Passing and the In/Visibility of the Philippine Lesbian Writer

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IN ITS DECEMBER 2016 lesbian issue, the American online magazine *Slate*, fairly popular amongst the queer community in the Philippines, asked their contributors the question, "Whither the lesbian?" The choice of the archaic word "whither" suggests both "where" and "to what end," as well as the decline of the term, "lesbian." In American culture at that point of history, it seemed like "the lesbian" was disappearing, an archaic identity that had no relevance in the face of more contemporary ideas about sexual identity (e.g., queer, non-binary, trans). Contributing editor June Thomas observes, "Younger women who love women are choosing the label *queer* or espousing some notion of sexual fluidity at higher rates" (para 4), rejecting what they perceive as the outmoded ideas around the label "lesbian." Because Philippine culture is still highly influenced by what is promoted in mainstream American culture (being a former colony), a similar phenomenon is happening among younger Philippine lesbians. Many have also shunned the label "lesbian" and begun identifying as "queer" or even "non-binary" to express the ostensible fluidity of their gender and sexuality.

This American influence regarding the way Filipinos articulate sexual identities, especially for lesbians, is strong because we don't even have a term for "lesbian" in our national language, Filipino. While we do have terms for gay men, we only borrow

terms for "lesbian" from English and inflect them according to our sociocultural context. Thus the question, "Whither the lesbian?" takes on a more basic nuance. Philippine lesbians are commonly referred to as "tomboy."[1] The term "tomboy" is derived from the same English word, which simply means boyish behavior in a girl, but not necessarily lesbian. It suggests that in the Philippines, all lesbians behave like tomboys. While we do have a Filipino word for male homosexual—"bakla,"[2] which originally meant "confused" and or "cowardly," suggesting effeminacy, J. Neil Garcia, the foremost Philippine gay critic, affirms that "over the past one hundred years, by virtue of American colonialism and neocolonialism, Filipinos have been increasingly socialized in Western modes of gender and sexual identity formation" (2014, xxi). This means that in contemporary times, the Filipino bakla does not have to be limited to the traditional expectations of effeminate behavior in gay men. They can present as masculine and still identify as bakla; the term was once derogatory, but has now been appropriated to empower the gay community, which continues to struggle against discrimination. I must add that we do not have Filipino terms for queer, bisexual, non-binary, or trans, which is an argument used by homophobes to prove that these sexual identities are only a Western influence.

That said, the indigenous group in Mindanao called the Teduray have a word, *mentefuwaley,* to refer to the transgendered in their community. Cultural anthropologist Stuart Schlegel shares his encounter with a transgendered woman described as *mentefuwaley libun* or "one-who-became-a-woman" (1998). The "one-who-became-a-man" counterpart is called *mentefuwaley lagey*. Schlegel's informant explains that these individuals do not only dress as women or men, but are "genuine," real women and men through the process of becoming. But this word and community (with a population of only around 350,000) are the exception rather than the rule in the Philippines and its population of more than 100 million. There is no word for "trans" in the major Philippine languages, so we use the English word.

But to be called "tomboy" in the Philippines is derogatory, and it is a term used only for "butch" lesbians, defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as a lesbian "whose appearance and behavior are seen as traditionally masculine." Women who have relationships with butches are usually called "femme" or lesbians "whose appearance and behavior are seen as traditionally feminine" (OED) and are called

1 Garcia notes that an unpublished master's thesis in 1975 mentions the word "lakin-on," used to refer to mannish women in Dumaguete City in the island group Visayas, but it is not a widely used term (2014, xxix). It literally means "like a man."

2 There are words for male homosexual in other Philippine languages, like "bayot" in Binisaya, also suggesting effeminacy.

"babae" (female) in the Philippines. That they are called "babae" suggests that in the Philippines, the femme is not perceived as a lesbian. Based on anecdotal evidence, to be the "babae" of a tomboy has even worse connotations (e.g., you're a woman so ugly you can't get a man, or if you happen to be pretty, you must be only using the "tomboy" for her money). Traditional butch-femme relationships in the Philippines replicate the dominant heterosexual male-female relationship paradigm.

To make things worse for Philippine femmes, they are also generally looked down upon by the lesbian community because they are not seen as "real lesbians." Philippine butches often worry that their femmes will leave them for a man eventually. In the US, in the 1970s to the '80s, the femme is "charged with the crime of passing, of trying to disassociate herself from the androgynous lesbian [...] a terrible misreading of self-presentation that turns a language of liberated desire into the silence of collaboration" (Nestle 1992, 142). As a self-defined femme herself, Nestle has an intimate understanding of the injustice of that misreading, asserting that the actual lives of femmes (e.g., being devoted to their butches) disproves that accusation of passing to collaborate with the heteronormative system. Since the '90s, however, femmes in the United States have taken back the label to assert their subjectivity: "I am more than masculinity's opposite, more than traditional femininity's complement. Femme is subject: me writing about femininity, about femme, as the expert on my gender identity" (Livingston, 25). Viewed this way, femmes can transgress even notions of femininity itself depending on how they interpret it. I am not certain if Philippine femmes see it this way though. I myself do not identify as femme because I do not want to bear the burden of its negative connotations in the Philippines.

In the first book of lesbian and gay criticism in the Philippines, *Tabi-tabi sa Pagsasantab: Kritikal na Tala ng mga Lesbiana at Bakla sa Sining, Kultura, at Wika*,[3] editors Eugene Evasco, Roselle Pineda, and Rommel Rodriguez use the term "lesbiana" instead of "tomboy." They do not explain the choice in the introduction; I assume it is the more neutral choice that does not carry the butch connotations of "tomboy." It is grammatically consistent with the practice in the Filipino language of adding to proper or borrowed nouns the suffix "a" to mean female variant (or "o" to mean male). The slang word "biyaning," derived from the "bian" in "lesbian" with the -ing suffix of the English present participle of verbs (thus referring to the act of "lesbianing") is sometimes used as a euphemism for lesbian. Another slang word "tibo" is used to refer to lesbians, usually those lesbians from the lower classes; it is

3 The English translation of the title in the *CCP Encyclopedia* is "Excuse the Slight: Critical Notes by Lesbians and Gays on Art, Culture, and Language."

derived from the phonemes /t/ and /b/ of "tomboy" and carries a similar derogatory connotation as tomboy. I must note though that some college-educated lesbians have appropriated the term "tibo" or "tibs" as a signifier of an in-your-face attitude about their lesbian identity, similar to the appropriation of the term "dyke" in the US. In a conversation about othering, human rights advocate Wisdom Powell, affirms, "To call a thing a thing … is really important if you're going to be made visible, to move from object to subject" (Kerrison, Powell, and Sewell 2018, 20). With the lack of a term for "lesbian" in Filipino, our national language, these appropriations of English words by Philippine lesbians will have to do for us to somehow take control of defining who we are. That said, I will not call myself a "tomboy" in the Philippine sense; it is too loaded with prejudice.

THE PRACTICE OF GENDER PASSING IN THE PHILIPPINES

Expressing as butch in the Philippines exposes a lesbian of this kind to homophobia. She is exposed to violence in the streets and discrimination, particularly in the job market, where she is relegated to stereotypical roles like security guard, janitor, farmhand, stevedore, or is prevented from ascending to visible leadership positions. My perception based on personal experience is that the exceptions are university teachers and those who are born into wealthy families and who have their own businesses. The *Philippines Country Report of Being LGBT[4] in Asia*, published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), notes that "no statistics show the extent of employment-related SOGI[5] discrimination in the Philippines," (2014, 35) which reflects the lack of importance of sexual orientation and gender identity in mainstream discussions of labor policy. Thus, when the report states, "Lesbians who are masculine in appearance are also reportedly hired to do male jobs even if they are given the same lower wages as heterosexual females" (35), the basis is anecdotal, individual accounts cited by LGBT organizations. In other words, it is safer or more viable for a lesbian to express as feminine in order not to be easily identified as a lesbian and thus be discriminated against in employment.

Creative writing, as a career or job, is not generally considered a secure means of employment or a source of income in the Philippines. Coming out and being visible as a homosexual does not cost a writer a loss of income per se. But it can be used as a basis to discriminate against a teacher, especially in Catholic schools. It affirms the idea that the "word 'lesbian' *has done all the things a writer fears it will do*" (Wilton 1995, 131; italics in original) (e.g., it can threaten job security, disrupt family life,

4 LGBT: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender.

5 SOGI: Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity.

wreak havoc on one's reputation.

By doing a practice-led research revolving around how my gender and sexual identity impinge on my writing of nonfiction within the Philippine literary system, I have found that, throughout the past twenty years, I have thrived by passing as a heterosexual woman, and passing as a heterosexual writer in the ways I presented myself physically; as well as the way in which I wrote. Through my writing practice, I posit, it is possible to transform this idea of "passing" into a process of *becoming* or construction of identity that can lead to greater visibility as a lesbian writer.

"Passing" is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as the "fact of being accepted, or representing oneself successfully as, a member of a different group" (cited in Dawkins 2012, 1). Dawkins, in her study of racial passing as a set of rhetorical strategies utilized in the construction and reconstruction of identity, adds that in general, passing refers to "the means by which nonwhite people represent themselves as white" (1). But she notes that the practice of passing is not limited to race. She argues, "Everyone passes, even for a moment" (xiv) in our efforts "to be more accepted interpersonally and socially and to ensure that our goals can be achieved" (3). Seen from this lens, passing is a mode of self-representation aimed at persuading others of one's identity toward particular objectives.

Gender passing is a common enough trope in literature, where women pass as men in order to gain access to certain privileges. For instance, in Shakespearean comedies like *Twelfth Night*, Viola dresses as a man in order to gain employment. But it does not have to do with her sexuality, because she later falls in love with her employer, Duke Orsino. There is also the story of Hua Mulan, the warrior woman in Chinese myth, who passes as a man to take the place of her ailing father in a war. Ginsberg explains, "the cultural logic of passing suggests that passing is usually motivated by a desire to shed the identity of an oppressed group to gain access to social and economic opportunities" (1996, 3). Women pass as men because they desire the privileges enjoyed by men in a patriarchal society, which have been denied them precisely because they were women. In these literary cases, women abandon their "weak gender" for the "stronger one" in order to accomplish their goals within the patriarchal system, highlighting the artificial constructedness of gender.

The practice of gender passing is briefly mentioned in canonical Philippine literature in the long allegorical poem, *Florante at Laura,* by Francisco Balagtas, who is considered the greatest Tagalog poet during the Spanish colonial period. The work is taught in most high schools, but hardly any attention has been paid to Verse 367,[6]

6 "*aking naakalang magdamit-gerero / at kusang nagtanan sa real palasyo.*" My translation: "I dressed as a soldier and escaped the palace."

in which the character Flerida escapes a forced marriage by dressing in man's clothes and fleeing to the forest in search of her lost beloved, Aladin. In addition, in a study of the image of the "protolesbian"[7] in Filipino literature, Philippine Studies scholar Minerva Lopez found the war novel, *Erlinda ng Bataan* (Erlinda of Bataan, 1970) by Nieves Baens-del Rosario, in which the eponymous character dresses as a male soldier and fights in the war against the Japanese, purportedly to avenge the violent death of her best friend, Charing.

When it comes to sexual orientation, a person identifying as homosexual might pass as heterosexual in order to circumvent the homophobia and retain or access heterosexual privileges. Some pass while not yet ready to come out of the closet as homosexual, in order to protect their privileges. Ginsberg asserts, "passing is about identities: their creation or imposition, their adoption or rejection, their accompanying rewards or penalties" (1996, 2). Passing as heterosexual may give us rewards like societal acceptance and/or job opportunities, but it also penalizes us because the act of passing is a rejection of our true identities, or who we believe we are. In a way, the choice to pass and the act itself are a manifestation of our internalized homophobia—our own thinking that if people could see who and what we are, they would deny us certain privileges. Not an unfounded fear, but it is a betrayal of the self. For a gay writer specifically, to hide one's identity is to deny oneself the sense of belonging to one's own community, as well as to do a disservice to this community. British scholar of lesbian studies Tamsin Wilton explains that, "lesbian books often provide not only the first non-homophobic context within which a lesbian reader may begin to understand her existence but also the first lesbian 'community'" (1995, 121). Being visible or coming out as a writer who is a lesbian allows one to stop hiding or dissembling, and then provides lesbian readers material that somehow validates their own existence, as opposed to homophobic mainstream messages.

For me, an understanding of and the sense of becoming a woman cannot be separated from my practice of lesbian sexuality. In turn, it is my lesbian sexuality that engenders my writing. My desire to be seen and recognized as a lesbian writer is consistent with the politics of identity and representation of minority groups. For instance, the editors of the book *Lesbian and Gay Studies* state that the basic criterion for a study to be relevant to the community is to "contribute, directly or indirectly, to improvements in the position of homosexuality" (Duyvendak et al. 2000, 220). Because discrimination against homosexuals is still widespread in the Philippines,

7 Lopez uses the term "protolesbian" because the literary works she studied were published before the English term "lesbian" became known in the Philippines as a word and were not written by lesbians (2003, 134).

homosexual scholars and writers, who want to be relevant to the community, should try to address the discrimination through the work we do. Because I have managed to pass as a heterosexual woman and writer, it may be seen as not only *not helping* advocate for the community, but also directly contributing to lesbian invisibility.

As a Filipino lesbian who expresses physically as feminine, I am never mistaken for a lesbian. I am always assumed to be heterosexual, and I thus pass inadvertently until I actually say I am not. I didn't deliberately perform my feminine look in order to pass; sometimes I actually liked looking feminine: having long hair, putting on makeup, wearing dresses because I thought that made me "pretty." As a Filipino female, I am subject to our rigid gender role expectations and standards, so I have been trained and constrained to think that in order to be pretty, I need to look feminine. Judith Butler's notion of "forms of gendering" (xi) highlights the performativity of gender, which refers to "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame" (quoted in Jagose 1997, 84). For Butler, gender is not a performance one freely chooses because its iterations are constrained by the patriarchal system in which we operate even though we may be aware of how some of these acts may be contributing to our oppression as females. But she adds that this notion of performativity makes gender "open to intervention and resignification" (84). Seen this way, gender norms cease to be interpreted as natural or static.

In 1999, I did shave off all my hair to prove a point. Even with a buzz cut, my lesbian friends teased me that I was not "butch enough" because I didn't know how to play basketball or billiards, skills that were typical of butches in that community in Baguio City. It must have been a joke because it didn't make sense to base identity on stereotypes among lesbians who claimed to be Marxist feminists, members of the organization "Lesbians in Baguio for National Democracy" (LesBoND). Not all Filipino butches are athletic either. But even as a joke, it had an impact on how I conceived myself as a lesbian at that time. I didn't intend to be butch, but it seemed to me that in order for my lesbian community to consider me as one of them, I had to prove I was butch enough—because a femme lesbian cannot be trusted; she is always suspected of the potential to turn around and run away with a man. As the early sexologists who promoted their theory of sexual inversion have suggested, a lesbian who doesn't present as masculine is not exactly a lesbian—"her authenticity as a lesbian must be questioned" (Walker 2001, 6). Yet I thought my buzz cut made me ugly because in the Philippines, women's beauty is traditionally considered contingent on hair being one's so-called crowning glory. American cultural anthropologist Vearncombe explains, "looking at a woman's face, at her hair, has conventionally been an exercise of desire, and of an assertion of male power" (Friedman 2018). In

this case, my baldness showed that I was refusing to subject myself to the male radar, ergo, I am a lesbian.

While gender and sexuality should not be reduced to hairstyles, it surely did not help when I got pregnant and decided to get married to a man one year later. To the general public, that is, any stranger looking at my heteronormative family, I was, for all intents and purposes, considered heterosexual. To my lesbian community, I simply proved to them what they had always suspected: Jhoanna is not a lesbian. Yet even though I didn't practice passing as a heterosexual woman in daily life deliberately, my heteronormative marriage threw me into exile from my writing. I couldn't write within it, for fear that my writing, which dealt with lesbian themes, would threaten my marriage, which I still wanted to keep at that time. I silenced myself for six years and only wrote again after I had ended the marriage, when I became free to articulate my lesbian material again. Seen in the light of this self-imposed censorship, I did deliberately make myself pass as heterosexual in order to silence the lesbian writer in me. It wasn't a case of writer's block; I chose the exile.

THE IN/VISIBILITY OF THE PHILIPPINE LESBIAN WRITER

Lisa Walker, in her book *Looking Like What You Are*, argues that "the passer, as a figure of indeterminacy, destabilizes identities predicated on the visible to reveal how they are constructed" (2001, 10). The very fact that the "true" identity of the passer cannot be determined by visual cues alone suggests that identities cannot really be ascertained visually. It brings to the fore the importance of process, of becoming, and of how identity is constructed over time and across cultures. If visible signifiers of identity are necessary, Walker proposes that more attention be paid to differences within the groups, that we avoid homogenizing approaches that privilege what can be more easily seen, for instance in pitting butch vs. femme, which replicates traditional gender hierarchies. This is why I write the word "invisibility" with a slash mark—*in/visibility*—to refer both to invisibility and the indeterminacy of using visibility as a measure of identity.

In this paper I problematize the way my feminine gender expression contributes to the invisibility of lesbians, particularly lesbian writers in the Philippines. I had always thought of myself as "out and proud" as a lesbian since coming out in 1988, when I was eighteen years old. But I have realized that I rejected butch expression because I didn't want to be seen or identified easily as lesbian by the general public. Walker, in a chapter entitled "How To Recognize a Lesbian" in her book about lesbian identity, states, "The paradigm of visibility is totalizing when a signifier of difference

becomes synonymous with the identity it signifies" (2001, 210). If a lesbian could be identified visibly as a lesbian, she would have to bear the weight of the heteronormative community's mostly stereotypical ideas about lesbians as a group. I have been able to somehow avoid that burden of the stereotype by expressing as feminine. But lesbians like me who do not exhibit the traditional signifiers of lesbian identity (i.e., butch or masculine expression) are further marginalized within the marginalized community precisely because we are not even seen. Just because I am not recognized on the surface as a lesbian shouldn't have to mean I am not a lesbian, but that is how visibility works. But my discomfort with butch expression taught me that I actually prefer not to be seen by the general public as lesbian, despite my crying out to be seen and validated by the lesbian community. By expressing as feminine and thus passing as heterosexual, I wanted to keep myself protected from public discrimination against lesbians, but this passing invalidated my lesbian identity, which I consider a central aspect of my writing.

Fabello, an American feminist activist and educator who focuses on body politics, explains that femmes are privileged because "We are not immediate targets for verbal harassment, physical violence, or other explicit homophobia, the way that more supposedly "visually obvious" queer women are" (2014, para 32). Our gender conformity somehow protects us from the discrimination and attacks suffered by women who are visibly not heterosexual. But she also believes that "being assumed to be something else, is equally offensive and homophobic, stereotyping and discriminatory" (42). We are only spared the violence because the public doesn't really know who we are. Fabello puts it emphatically, "if you don't fit the stereotype, then you might as well be straight" (para 28) to the heterosexual as well as within the lesbian community. And within the discourse of late twentieth-century identity politics, "to be invisible is to be seen but not heard, or to be erased entirely—to be absent from cultural consciousness" (Walker 2001, 1). Given the Philippine concept of the femme as "babae" or the "woman" of the lesbian, it becomes a kind of epistemic violence, an attack on the level of definition. It invalidates my specific experience of my sexuality and assertion of my lesbian identity. It renders me invisible as a lesbian to myself and to my community. I might as well be straight. I literally have to shout to be noticed or have to wear a statement t-shirt that says, "I am a lesbian. Deal with it." Or wear a butch partner on my arm like a placard, because that is, in fact, the only visible signifier that I am a woman-loving woman.

How do these ideas around the dynamics between sexual identity and gender expression relate to my writing? How can I say that I am a lesbian writer writing lesbian texts?

In the first place, even the term "lesbian" is fraught with conflict about how it is defined, particularly in the Philippines, as discussed above. While the easy solution is to say that a lesbian is a woman who has romantic and sexual relations with women, that does not reflect the historical struggle around the term, particularly prompted by Adrienne Rich's concept of the "lesbian continuum,"[8] in which virtually all women can be considered lesbian by virtue of their commitment to women. As Wilton, who examines this history in detail, finds that lesbian is "a word in constant flux, subject to continual negotiation and renegotiation" (1995, 30) depending on sociohistorical circumstances. What this suggests is that the term is not stable semantically, thus, the identity it is meant to refer to cannot be pinned down either. But it also means that each individual who identifies as "lesbian" can negotiate what she means by it through her particular subjectivity. Wilton suggests calling it "les-being" to focus on being lesbian as an activity rather than a static entity (49). A more contemporary iteration of this idea is held by Merryn Johns, editor in chief of *Curve* Magazine, touted as America's best-selling magazine for lesbians, who sees "lesbian" as "a noun, an adjective, and as a verb" (2016, para 3), that it is not a stable identity but something she does, particularly by "acting upon my desires" (para 3) for women.

If we cannot even agree on what a lesbian is, particularly for us as Filipinos, how can we begin to say what a lesbian text is? As American lesbian critic Bonnie Zimmerman explains, "classic" lesbian theory has always been centered around questions of definition (1992, 2): *What is a lesbian*? *What is a lesbian text?* Is it enough to say that a text is lesbian if it is written by someone who identifies as lesbian? That would be the easy solution. But that does not address texts written by lesbians that are not about lesbian experiences or issues. Or texts that repudiate lesbianism. I agree with Wilton's contention that a lesbian text must create an "oppositional lesbian cultural presence in the world" (1995, 131). Because the heteropatriarchy has long enjoyed the power to define what lesbianism is (e.g., framing it as abnormal and immoral, or nonexistent), a lesbian text needs to write against that script and take control of the narratives.

Similarly, Marilyn Farwell, an American scholar, in theorizing about lesbian narrative space asks specifically, "Where is the 'lesbian' in the lesbian narrative?" (1996, 6). She posits that in the twentieth century, the lesbian has expanded to "represent the woman who exceeds discursive and narrative boundaries," (17) a metaphorical subject of excess that challenges boundaries. Thus, a lesbian text must

8 This refers to "a range—through each woman's life … of woman-identified experience" (1995, 239). Rich also describes it as "forms of primary intensity between and among women," (239) not limited to sexual experience.

disrupt conventional and structural expectations in narratives, as she might also do in the way she lives.

While the content of my past writing was lesbian (i.e., it featured female characters who loved females), my lesbian-ness as a writer failed to show in the way I was using the form of the short story. For instance, in my fiction collection, *Women Loving* (2010), I wrote the stories in the way we were taught to write stories in creative writing classes, following straightforward rules of plot, particularly the linear and "classic" Aristotelian structure, which was considered conventional. This drive to follow the rules reflected my academic objectives to get good grades, but also, in a deeper sense, my desire to be a "dutiful daughter," as Adrienne Rich describes it, who obeys the father/patriarchy to gain approval. At the time I was writing those lesbian-themed stories (1998–2000), within the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing program of De La Salle University–Manila, I didn't even imagine there was a different way to write stories. While I even sat in a Fiction Writing Workshop under a professor who required us to write a postmodern story as a final project, I did not enjoy the exercise. It made me feel unstable, like I had no control over my material. The form of the traditional short story gave me the illusion of stable ground.

When I shifted to writing nonfiction in 2007, after ending my marriage and upon moving to Davao City, I obeyed the same rules of writing "creative nonfiction," which I learned in an MFA class, mainly around deploying fiction writing techniques in writing essays, and was rewarded for it with publication, a writing prize, and canonical stature through the Philippine literature classroom.

While I thought I was defying gender role expectations in my relationships, first in loving women and later by continuing to identify as lesbian within a heterosexual marriage, I took refuge in conventions of genre as a writer; it made me feel safe, the same way expressing as a feminine lesbian did.

But it was a false sense of safety. Expressing as feminine doesn't make me less of a lesbian than those who express as butch; it only delays public perception of my sexual identity. I am out as a lesbian in my real life and in my writing through its content and subject matter. If anyone who knew me (or read my work) wanted to discriminate against me based on my sexual orientation, they could very well do so because I was not hiding it. So why did I think it necessary to be immediately visible on the page even without my stating it directly?

I wanted to try to stop passing as a heterosexual writer. I wanted to end the exile brought about by my practice of passing and rejoin my lesbian community, knowing that I may lose the privileges accruing from passing—for instance, publication. This

desire to be finally seen came about with my realization that I was not actually seen by the lesbian community or the literary community. Despite my open declarations about it, I thought my lesbian identity was generally perceived as an illusion, at best provisional, depending on the sex of my romantic partner. Terry Castle, in her book about what she calls the "apparitional lesbian" in modern Western culture, talks about how the image of the lesbian is ghostly and thus needs to be exorcised (1993, 6), but that this erasure leads lesbians (as characters and in real life) to exert more effort to be recognized. "The very feeling of being obliterated by one's society may prompt a wish to assert oneself all the more aggressively—to enter more fully, as it were, into the larger scheme of things," (17) she claims. In similar manner, my need to be finally, truly seen as a lesbian writer has led to my desire to make my sexuality visible on the page as form, not only as content.

In the early stages of my writing career, I imagined I would fill the "lesbian niche," because I had lesbian experience as material for my writing. But also because at that time in the Philippines (the late '90s), there seemed to be a vacancy—so few writers were "out" lesbians, and those who were did not necessarily write about lesbian matters. I named it to myself as a "niche" because I believed that lesbian writing had a role to play within the feminist project of creating a women's literary tradition. I didn't take note that in the Filipino language, we only use the word *nitso*, borrowed from the word "niche," to mean the sepulchral kind, a tomb. I will later learn that in the Philippines, the "lesbian niche" is a kind of "nitso," where the system tries to silence and bury us.

I questioned why major anthologies of women's writing were being published but there were no lesbians in them. In fact, even in a book published in 2003 entitled *Filipino Women Writers in English; Their Story: 1905–2002*, edited by the country's foremost gynocritic Edna Zapanta-Manlapaz, there are no lesbian writers featured. In her introduction she does mention, along with other expatriate women writers, Nice Rodriguez and her book *Throw It to the River* published in Canada in 1993, but does not say at all that the Rodriguez book is the first book of lesbian stories by a Filipina in the diaspora. It is an oversight that makes the only lesbian writer mentioned in the book invisible in a book that makes it appear as if women write only about how they relate to men. Zapanta-Manlapaz notes that, "the history of Philippine literature in English spans more than a century, consisting of four generations of writers" (2003, 4), with the women coming from the middle class, "most (of who) are married and have children" or "separated from their spouses" or "self-proclaimed *solteras*" (single by choice) (7). So while Rodriguez identifies and presents as butch, and writes stories revolving around the experiences of butch

characters, all this is silenced by the heterosexual feminist editor, forcing Rodriguez to pass as a heterosexual "Filipino woman writer in English" just like the others in a book that purports to be definitive although not comprehensive, having sprung from the efforts of the executive director of the Ateneo Library of Women's Writings.[9]

In addition, a paper published in 2009 tried to map a preliminary historical survey of lesbian literature in the Philippines written in Filipino and similarly concluded that lesbians are invisible even within the feminist movement. Sharon Anne Pangilinan, a Philippine Studies professor in UP Diliman, argues that lesbians only become invisible "sa mga sadyang ayaw tumingin at makakita" (2009, 218) (i.e., only to those who really don't want to look at them and see them for fear of disturbing the status quo). She shows that there is no lesbian writing included in any of the canonical anthologies of Philippine literature, such as those edited by National Artist Bienvenido Lumbera. The article adds that even openly out lesbian feminist writers like Aida Santos and Anna Leah Sarabia, whose poems were included in feminist anthologies like *Sa Ngalan ng Ina: 100 Taon ng Tulang Feminista sa Pilipinas* (1997),[10] suffered marginalization and a kind of invisibility because the editor did not select their explicitly lesbian poems. In fact, "hindi man lamang nausad na sila'y kasama sa mga masigasig na tagakatha at tagapagtaguyod ng panitikang lesbiyana ng bansa gayong itinatampok pa naman sa aklat ang panunuring malay sa kasarian"[11] (226). Their work to advocate for lesbian literature in the Philippines was not even mentioned despite the anthology's being explicit about its feminist intent. It seems that the heterosexual feminist editor Quindoza-Santiago did not recognize the importance of specifically promoting the politics of sexual identity and orientation within her feminist framework at that time.

In the same article, Pangilinan mentions the anthology *Tibok: Heartbeat of the Filipino Lesbian* (1998) published by mainstream Anvil Publishing, Inc., which consisted mainly of coming out narratives by middle-class lesbians from the organization Can't Live in the Closet (CLIC) headed by Sarabia and four others from the diaspora, including Nice Rodriguez. While the book broke ground, being touted

9 Edna Zapanta-Manlapaz was executive director of the Ateneo Library of Women's Writings (ALIWW) from its founding in 1995 to 2003. ALIWW is an archival facility in the Ateneo de Manila University, which aims "to preserve written works by and about Filipino women in all areas, with emphasis on their contributions to Filipino cultural life" (Zapanta-Manlapaz 2003, xii).

10 *In the Name of the Mother: 100 Years of Feminist Poetry in the Philippines.*

11 My literal translation: "it was not even put forward that they were among the zealous creators and supporters of lesbian literature in the country even as the anthology features a gender-conscious analysis."

as the first lesbian anthology in the Philippines by its editor and publisher, as well as requiring their contributors to be out (as the editor notes in her introduction), it was essentially ignored by the Philippine literary community. It was not reviewed by the critics and it was not distributed widely. As Sarabia shared to me in a personal message, “I knew what [the book] did in terms of visibility. But no one in the literary world seemed to care too much about it.” I suspect it was because none of the writers in the anthology were “writers”—they were not products of the writers workshop system. Thus, it wasn’t deemed by the critics and academics as a literary publication; it was more of a political advocacy. It was an effort to become visible in literature, but the system refused to look at the women who had laid themselves out for the cause of visibility. Sarabia concedes, “Maybe Tibok, in my mind, was more like an historical artifact (of the LGBT movement), in a way, than a literary achievement” (personal message).

As Pangilinan asserts in her mapping of lesbian writing, it isn’t only a lack of representation in the anthologies; it is also that critics have not paid attention to the works of the lesbians: “hindi naipapasok sa diskursong pampanitikan ang mga ito” (2009, 228), “they do not enter literary discourse.” This renders them mute.

In the same vein of rendering the lesbian mute and seemingly invisible, four years before the *Tibok* anthology was published, Women Supporting Women Center (WSWC) convenor Giney Villar and her partner at that time, Aida Santos, had published a joint anthology of their work entitled *Woman-to-Woman* (1994), featuring photographs, poetry by Santos, and prose by Villar. Villar’s essays reflect on lesbian feminist politics, consistent with her advocacy work in WSWC. No reviews were written about this book.

My book, *Women Loving*, came out only in 2010 even though I had completed the manuscript in 2000. It took a long and winding route to going public because I was protecting my heterosexual marriage from the impact of my publishing a book of lesbian-themed stories, and I didn’t want to submit it to any publishers. But when it was finally launched, I was disappointed by the response (or lack of response) to it. It wasn’t seen as a landmark in women’s writing, even though, in fact, it was the first sole-author collection of lesbian writing published in the Philippines. It was not reviewed by any members of the Manila Critics Circle,[12] not even by my own feminist writer-friends. It must have been part of the efforts to keep the lesbian invisible, which, as Pangilinan observes is because lesbians are a threat to the oppressive

12 Founded in 1981 and composed of professional literary critics and newspaper columnists who publish their reviews in journals and newspapers. They also act as judges in the annual National Book Awards of the Philippines.

system for not complying with its binary and heteropatriarchal demands (218). My book suffered the same fate as the previous anthologies of lesbian writing.

The book didn't sell as fast as it could have (based on the dearth of Philippine books about lesbian matters), even though it was available in the major and mainstream bookstores across the Philippines. It took five years for its initial 1,000 print run to be sold out. Thus, my publisher didn't think it was worth doing a second printing. I thought I had failed, both as a writer and as a lesbian. As a lesbian reader, I was hungry to read a book about lesbian experiences, which I didn't find in Philippine literature, so I wrote it. I thought there was a gap I needed to fill. So I couldn't understand why there seemed to be no excitement around it.

Yet, the significance of such a book could not be discounted forever. Slowly, lesbian readers picked it up. Even though my evidence of this was anecdotal, I began to understand what my practice meant, outside of trying to be accepted by the literary establishment. Some years after its publication, undergraduate literature students began writing me to ask for interviews because they were using my stories for term papers and theses. Although as far as I know, none of these papers have been published, that my lesbian stories are being studied in academe gives it a kind of legitimacy. After years of being bypassed by literary gatekeepers, my readers were validating my work as a lesbian writer. In 2015, the stories were given new life by a different publisher as an e-book entitled *Women on Fire*.

My writing did reach my audience for the book: young women who were struggling with their lesbian identity. I know this because I later met young writers who told me how finding my book was crucial to their own turning points as lesbians and as writers who want to write about their lesbian experience and from their subjectivity. As American critic Bonnie Zimmerman describes it, lesbian texts are like "sacred objects" that not only affirm the existence of the lesbian community, but also help create it (quoted in Wilton 1995, 122). The award-winning Philippine comic book artist Emiliana Kampilan wrote me a letter sharing how as a college student, she had found my book in the UP Diliman library, and thought it was a sanctuary. She told me that she considers me her muse, and named one of the main lesbian characters in her first book, *Dead Balagtas Tomo 1: Mga Sayaw ng Dagat at Lupa* (2017) after me, tweaking it a little: "Diana Lynn." While Diana does sound like Jhoanna, it is also the name of the protagonist in my story, "Christmas Lights." Kampilan uses my Diana and me as intertexts[13] in her work, helping create our Philippine lesbian culture.

For young lesbian writers, it was crucial that there was a mainstream published

13 The term was coined by Julia Kristeva in 1966 to mean the "interdependence of literary texts," arguing that texts are not isolated phenomena (Cuddon 424).

book in the Philippines about lesbian experiences, including explicit sex, which had not previously been tackled widely in Philippine literature. *Women Loving* may not have won any awards or rewards from the Philippine literary system, but it was something. It did something significant by giving voice and shape to what had previously been muted and invisible. It did the opposite of passing as the hiding of one's true identity in favor of another identity perceived as superior. It made me visible to those who wanted to see me. The first line of defense against the invisibility of the lesbian writer is publication; the second is cultivating the specific community of lesbian readers, which includes critics. With the publication in 2003 of *Tabi-tabi sa Pagsasantabi: Kritikal na Tala ng mga Lesbiana at Bakla sa Sining, Kultura, at Wika,* a substantial, albeit preliminary exploration of the gay and lesbian cultural field, we are assured that our efforts to put our work out there will not be ignored any longer. In addition, the world of social media has made these tasks of reaching out to our community easier than when I started writing in 1996.

Yet I have realized through the questions raised by my own practice research, that while publication of *Women Loving* is my ceremonial "coming out" as a lesbian author, I still contributed to lesbian invisibility by writing like a "straight" woman, that is, following the standards set by New Criticism through the writers workshop system and my MFA. But passing in that way also allowed my writing, paradoxically, to become visible to the community. With the publication of this book and the e-book version, my material remains out there, being an "oppositional lesbian cultural presence" (Wilton 1995, 131) available to those who need it.

As Lisa Walker argues, the very act of successful passing draws attention to the indeterminacy of identities, especially those with no genetic markers like class and sexual orientation, and in my particular case, the sexual identity of my writing. By placing less importance on visibility and more importance on the process of construction or becoming, passing can be seen as a potential mode of lesbian visibility, particularly in writing.

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