

INTRODUCTION

Discourse(s), Gender, Sexuality and the Arts Retellings and Possibilities

The experience of gender and sexuality in everyday life is affected by the prevailing dominant discourses about gender and sexuality, for discourse, the linguistic formulation of a way of thinking, shapes, limits and delimits the way we define and understand ideas about ourselves. In this way, albeit simplistic, Michel Foucault's notion of discourse as power holds true. Interrogating dominant discourses that define who and what we are, including who and what we can desire thus needs to be continuing. Sexuality has been one of the central concerns of feminist and women's studies for through it women have been historically controlled by patriarchal societies, for example, rape – used in wartime and times of peace, birth control and other reproductive health issues, etc.

Sexuality is felt and enacted through the body, making it vastly personal. But because the conceptual understanding of sexuality, which affects how it is experienced, is formulated through discourse, it is too, largely social. Interventions into discourses on sexuality are thus potential sources of empowerment not only for individual women and men and collectivities but for society as well.

In this issue of the *Review of Women's Studies*, four essayists, five artists and a researcher explore the general confluence of discourse, gender, and sexuality in the arts to contribute toward these interventions into the discourse on gender and sexuality.

Ronald Baytan opens the collection with a lyrical discussion of his poetics and politics as a poet, whose subject-position as Filipino Chinese and gay informs what and how he writes. What does it mean to be Chinese Filipino and gay? What does it mean to live on the border, racially and culturally? Being Filipino Chinese living in the Philippines, Baytan points to another layer of difference: religion. Many Filipino Chinese have adapted to a dominant Filipino ideology: Christianity, as this is reflected in the formal educational upbringing of the youth of Baytan's generation onwards, for whom accordingly, "the Chinese schools thriving

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in [the] country are Christian fundamentalist in orientation.” How do all these layers of difference inform one’s understanding of the self, one’s construction of the self? What does it mean to live an identity, a sexual identity that is rejected by one’s culture—even dual culture—to live in a culture with a history of deliberate revulsion for the workings of one’s desire?

Baytan addresses these concerns by choosing to chart his poetry back to one of the least celebrated of the Chinese tales of old. In his poems, he re-tells the stories of the legend of the cut sleeve to trace and illuminate a possibility of, a presence of male love, a love of a man for another man, in the long history of China. While the stories of Emperor Ai, Dong Xian and Long Yang are hardly read, they are undoubtedly part of the literary history. Baytan re-tells them in his poetry as a way of “resurrect[ing] a forgotten voice [and] reconstruct[ing] a bigoted history” to affirm an identity as gay and Chinese. Through these historical and literary figures, Baytan argues, his generation can be proud of who they are, having been handed down a “legacy of a life lived with courage, passion and quiet dignity” by their *ang kong*, their “affectional grandfathers.”

The second essay, by Gina Velasco, brings us to a re-imagined pre-colonial past, at the point of first contact. It reads the performance and video art piece *Cosmic Blood* by Gigi Otalvaro-Hormillosa, a Filipina American and Colombian queer artist based in San Francisco, California, USA. Velasco argues this art performance is an “intervention into dominant modes of reading the racialized and gendered Filipina body” and “a critique of absolutist notions of national and ethnic belonging.” It challenges the dominant heteronormative and masculinist concept of belonging by recasting its received tropes in queer desire. Velasco underscores the retelling of the moment of first contact in *Cosmic Blood* by Otalvaro-Hormillosa.

Established representations of colonial power relations have designated power and agency to the colonizer—who was also always a man, and a heterosexual man—as he ravages the colony and the colonized. In the history of colonialism, sexual relations between the colonizer and the colonized and the sexual exploitation of the colonized are an undeniable part of the experience of colonialism; it is as well, one of those established strategies of subjugation that has delivered victories for the colonizer and his government. In the colonial history of the Latinized New World, this strategy has resulted in the re-population of the Americas with *mestizos* and the successful settlement of the ‘new world’ by the Europeans. In the Southeast Asian context of one of the territories of the Viceroyalty of Mexico, sex and sexual violence have likewise been used for the subjugation and disciplining of the population. The imagery of the dominant

heterosexual, male *conquistador*, as we know from the Philippine colonial and postcolonial experiences, extends beyond the individual body to the body politic. And in this metaphor, the imagery and value accruing to the conquered, naturally, are the opposite of those assigned to the conqueror, hence dominated, “non-agentic,” sexually subjugated, not masculine, thus feminine. And by metaphoric extension too, the imagery transcends the individual body to move onto the body politic—from a “Filipina” to *Las Filipinas*.

Thus, Velasco calls attention to the possibilities offered by Otalvaro-Hormillosa’s retelling, where the figure of the Filipina is envisioned “as a desiring subject, resisting the overdetermined tropes of woman as nation, territory, and land that are both a legacy of colonization, and persistent narrative within contemporary articulations of national and diasporic belonging.” *Cosmic Blood* offers a possibility for imagining notions of belonging beyond “the absolutism of race, ethnicity, and nation” as well as a utopian vision of the future in an image of a blue cyborg.

Ruth Jordana L. Pison for her part reads Jessica Hagedorn’s *Dream Jungle* as a disruption of existing colonial and imperial narratives. Contextualizing the analysis within a Filipino reading of the experience of a Filipino-American notion of and re-imagining of identity and roots as contributory interventions in the larger literary imagination of the nation, Pison explores the following questions: What imagining of the Philippines does the narrative have? How does it constantly negotiate its imagining of the nation and the multifarious issues imbricated in nationness? Is it possible that in the spaces of this novel’s problematic negotiations lays possibilities of interrupting the seemingly seamless discourse of the nation?

The last piece in the section on critical essays, and certainly not the least, by dancer Myra C. Beltran and the research report by dance enthusiast Carmencita P. Del Villar examine the interconnections among identity, body and sexuality as these are played out on actual individual bodies.

One’s sense of self is often influenced by the shape and feel of one’s body as we know from the experiences of many women and young women with issues such as obesity, erratic dieting, eating disorders, and even aging. In this, the corporeal self itself is both the site of contestation as well as the representation. But even without “disorder” issues, the body still influences one’s sense of self. Essentially, the body is the site of material possibility and impossibility: it allows as it disallows, for example, movement. One’s sense of self is thereby unavoidably affected by one’s body—how it looks, how it feels, what it can do, what it can’t do.

This juncture of the embodied self and a sense of self finds an additional layer in the social meanings and value judgments attached to

bodily shape and capability. Let us take for example aging. The research report "The Ballroom Dancing Culture" by Del Villar in part reflects this as it documents how some of the interviewees were empowered through the continuing ability to dance, despite aging, which also allows them to surmount certain societal constructions of women's bodies and gender roles. Accordingly, "To the women in the study, ballroom dancing proved to be all beneficial as they move on from their former role as nurturers of others to nurturers of themselves. Now that they have earned the right because of what they have accomplished, they feel empowered to break away from their old function and assume their new role. Ballroom dancing provides these women with the venue for their new role where they can express themselves, have recreation, and even be healed of the stresses of life."

Through the continued ability to move despite the developing limitations of the body and through controlled movement, the women in the study have changed their attitudes toward their bodies and have found a better sense of self. The study underscores, empowerment may be achieved by overcoming the social limitations and inhibitions imposed on the body. Del Villar asserts: ... "ballroom dancing illustrates new meanings for gender and culture as the women depart from the conservative expectations of them as meek or submissive. In defying their culture's depiction of who they are supposed to be, they have altered not only their own views but society's as well."

The empowered self is a beautiful self. How then do we record this self to affect others in the same way? In practical terms, how can we convey this to contribute to the empowerment of others as well? How does one write the self, especially that self who was found in movement, in the nuanced understanding of self, body, bodily movement, and art expression?

Myra C. Beltran takes on this challenge of writing the self in movement and in the art the body has created in the essay "when body becomes writing." Taking off from Jacques Derrida's concept of the "trace," the essay presents a written record of dance through a dancer's autobiographical narrative that traces, so to speak, the writer's journey, taking into account "the various forces that impinge on the body" – "the source and medium of all the dances that [she] create[s]."

The literary and art works featured in this volume offer a telling of sexuality in discourse, which are also critical interventions to the dominant ways of representation. Through various genres and styles, Will P. Ortiz, Eugene Y. Evasco, Isabela Banzon, Luna Sicat-Cleto, and Tala Isla-Contreras contribute thus to enriching the ways of representation and ways of understanding the self, who is also a sexual being.