

## REALIZING MALENESS

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I grew up in a sleepy rice-producing town in Nueva Ecija. It's an insular town where people know almost everyone else. Its space is conducive for socializing young people into the rudiments of becoming man or woman.

One of the things I do remember about growing up in this town is the bonding entered early on by young people. My male friends and I already mimicked the relationship our fathers had with their friends. It's a highly competitive bond, played out through group games such as *barang-taga*, *taguan* (hide-and-seek), *tumbang-presos*, and *habulan*. We had to prove our self-worth not only by winning, but winning through a collective effort, usually male.

Girls are considered less agile and determined than boys. Boys are the designated pack leaders. Girls who associate with boys are considered as tomboys, and had to revert to their own girl group. Boys who associate with girls are considered as *bakla* or weakling. They had to maintain the challenge and threat of other boys. Come to think of it, there was no overtly gay child I can remember growing up with.

I realized heterosexual maleness in two forms. First was when my male friends and I played out pumping scenes in the black sand of an isolated part of the river bank. We were all naked. One suggested to create a hole in the sand, write a

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girl's name beside it, and to insert our penis in the hole. We recreated the groans and panting of our fathers. I do not know if anyone actually climaxed during the scenes.

I remember this childhood scene because of its artificiality. It was not actually fun but which I felt I was compelled to do and enjoy.

The other scene involved me and my brother. We were both brought by my mother to the town health center to be circumcised. Before our turn, there was already a boy undergoing the operation. The doctor and the nurse were working intensely on the small yet erect penis. My brother and I were at the door while my mother was asking questions to the doctor. All the while, the boy was staring blankly at my brother and me. With the exemption of twitches of pain and blowing air out of his mouth, he stared evenly blank at us.

My turn came. I was told to remove my pants and to lie on the operating table. Somehow, I was reacting—twitching and blowing air—similarly as the boy earlier did. After minutes, my mother handed a pajama pants to me. I wore it slowly, then pinched the crotch area to avoid touching the newly operated organ.

I took a painstaking daily ritual to nurse the organ into recovery. My grandfather eventually took over the task of caring for my brother and I, a task he had numerous times taken on with my other male cousins. After summer, it was all over. My male classmates in school could no longer tease me about being uncircumcised. "*Pwede nang manligaw*," (Ready for courting girls) they greeted me and my penis.

This other right-of-male passage is a sublime experience. I had always felt the lack, as male friends boasted about the recrafting of their penis skins. And when I did mine, I could not imagine why such importance has figured in the hidden physical transformation.

When I was young, the penis was displayed. It was looked at by everyone, including male friends. After some time, the penis had to be hidden. It was always embarrassing to have an erection, especially at a time when jeans were fashionably fitted. So wide-ranging is the effect of the penis that it simultaneously provokes both dignity and shame, belongingness and isolation, privileging and marginality.

It was all confusing then, all this power centralized in one organ. It had the ability to instill obedience and provoke dissonance. While the small town socialized boys and girls into gendered and sexual beings, it did so as an aftermath or effect of any action undertaken. Boys will be boys only after boys have done an act that is heterosexually male. Boys become boys when they have effected their substance as being boys.

In the name of heterosexual maleness, the body performs tolerable acts of masculinity. The body or its parts are reshaped, transformed into symbolic tools of masculinity. And somehow, such acts of bodily performance and transformation substantiate gender and sexuality. With the accumulation, things can never be the same.

Even gender and sexuality become after-effects. The space of the small town becomes distant, yet my gender and sexuality become real in the aftermath of growing up in this space, moving on to the city and elsewhere. The town I have inhabited becomes lost and transformed in other socializing spaces of urbanity and development. My small town is just a circuit in other spaces of socializing gender and sexuality. My body is just another artifact to unevenly reproduce dominant and marginal components of national being.