like a beauty-pageant contestant. She didn't get the job—because she was not too tall. Another applied for a top job in a multinational firm in Makati<sup>3</sup>—with her butch haircut and all. She did well in the exams, and during the interview, the personnel director was flabbergasted. The director asked, “Well, errr, hmmm.

Are you a practicing lesbian?” Our dear sister looked at the straight director’s straight eyes, and then said: “Oh, I’m no longer practicing. I’m already good at it.” She didn’t get the job, but scored some points at queer advocacy in the towering canyons of multinational Makati.

## 5 Unhappy people

The last stereotype I know is that lesbians are unhappy people. Their affliction can be cured if a straight man courts them, has sex with them (eeewww, I could hear squeaks from the lesbian gallery), marries them.

But tell me, baby, what does happiness mean? When I meet my lesbian friends in bookstores or conferences, they never fail to relate to me how they are amazed at the quickness with which gays meet and, well, mate. For them, I guess it’s a rather longer process that involves getting to know you, conversation and dates, movies and dinners, the works. “How could you,” one of them asks, “just meet somebody in the bathroom and have sex with them?”

“Ahh,” I answer, returning discreetly the illustrated *Kama Sutra* to its shelf in the bookstore. “I haven’t done that, I think, let me remember, no, I haven’t, but you know, that is *just* sex.”

“Precisely my point,” my lesbian friend answered, sounding like an interlocutor in a court of justice.

### Endnotes:

1 “Tibo” and “Tivoli” are Filipino terms for “butch” lesbians or lesbians who are masculine-looking, and who usually play the “male” role in a relationship and in sex.

2 SUV: sports utility vehicle.

3 Makati, one of the business districts of Metro Manila.

4 Lesbian bed death, or the lack of sexual activity in a relationship.

“I guess that we are still men, you know. With galloping gonads and as horny as hell.”

“Oh,” she said, a smile dawning on her face. I thought that was also the smile of recognition and acceptance.

Many lesbians I know are in relationships that have lasted for weeks, months, hey, even years. They’ve hurdled the petty jealousies and the small wars, wrestled with the lesbian bed death<sup>4</sup> and other minor disaffections. They live and lust and love together, focused on the horizon of their common dreams.

My lesbian friends are fully secure with themselves and completely in tune to the call of history. They have met with me on many happy and gay occasions, have given me advice legal and otherwise, have listed down contacts for me to follow through, have fed me and consoled me when times were tough. And after everything is said and done, I know the lesbians will be there—in their offices and schools and factories and houses—as collaborators and co-conspirators in my endeavours. ☺

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