

From the One Growling from a Corner in the Dark: Metro Manila Bear Culture and the Pandering to Patriarchy

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Abstract

The gay scene in Manila is hairy, not in the sense of hirsuteness, but in that of the strands interlocking gender, size, social status, and economic class that foreground identity politics. This paper on particular bear clusters of Manila highlights the manifestations of varied attempts of delineation within LGBT. The gay bears of Manila, consisting of burly men with a fascination for perceived manliness and the muscular, hedge identity within a marginalized sector that mirrors the normative enactments of hierarchy. This is problematic because certain Manila bears, being of approximate heteronormativity in terms of not looking “effeminate” or “femme,” exude in the primacy of the patriarchy and its adjacent agencies of oppression. From apps to parties, a certain aesthetic is approached by the Manila bears that has been extracted from international expressions of bearhood, be it the “bear smile” as exemplified in Japanese bara magazines to the fashion celebrating the lumberjack, despite the fact that the flannel clothes of these workers are not appropriate in the tropics. Ultimately, certain Manila bears exact power in their miniaturization or rendering toy-like or tokenistic of the proletariat figure as a visual of both celebration and ultimate domination for their desires.

Keywords: LGBT community, marginalization, social spaces, identity

With the accessibility provided by the internet, Filipinos have had the chance to illegally download several TV series that may take too long to reach Philippine shores, or may be censored when they get broadcast across Philippine airwaves. Such is the case with HBO shows; Singapore is the location of HBO Asia and their censors have managed to

take off chunks of what they think as questionable material that will affect society's moral fabric. As such, one of HBO's recent shows that has not been shown in Asia is entitled *Looking*, a television drama series focused on the lives of gay men in San Francisco portraying the longing, the desires, and yes, even the causalities and implications of a liquid bliss.

Because of the downloads, and the Internet's locus for information, several Filipino gay men have attenuated identity politics over at the Global North to be either simulated or to be at least approximate here at the Global South. At HBO's *Looking*, one of its cast members figured in an online fracas over statements he made regarding the disdain for the effeminate homosexual man.

Russel Tovey, a British actor, had an online profile published by the Guardian. One part of the piece went on about his gratitude towards his father's refusal to send him to drama school. Had he gone there, Tovey asserts of an alternate willowy future of the pansy:

I feel like I could have been really effeminate, if I hadn't gone to the school I went to. Where I felt like I had to toughen up. If I'd have been able to relax, prance around, sing in the street, I might be a different person now. I thank my dad for that, for not allowing me to go down that path. Because it's probably given me the unique quality that people think I have. (Tovey in Lamont, 2015)

Tovey's statements are borderline praising "straight-acting" as more acceptable, less problematic in terms of opportunities in acting, or in society in general. As such, muscular gay men are more acceptable and less problematic. Such a vilification of the sissy, the shrill, limp-wristed, languid, fligid view on the gay takes on a media highlight.

Understandably, plenty have weighed in online attacking Tovey's comments as crass, as backward. Tovey's focus on strength he gained at the gym was mocked by many and paled in comparison to the

strength of the sissy gay men who are brave enough to be who they are in a society that is still addicted to the many forms of patriarchy.

That may be well and good, but perhaps there is some disturbing truth that rings from Tovey's penchant for the macho version of the gay man. Some gay men in Manila sadly agree with Tovey's disdain for the effeminate. As such, some Filipino gay men create a certain distance from the swishy, effeminate, loud, flamboyant *bakla* stereotype. Some Filipino gay men need to show that there are other variations of the homosexual aside from that stereotype. That is true, but at the cost of those who are actually loud, effeminate, flamboyant gay men.

There is no appropriate and exact translation of the word "bakla" into English. It cannot be simply translated as homosexual man or a man having sex with another man. In Philippine gay culture, "bakla" is the conflation (or a hybrid) of the gay man and the transwoman (Garcia, 2009).

A Transwoman or TransPinay (a person who is assigned male at birth but feels, thinks, and insists that she is a woman regardless of the physicality attributed to her person, such as gonads) colleague once told me that I am lucky because I am close to the heteronormative (a person who is attracted to the opposite sex) with my bearish body. What was meant was that my physical attributes can pass off as a heteronormative male even though I am not. I mention that I am a gay bear and that is endemic of the study as a configuration of the body. As a gay bear, I am defined as being rotund, stocky, and hairy (Whitesel, 2014). In such a way, this creates a terse and tense interlocking with the TransPinays. The gay bears tend to veer away from femininity, which the TransPinays not just aspire to but embody. We may be varied but ultimately our bodies define us.

Am I "lucky" because I am close to heteronormativity with my looks and therefore in the realm of "respectability"? It is always disparaging to engage oneself in a way of definition of one's identity via negation. By enumerating what one is not, one is privileging a set of

qualities and diminishing the others. This paper engages in how a group diminishes another group to cater to an approximation of normativity.

This issue paper engages through conversations with friends, mining through memory, and attempting to deal with the doggedly complex construction of identity and its entailing politics. I engage myself in participant-observation in certain events to cull experiences, phenomena to put together a series of arguments regarding the politics of the body, and the politics of identity. While organized religious institutions see a need to impose controls on the body and media attempt to set up parameters regarding the discourse of identity, there are individuals who do not subscribe to such restrictive configurations. This issue paper relies on anecdotal evidence as I sift through my conversations with members of the bear clusters in Manila. I present evidence culled from netnography (Kozinets, 2010), where photos and texts from social media are observed and studied.

Our thoughts and acts hearken to Judith Butler's Queer Theory on Performativity (1990). Butler points out that the notion of self is a surface in which identity is thus performed into it. Similar to Pierre Bourdieu's (1990) habitus concept, this performativity gives layers of identity rather than being reliant on the presence or absence of body parts. "The concept of gender as an activity, something one does rather than something one is (West and Zimmerman, 1987), continues to suggest compelling explanations and highlights the construction of gender across a vast array of social situations. (Hennen, 2008, p. 16)"

The lattices of body size, body hair, costumes, and even a smile are what this paper attempts to offer in the growing discourse of a more complex homosexual identity. The homosexual is not a shrill comedic take on or a parody of a woman. As the title of the paper implies, the undercurrents and countercurrents may create scary but ultimately necessary sounds from a corner, necessary because they need to be heard.

Identity is a construction written into the body or embodied. The title is a takeoff and with apologies to Mark Twain's satirical essay against America's invasion of the Philippines' "*To the Person Sitting in the*

Darkness” in which he rails against extermination in the name of colonial expansion. This paper attempts at appropriating colonial expansion and highlights its shared perpendicularities in which it is an embodiment of the patriarchal status quo.

I want to highlight that there are several voices under the banner word/derision “*bakla*” and these are growling from a corner sidetracked by a mainstream society unwilling to be confronted with identities beyond the gender binary. Growing up gay, I have heard that biology is destiny. If one is born male then the rigors of masculinity must be embodied. One is born male; one is not made male.

What’s in a name? Shakespeare was wrong in belittling the power of nomenclature. One classmate of mine asked me why his brother identifies himself as gay but is angry when he is called “*bakla*”. In response, I discussed the class and aesthetic connotations of the “*bakla*”, stating that the stereotype of the swishy, limp-wristed is an affront to several middle class Filipino gay men. This is the gay men’s misogyny, their disgust in being effeminate. Hence there is discrimination within the LGBT community itself. Particularly looking into misogyny and class discrimination, this paper focuses on how I saw that within the tiny circles of bears in Metro Manila, that despite being in the margins with the LGBT, some members still flourish within the systematic power conscriptions of a patriarchal status quo. This is ironic considering the origin story of the bear community in America was born out of the need for inclusion.

The bear movement in America started out as a focus on negations as well. These are gay men who are not the typical gay men highlighted by media and mainstream society. These are not young men with chiseled bodies sashaying in glamorous clothes in troops of Adonises. The bears are men who look ordinary, particularly with a belly, body hair, and are into masculine ordinariness. Some bears appropriated the lumberjack look of flannel shirts, suspenders, and boots to exemplify masculinity.

This kind of focus on masculinity, however, creates the negation of the feminine: “Authentic masculinity implies freedom and control, yet

anything marked as feminine is strictly proscribed" (Hennen, 2008, p. 49). It is ironic that the bear movement's impetus was its exclusion. The ideal of the bear movement is that of inclusiveness. But the bear clusters in Metro Manila prove to be less than ideal; in fact, some bear clusters reinforce the patriarchal status quo celebrating not just masculinity but an insidious demarcation brought by class barriers.

A bear friend of mine gets angry if he is called "*bakla*". He would curtly reply, "I am not *bakla*. I am gay". Is there a difference? For many gay Filipinos, the word "*bakla*" has such a massive negative connotation. That word paints a picture of the stereotypical beauty parlor "*bakla*", who pays the men he finds at the town's basketball courts and on streets for sex. The stereotypical "*bakla*" is one that is a screaming queen of bold colors and exaggerated female-parodying movements. This is also the "*bakla*" of the lower classes. What my friend has quickly asserted is not just his masculinity but also his economic status that can afford him considerable distance from the lowly barrio queens. Hence, the "*bakla*" is derided by a number of affluent Manila bears not just for its limpness but also for its perceived lack of dignity brought about by the lower classes.

I recently had a talk with another TransPinay, Noemi Fontanos, who was perplexed at my fixation with the body. She has been doing the lecture rounds highlighting the realities of transpeople in the Philippines. Much of her philosophy is that "we are more than our bodies." That may be so, but in the arena of gay men, the body is the mode of classification. In the bear clusters, willowy bodies are disdained. Anonymous Bear 1 mentioned in the vernacular, "*Ayaw ko na parang uod tapos kung kumilos bigay na bigay na*. (I do not want a worm who is an all-out queen)". He is of course citing the stereotypical *bakla* (homosexual) hairdresser with a proclivity for the shrill fashion sense and the limp body. After all, several bears cater to the notion that "the male body is connotative of power and strength, celebrated as manly spectacle in opposition to womanly gentleness and beauty" (Beynon, 2002, p. 65). Furthermore, the effeminate is a negative because "...effeminacy as (1) a passive disposition toward pleasure and self-

discipline that we perceive as womanish; (2) a moral failure resulting from a 'kind of contamination' by the feminine" (Hennen, 2008, p. 48).

In that aspect alone of the body, a certain expectation is embodied. In the social media app "Growlr", which I downloaded specifically for this paper, I noticed that some users specify that the men they are looking for should not be "effem" (effeminate) and must be "discreet" as opposed to out and proud. This sort of approximation to the heteronormative connotes the internal homophobia shared among and by many gay men here in the Philippines. However, one must remember that this is a social media app; hence one can speculate that this demographic of users must have the capacity and ability to afford a smartphone and an Internet connection to engage with other users or members.

While it is lofty an ideal that we "are more than our bodies", the process of engagement among bears is that precisely because of our bodies, we must seek similarities among the community and clusters. Some bears go to the gym not to merely lose weight but actually to bulk up, for "physical fitness was directly related to national and Imperial well-being, military readiness, and commercial success" (Hennen, 2008, p. 47). Being a bear means having to look like a daddy, an older heavier set man, ergo the aspect of "physical fitness" is not merely a health regimen but an aesthetic that fits the paradigm of body as location and identification. After all, "aesthetic size cannot be divorced from social function and social values" (Stewart, 2007, p. 95).

I mention the word "cluster" when I discuss bears. Since I became aware of the bear subculture here in Manila, I noticed a glaring although quiet ingredient as to how the bears gather themselves into self-sustaining clusters. I noticed that the bear clusters tend to be defined according to class vis-à-vis career and lifestyle articulation, similar to being in a microcosm of a patriarchal status quo that bemoans the feminine, one that at this time creates a distance defined by money.

The first bear party I went to was inside the posh subdivision of Dasmariñas in Makati. It was inside the house of a diplomat and his Filipino partner. In the several occasions that brought me back to that

house and be among bear friends, I noticed all too often that the bears here are among the upper and middle classes. In fact, I distinctly remember that as a form of entertainment, another bear who works in advertising and I taught them *swardspeak/baklese* (Manila gay language) and *bekimon* (lower class homosexual) words. Such trivialization of the lower classes' articulation is prominent in such gatherings. In one of the bear parties, some of them asked those of us who are knowledgeable to demonstrate such linguistic abilities for hilarity. As one of the bears said to me, "I cannot speak like you. My job...my office simply has no way for me to talk like that". By such snide underhanded remarks, that person comments on my occupation as "vulgar" enough to be exposed to such horrid ways of speaking curated from the margins.

This came to a point at a bear gathering in November 2013 called iBearnation. Firstly, it costs PHP250 (about USD6) to get in. Secondly, the theme of the party was "Bears at Work." I had a shirt designed to incorporate the military camouflage years ago, which I decided to wear that night. When I went to the party, the bears' trivialization via tokenism of the blue-collared occupations struck me.

I have heard of several gay men growing up and being spanked by their parents for donning girls' clothes. "For many men growing up gay, experimentation with clothing offered a means of exploring that sense of difference" (Cole, 2000, p. 2). However, the only time I wore a skirt was to use my sister's skirt as a headdress because I was playing a Native American, a mention I make because of my having rendered an entire group of people as a token for something to play with. Thus, I cite the iBearnation's "Bears at Work" party. I saw friends who shed off their corporate attire and don the very butch vestments of the working class as construction workers, as lifeguards, as law enforcers, and yes, as military men.

My feelings as I scanned the room delve into entitlement and hedonism. For the record, I attended that party because it was an opportunity for me to observe a bear party in Manila held in a relatively public space and not within exclusive enclaves. As I watch the bears flirt and gad about in their tokenistic wear of the working man, I realize that "The body becomes an image, and all manifestations of will are

transferred to the position of the observer, the voyeur. The body exists not in the domain of the lived reality but in the domain of commodity relations" (Cole, 2000, p. 124). Yes, we are more than our bodies. We are our bodies and our level of consumer power, as well.

The iBearnation is an exercise of "bricolage", in which disparate elements are put together to create an identity. You have well-off or high career level bears dressing up as the working class. The bears had fun; I realize that I am part of the problem of us maligning those who we are not. I understand now what one of my TransPrinay colleagues told me, that I am "lucky" to be near heteronormative, because I can afford to blend in. "For upper-class gay men, money and privilege could buy an acceptance of difference, or to create a safe private space" (Cole, 2000, p. 24).

What we did dressing up as working men made the concept of labor as a toy to be tinkered with. "The miniature, linked to nostalgic versions of childhood and history, presents a diminutive, and thereby manipulatable, version of experience, a version which is domesticated and protected from contamination" (Stewart, 2007, p. 69). What contamination? Perhaps a much-needed discussion on proactive engagement with labor issues? How about engaging in issues regarding the concept of fairness in production and salaries? These are prickly topics not to be mentioned at a party, much more of a party of hedonists playing dress up as people from the lower rungs of society and economic strata. All costumes parlay to "masculine" occupations. This sort of trivialization is problematic and emblematic of the need for this bear cluster to be adjacent to the status quo. Thereby by its proximity, the status quo is simulated by this bear cluster to approximate its dictations over political and identity matters.

Furthermore, the choices of the costume for the proletariat are selected from the visual trope of the west's or global north's blue collar workers. None of the bears in the party wore something that is reminiscent of the local proletariat, like a jeepney driver or an informally employed construction worker whose salary depends on whether he is needed on that day or not. Even the choices of the proletariat costume have an intersecting issue of class and location. The bears prefer to dress

up as the affluent west's versions of the working man. This alone shows another level of privilege regarding exposure to such a culture and at the same time, to showcase a certain aspiration for a culture that is distant or separate from the local.

Though I know that there are members of the bear community who have the ability to see the intersecting issues and find them problematic, many prefer to just let these slide in the name of collective mirth. Not only was there a distance now between the bear and the swishy *bakla*, but another distance was made clear between the economically marginalized bears and the corporate bears. Now, another distance exists between the local proletariat and the perceived western class as a means of aspiration.

Aspiration is a strong driving force for the bear communities to emulate the bear collectives of the west, that is, of American bear clusters. Hence, there is a need for parties like iBearnation to generate a critical mass of select personalities and consumers to achieve "world-class" status similar to what noted Asian locations for bear parties such as Taipei and Hong Kong possess. Certain members of the bear community here entertain such an aspiration, that is, to create considerable distance from the Global South's economic inequities, grave social injustices, and mask of numb impunity.

I did not attend any iBearnation parties after that, not just out of principle, but because I do not want to spend on what proved to be mere trivialities, even as these were collectively an interesting microcosm of patriarchy. The process of exclusion is done via financial capacity. The next iBearnation was done in March, where it started in Malate with the bears going inside chartered buses to be transported to the lush and posh resort of Pico de Loro. The total cost for the ticket to enjoy iBearnation was PHP15,000, about USD340 at the time. The ticket price alone creates a massive barrier as to who can attend this party.

Social media eventually provided me photos of the iBearnation2 party. The bears had invited bears from other Asian nations, an attempt at saying that their parties were internationalizations, as it were, as if that was a positive. It was as if the presence of bears from affluent Asian

nations would somehow elevate this particular bear cluster in Manila as the bear scene to be in. This particular bear cluster is comprised of bears whose collective earning power can be formidable. They post their photos on social media with their “bear smiles”.

Yes, there is such a thing as a bear smile. It is simply smiling with your lips closed, no teeth shown, cocking your chin a bit forward and thus showing the hirsuteness of your chin. “Many gay men no longer feel the need to define their identity through their choice of dress, while others are making conscious efforts to reinforce a communal identity through behavior and location for living and working and dress” (Cole, 2000, p. 189). This communal identity is very crucial to bear clusters.

If one would think it is “cute” to have a bear smile, it would be a disservice as well to look upon this as mere trivia. The manifestation of a bear smile embodies that identity stem from the path that “...complexity is a matter of context and history as much as it is a matter of number of elements, for the assignation of elements is a cultural process: the description determines the form of the object” (Stewart, 2007, p. 89).

“Analytically, the concept of recognition is useful as a starting point, but not as an end in itself. The refusal of recognition is often not simply the consequence of a single form of discrimination, but often precedes or extends out of a constellation of social forces” (Juan, 2006, p. 706). It is part of any identity process to take into regard this “constellation of social forces” as to highlight that this is not a simple binary oppositionality but interlattices of several concerns. We do not discount but rather engage with other people’s or cluster’s aspirations, compromises, and tensions and discover the manifestations of these in habits and eventually into “constellations of social forces”.

Such “social forces” also produce jokes about “the other”. The typical joke of the sissy boy being dunked by his angry father into a huge barrel of water is an effect of how society views and disdains the effeminate. Akin to torture, the angry father repeatedly and forcefully submerges his effeminate son and angrily asks if he is “*babae o lalake* (female or male)”. If the boy says “*babae*”, the father continues the

dunking. The dunking becomes so repetitious that eventually when the father yells once again at the boy asking if he is "*babae o lalake*", the boy gasps "*sirena* (mermaid)".

It is no coincidence that some gays in Manila identify the overtly outré flamboyant *bakla* as "*basang-basa* (truly wet)". Such wetness and hybrid-outsider identity (that of the mermaid) comes into a violent clash that clearly played in the case of the murder TransPinay Jennifer Laude in December 2014. Laude died from being drowned in a toilet allegedly by US Marine Private First Class Joseph Pemberton. Many reports cite that Pemberton met Laude at a bar, with them subsequently going to a nearby hotel. The story goes that when Laude's biological identifying mark came into light, Pemberton was so incensed that he allegedly became violent, commenced hitting Laude, and ended up drowning her in a toilet. Numerous comments from the online reports evince abject disapproval of Laude as being a deceitful *bakla*, and ergo deserving to die, never mind that a human life has been snuffed. Laude being somebody that does not fit into the labels of decent, acceptable society, she was adjudged as deserving of a violent death.

The gender trouble is not currency for many of the Manila bears. This marked distance from the extreme feminine is what a Manila bear is. One aspect of the *bakla* life in the Philippines is the celebration of beauty pageants. The typical *bakla* calls in sick to watch Miss Universe. Yet, I know bears who do not like to do this. It is one thing not to like it; it is another thing to be proud of not liking it. One of my bear friends would acidly say "I am not *that kind* of gay" (emphasis mine). This act of marking difference and distance from the stereotype is an act of vilifying the sissy, the effeminate, castigating the *bakla* as a problematic view on homosexuality. What is *that kind* of gay, anyway? Heteronormative society defines the *bakla* as frilly and disposable; disposal is what it does to the *bakla*.

This is perhaps why bears are mostly absent in the LGBT visibilities of a political nature. The most visible and most vocal gay members of the LGBT in media tend to be effeminate. During the Pride March of 2014, the bear contingent was small as they walked with the bear flag. In one of the online forums catering to the Manila bears, there

was a call to join the rally but the poster pre-empted the thin support by mentioning that they would understand if several of their members do not show up due to the fear of being seen in such an event. Many of the bears are closet cases as well, as they are those who want to distance themselves from the typical representations of homosexuality. It can be argued that numerous Manila bears only want to be visible within and among other bears as well.

In sum, the issue interrogated by this paper is that despite being identified as a member of the LGBT, there are some bear clusters who engage in structural oppression supported by a patriarchal status quo demeaning the feminine and those with meager economic resources.

Recently, a student asked me about the possibility of the Philippine LGBT community uniting. He specifically asked about what would make the LGBT community pool their resources and change the system “clandestinely”, such that the dominant factor would no longer be based on class but based on gender and/or sexual orientation.

I replied that such unity is unlikely to happen because we look down on each other as less. Of course, the student engaged in speculation as to the notion that economic status is the dominant factor for hierarchy creation. He is myopic in a way that gender must be seen and treated as crucial as and intertwined with economic leverages for the status quo to enforce demarcations. However, he is correct in identifying the connective forces in terms of power and identity. After all, “articulating a web of connections does not mean we ignore the complex differences among identities and forms of discrimination. Indeed, accuracy demands that we attend to the different origins, histories, and consequences of structures of oppression” (Juan, 2006, p. 707).

The fact of difference entails the possibility of exclusion from mainstream society. However, exclusion does not erase the possibility of participation. There are always those mumblings and grumblings from the periphery and from below that augur paradigm shifts to trouble the still waters of the status quo. It is a matter of recognizing the plots and points of where power is articulated and can be recast and repurposed for change.

Yes, there are some individuals who cherry-pick identity configurations and still cater to the paradigm of the status quo. These are but attempts at being normative at the cost of maligning those within the LGBT community. How can we expect progress when some sectors apply status quo hierarchies? They may argue personal taste for their penchant for this endeavor. However, focusing on mere personal taste is not empowerment at all. Empowerment is not defined by what you can attain or achieve for yourself; but what you can give others to be seen in a different and egalitarian light, moving forward to a more inclusive path.

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