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Tomboy, Dyke, Lezzie, and Bi *Filipina Lesbian and Bisexual Women Speak Out*

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This chapter is excerpted from a 2-hour telephone dialogue conducted in July 1996 between Filipina lesbian and bisexual women organizers in New York (Christine Lipat, Ann Ubaldo) and San Francisco (Trinity Ordon, Cianna Stewart). Invited to submit an article on Filipina lesbians for this anthology, Trinity instead gathered three other women to share their experiences as Pinays, gay women, and queer organizers. Their lives and opinions represent a range of different geographical, cultural, social, and political locations in the United States and the Philippines and reflect some of the diversity among Filipino lesbian and bisexual women.

Christine, 25 years old, born and raised in New Jersey, is the eldest daughter of two medical professional immigrants from the Philippines. She is an activist in Asian American arts, women's, and lesbian communities and is currently a board member of the Astraea National Lesbian Action Foundation and the acting executive director of the Asian Ameri-

can Arts Alliance in New York City. Ann, 44 years old, from a middle-class professional family, was born and raised in Manila and graduated from the University of the Philippines. She immigrated to New York City in 1985, where she lives as an artist, musician, photographer, and self-employed jeweler creating her designs in Filipino motifs using the *alibata* script. Christine and Ann are cofounders of Kilawin Kolektibo, a Pinay lesbian collective based in New York. Cianna, 29 years old, is a *mestiza* white-Filipina woman who lived in Davao City until she was 6, when her family returned to the United States following Marcos's declaration of martial law. Cianna studied theater and divides her time between theater directing and organizing around Asian/Pacific Islander sexual and gender diversity through the Visibility Campaign, Living Well Project: Asian and Pacific Islander AIDS Services in San Francisco. Trinity, 45 years old, was born and raised in San Diego, California, in a post-World War II immigrant family of 13 children. She has participated in the Filipino, Asian American, women's, and gay liberation movements over the past 25 years. Trinity is a community organizer and graduate student in history of consciousness at the University of California, Santa Cruz, conducting research on the social history of the Asian/Pacific lesbian and bisexual women's movement in the United States.

Coming Out—Finding Self, Finding Others

Coming out—accepting one's homosexual/bisexual identity—is a lifelong process of revelation and disclosure. Sharing one's "coming out" story is a familiar ritual in the queer community and often establishes a common bond among people across race, nationality, age, class, and cultural differences. Christine and Ann knew each other through building Kilawin, a Pinay lesbian collective in New York City. Trinity and Cianna worked together in San Francisco in the Asian/Pacific Islander Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (A/PI-PFLAG) Family Project to provide support to families of A/PI gay people. To build a friendship bridge between them, they first shared their "coming out" stories with each other.

Trinity: In the 1970s, I got involved in the Filipino movement and radical politics in the San Francisco Bay Area. I was editor of a radical Filipino newspaper, *Ang Katipunan*, and blacklisted by the Marcos government. I also fell in love with a woman in the '70s, but I could not come out in the Filipino movement. Open homosexuality was not acceptable in the community or movement. In 1986, I attended a lesbians of color conference. Soon, I sought out other Asian lesbians and organized the first A/PI lesbian retreat in 1987. I have been here in the Asian and Pacific Islander lesbian and bisexual women's (APLB) community ever since. Organizing Asian lesbians has been the easiest political work I have ever done. It is fulfilling, and it fits me. And it helps that I am married. (Everyone laughs.) My mother likes Desiree, and we had a big wedding ceremony in 1988. Now we are planning to have a baby next year. I do not feel very radical anymore. (Everyone bursts out laughing.)

Ann: Domesticated!

Trinity: I know. I feel very settled down.

Ann: It is about time, Trinity.

Christine: You do not have that edge anymore! (laughing)

Trinity: I am glad that I met Desiree when I did; I was ready. A year later, marriage came up when we decided to have children. Suddenly, the Filipino voice inside me said, "Des, we have to get married." When I tell this story to other Filipinos, they know what I am talking about. Do you?

Cianna: Yes, definitely. And when you get married, you stay married. You are not supposed to break away from that marriage.

Ann: Back home, we do not have divorce, so marriage is "forever." My parents never forced me to get married; it was never an issue. My mom asked me, "Do you have a boyfriend?" I said no. "It is okay," Mom said. Then I said to her, "Mom, I have a girlfriend."

Trinity: So you told your parents?

Ann: I told my parents, and they did not approve. They said I did not have a future. They care for me but do not think a long-term relationship will work with a woman.

Trinity: What about you, Christine? What is your story?

Christine: Let us see. I have been attracted to women since I was a kid. In junior high, I had dreams, but I knew it was not something to be talked about. In college, I finally came out, but it was not easy.

Trinity: What do you mean?

Christine: Oberlin College [Ohio] was a liberal place where students wore pink ribbons on their backpacks. It was okay to talk about sexuality, but finding people who I could personally relate to was difficult. Finally in my junior year, I heard of a people of color lesbian/gay/bisexual group, and I went to one of their meetings. Because I had a steady boyfriend then, they said, "Oh my gosh, Christine! What are you doing here?" (Everyone laughs.) So I met all these cool women and was able to come out. My first girlfriend was in that group. After graduation in 1992, I returned to New Jersey and started looking around, hoping for an Asian lesbian group. I had just returned from San Francisco for my first Pride March.¹ I was in Chinatown, New York City, wearing my San Francisco Gay Pride T-shirt, when two Asian women came up, gave me an ALOEC [Asian Lesbians of the East Coast] business card. One of them said, "I think you need this." "Great, I have been looking for you," I replied. "Come on, come to a meeting," they said. (Everyone laughs.)

Cianna: That is great!

Christine: I also met people from the Asian American Writers Workshop. They had a coffeehouse, and I told myself, "This is a place where I feel comfortable, in New York City." Then I joined Youth for Philippine Action,² and they told me about Kambal sa Lusog,³ the Filipino lesbian and gay group in New York City. I had seen Kambal march in the New York City Philippine Independence Day Parade, which was the only way I knew about them. It was through networking, though, that I met some Kambal people.

Trinity: What about you, Ann?

Ann: Well, I will tell you my love story with the girls (laughing). When I first transferred to this new school in Manila, I knew there were girls looking. I was a guitarist and a player at that time. . . .

Trinity: Wait a minute. You were a "player"?

Ann: Yes, a softball player.

Trinity: Oh, I see. I thought you were a different kind of "player."
(Everyone laughs.)

Ann: I was 11 years old, Grade 5, and a softball player when I learned there were some girls who had crushes on me. "Oh my God," I said. I did not do anything until college, but I just felt it. I met this classmate of mine 25 years later in the States, and she said, "I knew you were a 'boy' when you went to our school." Even all my classmates said they knew I was one. My first girlfriend was when I was 19 in college. After that, I never left the women. Twenty-five years later, I have "furthered my resume." I have been pretty adventurous! (Laughing)

Trinity: You came out as a lesbian in college in the Philippines, then came to the U.S.?

Ann: My girlfriend wanted to try it out in the States, so I said, "Yeah, I want to." So I wrapped up my business in the Philippines and told her to look for a place for me in New York and I will be there. And I did. I came. But it did not work out with that girlfriend I followed. After 2 months, she married a guy.

Trinity: Oh.

Ann: So I hung out with a few lesbian friends from back home. I was a lost soul for a while. I only met the Kilawin girls after 10 years here in New York, after searching and searching for these beautiful Filipina dykes.

Trinity: Let us talk about Kilawin.⁴ It is the first Pinay lesbian group in the U.S. How did it get started?

Christine: Everybody was involved in different movements and learning different skills. Then we met each other and created our own informal friendships. Some of us were involved in Kambal sa Lusog, but by 1993 its membership was waning. Then a few of us started going to Gabriela Network⁵ meetings. They opened the door for us and invited us to participate. . . .

Ann: What helped convince us to organize ourselves was meeting many of the other Filipina lesbians who were organizing in San Francisco, Toronto, and the Philippines during the Stonewall March in New York City in 1995. During the next 6 months, about

15 of us met and created Kilawin Kolektibo, a sociopolitical collective working to create a cultural space for Filipina lesbians.

Christine: Our first political action, via letter and E-mail, protested the degrading, stereotypical portrayal of a Filipina mail-order bride⁶ in the Australian drag queen road movie, *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. Our unique cultural viewpoint—as women, lesbians, and Filipinos—gave us the vantage point to critique this mainstream crossover movie.

Ann: But we were the lone voice of protest in the gay community! Many just did not "see" the problem, while others wanted to overlook it, saying, "The rest of it was so good." This is a good example of the gay community "advancing" at the expense of people of color!

Christine: After the "Priscilla" protest came the Philippine Independence Day March, the Gay Pride March, Asian American student conferences and community forums, benefits, fund-raisers, and potluck parties and a visit to our Pinay sisters in Toronto. It is amazing that we did so much in so little time!

Ann: There are about 30 Pinays on our mailing list, with at least 12 or so coming to the monthly meetings. We try and blend our personal friendship with our politics, and it's been exciting to have Kilawin around.

Trinity: Cianna, what about you? How did you come out and find community?

Cianna: For me, it was bisexuality. I came out at Wesleyan University [Connecticut], where I first met other lesbians. I went to the meeting of the "Lesbian, Bisexual and Questioning Women's Group." I walked in, and they all looked at me and said, "We have been waiting for you to show up. We knew you were coming." Then I said, "I am glad I am here. Finally I figured it out, I am bisexual, so that is why I came." They said that they would wait a little time longer.

Christine: You mean, until you turned lesbian?

Cianna: Yeah, until I turned lesbian. So I got really angry. I have been doing political activism since I was 9 years old. I started out as an environmentalist, then became an antinuclear protester and abortion rights activist. When I went to college, it was queer activism. I started a campus bisexual group with another bi

woman. Everybody who went to school received our flyer: "If you are bisexual and want to talk about it, come to a meeting on Thursday." Forty people showed up.

Everyone: Wow!

Cianna: And everybody had told us there were no other bisexuals! It was support group with a political tone. We wanted the campus gay, lesbian, and bisexual organization to acknowledge that "bisexual" meant something. After college, here in San Francisco, I was later involved at the national level with the bisexual community and ran the national bisexual network⁷ for 2 years. In 1992, I got to know individuals in the community through my safer sex work with the dykes in San Francisco. I was a founding member of the Safer Sex Slut Team,⁸ so . . .

Christine: I heard about them! (Laughing)

Cianna: Yep, yep (laughing). I got pulled into the community through dating an Asian dyke. Then I got this job here at the Living Well Project and have been working with the Asian/Pacific Islander community for the last several years. My primary community, however, are gay and bisexual men. I also have a lot of dyke friends, including A/PI dykes. ■



Coming Out Queer—Youth, Family, and Community

In this section, the women share their knowledge and opinions about differences among Filipino queers in the United States, especially between older and younger generations of Filipina queers. The section ends with a discussion of gays and lesbians in the Philippines, citing the greater social acknowledgment of gay men, counterposed by the invisibility of lesbian women in the Philippine society.



Trinity: Cianna, tell us what you know about gay youth.

Cianna: Through my own interest, and just being here at this agency, I am familiar with one of two A/PI queer youth groups

in the country. AQU²⁵A—Asian and Pacific Islander Queer and Questioning Under 25 Altogether—is really, really active. They have a combination of socials-plus-support, HIV/AIDS information, leadership training, and political activism. They lobbied in Sacramento, our state capital, to persuade state senators to include queer issues in the public school system during California Queer Youth Lobby Day. They use *queer* more than *gay* or *bi* or *lesbian*. Some people actually refuse to use any other word but *queer*.

Christine: Why?

Cianna: They have a more fluid conception of sexuality. They are still figuring their identity yet acknowledge there no single identity, no fixed qualities. They also have a stronger conception of the movement as a cogendered movement/multigendered movement. I think that is why they have embraced the term *queer*. Sometimes people from the older gay and lesbian movement think of *queer*, *lesbian*, *gay* as the same thing—and also eliminate the bisexual from their rubric. The youth, however, make a very clear, concerted effort to include bisexual and transgender folks. In fact, there is a member of AQU²⁵A who is straight. She is kind of "queer" in that she does not align herself entirely with the straight, more homophobic straight community. She feels very comfortable in AQU²⁵A, and everyone feels very comfortable with her because she fits in. She feels it is a group she can socialize with, even though she is not there to get social support around her own "queerness" because she is straight. She is part of AQU²⁵A. Nobody has a problem with it.

Trinity: What about their parents? What do they think?

Cianna: Some of the youth are out, some of them are not. In AQU²⁵A, they learn ways to talk about their sexuality. They get support for coming out and share coming out stories with each other. They are more prepared and have ways to support each other, regardless of the outcome of their coming out. There has been quite a range of reactions among their parents. Most parents have generally been okay—not openly excited or anything. Parents just say, "Do not talk about it." But no one has been kicked out of their house.

I have met more kids who have not come out, and their fears are really intense—fear of getting disowned, fear of parents not

supporting them. Some of them do not want to come out until they have finished high school. Up until you are 18 or in college, you are so completely dependent on your parents. It is also hard to come out when you are living at home with your parents (everyone laughs), where you get monitored more closely.

Trinity: Have you noticed anything particular about the Filipino youth?

Cianna: Not specifically. Some Filipino families seem to have no real problem with it; other Filipino families have been very hostile. It does not really seem to matter whether they are immigrant or American born, or whether they self-identify very strongly as Catholic or not. There are both very devout Catholic parents who are really supportive, others do not really care, and some are really hostile. I have not seen anything that I can really put down as a "truism."

Trinity: What about in Kilawin?

Ann: Are they accepted in the family? The parents of some of the younger ones are pretty cool. But the older ones—like my parents' age—are conservative, and it's still not accepted. "Don't ask, Don't tell."⁹ It is like that back home. But for the younger ones, I think it is more accepted.

Cianna: Younger parents or younger kids?

Ann: For parents who are in their 40s, it's not such a problem. Marisol is 18 years old and pretty new in our group; her dad joined us in the Independence Day Parade. We all said, "I wish my dad was like yours!"

Trinity: He marched with your contingent!

Ann: Yes. It was really cool, you know. Most of them, it is really cool with their parents.

Cianna: I've also seen the story that Sasha Mobley tells in *Coming Out, Coming Home*.¹⁰ It is something I've heard before—parents are afraid there's something really, really bad going on in their kid's life. They're worried that their kid is going to be thrown in jail or becoming a social dropout. When the kid finally says, "I am queer," the parents say, "Oh. That is not as bad as I had imagined."

If anything, I have found it harder to generalize about the Filipinos than East Asians; it is that there is a wider range of reaction.

Ann: We have our Philippine Independence Day Parade, but the Irish lesbians and gays cannot march [in the St. Patrick's Day Parade].¹¹ But with the Filipinos, it is fine. I asked Ninotchka Rosca¹² why. She said that we have a very strong women's movement. When issues about gay/lesbian rights or children's rights or any other minority rights come up, the women hold up an umbrella. When lesbians are being discriminated, it is always the women that support us. That is how it is in the Filipino community here.

Christine: The first time we marched in the New York City Philippine Independence Day Parade, the parade marshals kept delaying us. Both Kilawin and Gabriela Network were moved from place to place to await our turn to march.

Ann: We had been waiting for 2 hours in the sun. We were the only all-female group in the parade, so there was instant discrimination. When Ninotchka finally said, "It is time for us to march," we started marching, and the parade organizers did not say anything.

Trinity: So the women's group and the lesbian group marched together?

Ann: Yes. We always march together.

Cianna: Cool.

Trinity: Christine, when Kilawin marched in the Independence Day Parade, what did it mean for you?

Christine: It was fun, and for the small number of people who do see the parade—there are never that many people—they were pretty supportive. The Filipino radio show *Radyo Pinoy* interviewed us too.

Ann: There was a good article on us in *Filipino Express*,¹³ and we marched side by side with Gabriela. . . .

Christine: Not only because we support each other's causes but also so that the people in the closet could march with Gabriela.

Trinity: That means that you are really "out" in the Filipino community?

Christine: Yes, a lot of people would say that it is a lot easier to march in the Gay Pride than in your own back yard! (Laugh)

Trinity: That is for sure.

Ann: Half of us are Gabriela members. It is not hush-hush. We can be up front. Gay men, however, are more accepted than gay women, but we are trying to deal with it.

Trinity: Are gay men more accepted in the Philippines?

Ann: Yes, in Philippine society, gay men are more accepted. It has always been like that. But now the gay women are coming out. We are making a stand and saying we are more than the stereotype. It has been improving for the last 10 years.

Cianna: But it is a particular kind of gay men. The *bakla*.¹⁴

Christine: Yes, I was recently visiting Chicago, and they had a videotape of some Filipino comedy shows. They always have the drag queen character.

Ann: It is very popular.

Christine: I know I have seen a sitcom or two with a lesbian, but somehow they always end up with men. (Everyone laughs.)

Cianna: When I went back to Davao 3 years ago, my family told me, "Oh, the *bakla* boys are having a volleyball game. You might want to go down there." We own a hotel, and there is a disco in the hotel where a whole group of them hang out. One of my aunts is a clothing designer, and many of her designer friends are *bakla* boys too. They are always at the hotel or in the coffee shop—it was fine. [As for lesbians,] my aunt, whispering about a woman in this band, said, "I think she is a tomboy, so you'd better watch out."

Trinity: "Better watch out"—meaning what?

Cianna: Meaning, she might get "crushed out" on me (laughing). She was cute, too. But it was a real contrast from the States. My family, who are a very public family in the southern Philippines, have gay men all over our social engagements, everywhere.

Trinity: Openly gay?

Cianna: Yes, very open. You talk about it, and you laugh about it in public, too. The *bakla* boys were flirting openly with my brother—who is straight. And the whole family was kidding him about it

without being derogatory to the guys flirting with him. But when it comes to any visibility of lesbians, the first time I met a lesbian woman from Davao was at Stonewall in New York City. ■



Empowerment and Visibility

Citing a link between activism and the Filipino lesbian/bi women's community and organizing, this section probes the connections between gender and sexuality, oppression of women, and future prospects for organizing Filipina queer women in the United States and the Philippines.



Cianna: Is there a strong *Mars* and *Pars*¹⁵ presence in the Filipino women's community in New York?

Ann: Yes, they are mostly *Fil-Fils*.¹⁶ They stick together; many came from the same schools and have common friends. Whatever their situation back home was, they bring to New York or wherever they go.

Trinity: But they are involved in the activist groups?

Ann: No, but with Kilawin coming out as well as other Asian lesbian groups, I think it will make everyone's situation better. Visibility is very important.

Cianna: I also think it is better. Hopefully, people can come out without the stereotypes getting in the way.

Ann: And being political and making people more aware of what we are doing will really improve the situation. Educating them too.

Trinity: Why do you think there is this connection between activism and Filipina lesbianism? To be visible, we also need some political consciousness just to put ourselves out there. The *bakla* are already known and accepted in Philippine society—I do not know about accepted, but at least known. But lesbians are invisible. They do not exist.

Ann: I was also wondering why we must have politics to be visible. With the gay men, they are the hairstylists, the artists, and it is okay. It is harder for us.

Christine: People do not talk about Filipino lesbians or even say the word *lesbian*. You have to educate yourself, learn the words for what you are and what you are feeling, but they are not common, everyday words. Even then, it's hard to talk about it!

Cianna: There have always been some women who have been dressing and living as men, blending into mainstream society there. If you are a flamboyant cross-dressing male, it is hard to hide. At the same time, he is not threatening to the power structure because he is "downgrading" his status by acting more feminine. He is not a threat; he is a joke. But a lesbian woman is actually threatening to the power structure because she is taking her own power. This is political because it is a power struggle.

Trinity: We cannot overlook the gender issues underlying sexuality. For example, women going up the corporate ladder are often criticized for being "bitchy" and "unladylike." In the same regard, when lesbians and bisexual women assert their sexuality preferences in their social and personal lives, then it too becomes threatening. The political edge to a lesbian or bisexual identity for Filipino women is a necessary path. Otherwise, we never get taken seriously.

Cianna: Yes. It becomes so completely tied into the role of women overall in society; we cannot escape that political correlation.

Trinity: It is one thing to put down a tomboy and say, "Oh, she is just trying to be a boy, but she does not have the equipment." But it is another thing to understand that also means that "she does not need men." Women who live that way, however they dress, are much more threatening.

Cianna: A straight butch is never going to come under fire as much as a tomboy. That is just the way it has always been.

Trinity: Right.

Cianna: There are athletic or butch women who may get harassed on the street, but in their social circles where it is known that they are *not* queer, they do not face the harassment that we do.

Trinity: It is also good to mention the case of Beth and Vangie in the Philippines and the emergence of several activist-oriented lesbian groups in the Philippines. Beth and Vangie worked in a social service NGO when they fell in love. Once everybody found out, half of the office got homophobic about it.¹⁷

Christine: Especially the guys.

Trinity: The presence of gay liberation groups in the Philippines is an expression of a growing political consciousness among Filipino gays and lesbian and bisexual people. The Philippines is no longer a country that people left behind. That was my father's experience. Since the 1965 immigration wave began, Filipinos continue to go back and forth to the Philippines all the time. So too with the gay connection. Linking up with gay groups in the Philippines is very helpful to our own visibility and coming out process here in the U.S. It also proves that homosexuality is not just a white thing or an American thing. It happens in all countries.

Christine: Being out and visible also has its problems. When you first start, there is excitement from organizing around the issues—like the *Miss Saigon* protest¹⁸ with Kambal or joining the Stonewall March¹⁹—you meet a lot of people and get to know each other. But then division and factionalism start, breaking trust, breaking expectations. I think the real challenge is trying to get past those problems and find out our commonalties, what we are building for the future.

Ann: It is really hard to work together for a common cause. We have a common struggle, and we should work together wherever we are, whether we are here or in the Philippines. That is the hard part. But if we keep trying and communicating, we can work on projects together.

Cianna: My concern for the future is to get past the problem that I have encountered, not only with a queer Filipino movement but through several different Filipino groups—who is really Filipino and who is really queer? Proving yourself has been something that I personally live as a *mestiza* and bi. I hope we are going to stop "proving ourselves" and "questioning each other" and focus instead on the work that has to be done.

Trinity: Let us remember that up until the overthrow of the Marcos government, the Philippines has been in a colonial relationship to

the world and within itself. It has never really had the chance to be its own country. This has had colonizing effects on people's thinking and how the whole country has developed or, rather, underdeveloped. We would not be able to talk about this subject if Marcos was still alive and running the country.

Everyone: Right, right.

Trinity: We have to appreciate our progress as Filipino gays just in the last 10 years.

Ann: The coming out of lesbianism in Philippine society is also part of the women's movement.

Cianna, Trinity: Yes.

Trinity: And lesbian rights was also advanced in Beijing U.N. Women's Conference.²⁰ It was a controversial issue among feminists in the international women's movement if lesbian issues would remain in the closet. Even though mention of lesbian rights and issues was eventually withheld from the official document, the struggle over its inclusion unfolded in front of the eyes and ears of the international women's movement. These were significant first steps. By the next decade's U.N. Women's Conference, our progress will be even greater. ■■■

In conclusion, the lives of Filipina lesbian and bisexual women—as attested by the women's stories above—have changed radically over the past 20 years. For the two older lesbians, Ann and Trinity, family and community acceptance in the 1970s was minimal, if forthcoming at all. On the other hand, Cianna's and Christine's "coming out" experiences in college in the 1990s were positive and supportive. Although both generations of Pinays faced the same difficulties—coming out, negative stereotypes, societal homophobia, family rejection—new opportunities exist today for a greater degree of acceptance in the family, community, and overall society. Through the efforts of many gay liberationists before them, today's queers are surrounded by a community of friends and organizations and provide the context for this emergent Filipina queer empowerment and visibility movement. Filipina lesbian and bisexual women in the United States and the Philippines are part of a global pan-Asian queer movement and have been both agents and

beneficiaries of this international mass liberation movement for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender rights for the past 25 years.

Notes

1. The Stonewall Rebellion, June 29, 1969, which launched the gay liberation movement, has been commemorated yearly in June with a Pride March in major gay communities across the United States. New York and San Francisco parades gather at least 300,000 celebrants.
2. A Filipino American youth activist group in New York City, 1990 to 1993.
3. *Kambal sa Lusog*, translated, means "Twins in Health," a name chosen to include both Filipino male and female homosexual and bisexual people. The organization was formed in 1992.
4. *Kilawin*, a hot and spicy Filipino dish; *Kilawin Kolektibo*, formed in 1995, is a "hot and spicy" Pinay lesbian collective based in New York City.
5. *Gabriela Network*, based in the United States, works with *Gabriela-Philippines* to organize, educate, and network on issues that affect the women and children of the Philippines but that have their roots in decisions made in the United States.
6. A sex-starved, half-crazed, Tagalog-speaking Filipina wife of an older Australian white man in the outback performs a gross dance routine popping ping pong balls from her anus (shown offscreen). Besides *Kilawin*, Filipina women's groups in Australia and Manila lodged complaints about this movie.
7. *BiNet* (Bisexual Network), founded in 1989 in San Francisco, is a national coalition of groups and individuals of bisexual-identified people.
8. A multiracial bisexual and lesbian health education outreach team that gave safer sex demonstrations in dyke bars in San Francisco, 1990 to 1993; sponsored by the Lyon-Martin Women's Health Services and organized by the prominent bisexual community organizer Lani Ka'ahumanu.
9. U.S. military policy, initiated under the Clinton administration in 1992, permits homosexual soldiers to serve but not to engage in homosexual activities while in the service.
10. A video interview of four families of Asian lesbian and gay children (A/PI-PFLAG Family Project, 1996). Filipina *mestiza* lesbian Sasha Mobley and her lover, brother, and mother share their experience with Sasha's "coming out" to the family.
11. Following street demonstrations and court litigation, the Massachusetts State Supreme Court ruled in 1994 that the Irish lesbian and gay contingent could be prohibited from participating in the Boston St. Patrick's Day Parade.
12. A well-known journalist, feminist organizer, and leading member of the *Gabriela Network*.
13. "New Filipina Lesbian Group" (1995).
14. Slang Tagalog term for homosexual men; connotes a soft, "swishy" man; like the English term *faggot*, it can be positive or negative, depending on the context and intent.
15. Tagalog slang for *Kumadre* and *Kumpadre* (close friend, female and male) used among Filipina lesbian tomboy and fem couples.
16. Philippine nationals.

17. Beth Castronuevo and Vangie Lim were fired on September 6, 1994, from their jobs at Balay Rehabilitation Center after news of their lesbian relationship polarized the office. Balay is a nongovernmental organization dedicated to aid families of Philippine political prisoners. Beth and Vangie's dismissal was met with public protests by lesbian and women's groups in Manila. A lawsuit is currently under litigation.

18. *Miss Saigon*, a musical update of *Madame Butterfly* by Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg, opened in New York City in April 1991 after months of criticism for its sexist and racist content and casting practices. Lambda Legal Defense Fund, a leading national lesbian and gay organization, came under fire from Asian lesbian and gay groups for using *Miss Saigon* for its annual fund-raiser. A highly publicized protest led by a coalition of Asian and gay groups disrupted the April 6 and 11 performances during opening week. For details, see Yoshikawa (1994). Furthermore, according to Christine Lipat, the *Miss Saigon* controversy was the first activist campaign that brought Filipino gay men and women together, setting the stage for the later formation of Kambal sa Lusog, which in turn led to the formation of Kilawin Kolektibo, a Pinay lesbian group (see Note 4).

19. Celebrating 25 years of struggle since the Stonewall riots launched the gay liberation movement, over 1.5 million gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people and their supporters gathered for a week-long celebration in New York City, culminating in an international march and rally in Central Park on June 25, 1994.

20. The 4th U.N. World Conference on Women, Beijing, People's Republic of China, August 30 to September 9, 1996, gathered over 200,000 international delegates. Controversy over lesbianism emerged before the conference when China wanted to deny access to lesbians, Tibetans, Taiwanese, Asian women's rights groups, and some organizations militantly opposed to abortion. In addition, the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) Forum, which preceded the U.N. gathering, was moved to Huairou, 30 miles outside the capital, making it nearly impossible for NGO groups to observe the Beijing event. At the U.N. conference, controversy focused on the specific inclusion of lesbian issues in the U.N. Platform for Action document. Before Beijing, prolesbian recommendations were submitted by NGOs at the Latin American and Caribbean preparatory meeting. The Europe and North American Regional Platform for Action mentioned sexual orientation in its preamble and directed governments to include lesbian groups in the design, development, and implementation of strategies for change. This was the first time that a document adopted by U.N. member states had included any mention of sexual orientation.



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17

At the Frontiers of Narrative The Mapping of Filipino Gay Men's Lives in the United States

Martin F. Manalansan IV

Personal [life] narratives allow us . . . to see lives as simultaneously individual and social creations, and to see individuals as simultaneously the changers and the changed.

Personal Narratives Group (1989), *Interpreting Women's Lives*

Life narratives or histories are compelling social and personal texts that have been used by social scientists and humanities scholars for decades.¹ The process of eliciting these narratives is itself a source of useful insights. In this chapter, I explore the ways in which narrative elicitation and telling render interesting performances of identities and experiences. From 1990 to 1993, I interviewed Filipino gay men living in New York City. Fifty of them consented to be involved in intensive life

history elicitation, which lasted anywhere from 2 to 8 hours (sometimes split into several sessions).² I suggest that reflections on field experiences and life narrative methodology provide powerful sources of understanding about being Filipino and gay in America.

Interview? What is this interview for? Who will even be interested in my life? Why do you want to know about my life? I am not a celebrity. Okay, I could be a celebrity [giggles], but I am just an ordinary *bakla*.³

These were the words of Mario, a 40-year-old Filipino gay man. He was quite jocular and somewhat uncomfortable about the prospect of being interviewed when I first approached him. Indeed, the practice of the interview is popularly constructed as somewhat removed from the mundane struggles of immigrant lives. For many informants who were immigrants, the interview is something that stands out as a bureaucratic and sometimes intimidating procedure such as the green card (permanent residence) or citizenship interviews with the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Therefore, the practice of eliciting life histories initially suggests a forbidding domain in which to navigate and redraw the inevitable axes of ethnicity, race, class, sexuality, and gender.

Mario's attitude was in fact shared by many of my informants. When I approached Filipino gay men about my project, many of them expressed some reservation about the whole process. Confidentiality was foremost in their minds. As one potential informant said, "*Baka maging front page news ang buhay ko* [My life might become front-page news]." Part of their trepidation may be due to what is perceived to be the very active rumor mill in the Filipino community. I had to present myself as another member of the community yet set apart by my academic credentials and professional project. Some potential informants' fear may stem from their various legal or citizenship statuses. Some were undocumented aliens, others did not want to be publicly identified as gay, and a few were diagnosed with AIDS. The hazards that surrounded each situation were real, and I tried to persuade them about the completely confidential nature of the interview and the eventual report. Therefore, all informants' names that I use in this chapter and in all of my work on the project are pseudonyms.

In contrast to worries about confidentiality, there was the allure of the "interview." Mario explicitly connects the practice of the interview

and life narrative elicitation with something that celebrities do. In addition, many potential informants likened the life history interview to those in many TV talk shows, in which lives were continuously put on display. For some gay Filipinos, the interview was one brief moment to at least see themselves as movie stars or TV celebrities whose lives were necessarily part of public scrutiny. Despite their initial awkwardness, Filipino gay men who chose to participate in the life history interview provided compelling stories about themselves both in the content of their narratives and in the manner and situation in which these were told.



Language and the Performance of Identities

The philosopher J. L. Austin (1962) argued that people's use of language in different situations betrays and portrays individual and group interests and backgrounds. In the negotiation and elicitation of the life narratives, the deployment of various linguistic strategies is a way of negotiating status, establishing roles, and confirming and performing identities.

Consider the first few minutes of my interview with Oscar, a 30-year-old Filipino immigrant who has been in the United States for 4 years. The initial interaction started with my asking the question "Do you speak Tagalog?" When he said yes, I asked whether he wanted the interview to be conducted in Tagalog or English. He said that it was okay either way. I started the interview in Tagalog and asked him mostly about general information such as his date of birth and ethnolinguistic group. However, when I started to ask him more personal questions about such topics as childhood experiences, he started to answer me in English. After an hour of stories about his childhood, he started to become comfortable and began to talk in Taglish. By the time he was answering my questions about his sexual and social experiences in gay life, he was freely using idioms and words from *swardspeak*,⁴ the Filipino gay argot.

Here the relationship between Oscar as the narrator and myself as researcher was configured and negotiated with the particular uses of

language. English was a way for him to ease the tension while he was getting used to the interview process. Then, as he settled into the situation, he began to use Tagalog. By the time the more sensitive issues about sexuality were being discussed, he was using swardSpeak.

Social distance and proximity are particularly evident in the ways class, ethnicity and immigration status are implicitly articulated in linguistic situations during the interview process. The informant Paulo, for example, insisted on speaking English throughout the interview, although his command of the language was quite poor. During the interview, he was often unable to grasp the meaning of the questions. In his heavily accented English, he would often tell his stories in a very abbreviated, almost cryptic manner. At one point during the interview, he then revealed to me that he had only very recently become an American citizen. He had spent several years as an undocumented person. Through the amnesty program of the federal government, he had been able to legalize his status. He said, "I know that my English is not good, but I am an American now. I will try to talk like all Americans—in English."

In complete contrast, Rommel, who was born and raised in the United States, peppered his story with accented Tagalog words. He admitted that although he cannot hold a complete conversation in any Philippine language, he nevertheless attempts to punctuate his conversations with other Filipinos with a sprinkling of Tagalog. He does this to create a sense of affinity between himself and other Filipinos. In addition, this gesture is his attempt to show immigrant Filipinos that although he may not speak the "mother tongue" fluently, he is not arrogant or *mayabang* (arrogant).

Another informant who was a scion of a prominent family in the Philippines used a particular form of Taglish that is commonly seen as an elite form of code switching. During the interview, he was trying to find out if we knew certain people in common. Once we had established some common friends and acquaintances, he began to talk about his family's wealth and how easy his childhood had been and how all that had changed when he came to America. He said that unlike the Philippines, where people knew their "place," America brings Filipinos from different backgrounds together. He added that he tries to keep away from Filipinos who are "low class" or *bakya*, and he boasted he mingles only with his "own kind" as much as possible. His language behavior was meant to signal his upper-class status and crucial difference from other

Filipinos. It was also his way of finding out about my own class background. My ability to converse with him in his class-marked language code and our having a set of common friends and acquaintances enabled me to continue the interview.

In many ways, not only is language a tool or the means to tell a story, as these examples suggest, but its use in specific situations is part of the story itself. In sum, language locates the individual user within the social context as he weaves his life story. Filipino gay men's deployment of language forms and practices in their narratives and within the narrative elicitation process reflects the multiple positions and situations they occupy.



Kiyeme and *Etsing*: Beyond What Is Said

In recounting their lives, Filipino gay men, particularly those who immigrated as adults, use specific idioms and hand and facial signals and codes to signify irony, exasperation, or dissimulation in certain parts of the narrative. These idioms and gestures are ways in which Filipino gay men read between the lines and go beyond the literal meanings of what is said.

The swardSpeak idioms that capture these verbal and nonverbal cues and codes are *kiyeme* and *etsing*. *Kiyeme* and *etsing* can be used interchangeably and can mean artfulness, artifice, inauthenticity, untruth, and playful manipulation of social situations. Sometimes, after saying something, the speaker feigns a sneezing attack and says, "*Etsing!*" More often than not, these words are not said and instead are signaled by particular actions such as running one's finger over a hard surface such as a tabletop or a wall with a quick flick of the finger at the end. Another nonverbal signal is the raising of one's eyebrow or using a finger to push up an eyebrow.

The concepts of *kiyeme* and *etsing* permeated several interview situations. One particularly lively interview involved Carlo, who had been a migrant/overseas contract worker in the Middle East before immigrating to the United States. He suggested that the rules around sexuality and moral conduct in Saudi Arabia were so strict and forbidding that he

had had to play it safe, so that many times he had acted very masculine. After saying that, he did the finger signal. During the interview, Carlo consistently used the signal, and when I asked him if everything he had told me was *kiyeme* and none of it was true, he said that it wasn't really important to know the truth or not, only to be able to "play" with the situation. When I asked him further about this concept, he said that Filipino gay men like to think of themselves as being in control of the situation, so the best way to think about any situation is to treat it as if it were all artifice (or, as he said, "fake"). The artifice of life in general allows Filipino gay men to cope, survive, and in some way control social situations. For example, he mentioned the lack of working papers that he and many of his friends were confronted with when they moved to the United States. When he applied for a job, he not only produced the required documents, such as a social security card, but also tried to act like an American, so, as he said, he made *kiyeme* to survive.

When I asked him if he thought the life history interview was the same thing as those situations of survival, he answered that it was a different kind of *kiyeme*. There is no attempt at dissimulation or trickery. It was his way of connecting with me and to show his view of the world.

Other informants talked about the importance of the idioms, particularly in the pleasure of speaking. As Exotica, one of the more eloquent informants, noted, "It isn't about what is said, but how it is said." *Kiyeme* and *etsing* provide a way of adding some excitement to what may turn out to be a boring activity such as the interview. Exotica further added, "Things are not what they seem." For Exotica and for many Filipino gay men, the use of idioms for pleasure and/or survival shows how things can have hidden or veiled meanings and how one needs to be aware at all times—otherwise one may not survive or make the most of any situation.

In the life history interviews, the narratives and their elicitation become part of this play for survival and pleasure. The idioms *kiyeme* and *etsing* suggest layers, dimensions, and regimes of truth that exist in the narratives. Indeed, one cannot rely solely on the spoken or the literal; there are meanings and truths that are partially covert and not so apparent. Some of the pleasure and value that the narratives afford the researcher, the narrator, and the readers of these texts lies in uncovering these meanings.

AIDS and Narratives From the Trenches

How does AIDS figure in the elicitation of life histories? In the pandemic, lives of people with AIDS become the grist of gossip, scientific inquiry, and journalistic and visual art renditions. For many of my informants, the AIDS pandemic is the implicit context within which the elicitation of life histories occur.

There was trepidation specifically among those who had AIDS to talk about the topic. Six months after he participated in a life history interview, an informant called and asked me out for dinner. During dinner, he admitted that he had intentionally omitted very important information about himself but that some events in the past few months had made him reconsider this deliberate oversight on his part. He then said that he had just been diagnosed with Kaposi's sarcoma, a type of skin cancer that many people with AIDS acquire and that is marked by purple lesions. He said that he had known he was HIV positive since 1986 and had been diagnosed with AIDS in 1989 but that during the interview, he felt that he could not, even with the confidential nature of the interview, disclose his condition to me. He said, "I was not ready to tell you [about the diagnosis]. A few close friends and family members know, but revealing this to you during the interview was something else. It was too public." With the visible signs of the cancer on his face, he said that his life had entered what he called a more "terminal" state and that he was ready to be more public about his condition.

For those who have seen the horrors of the epidemic, many perceived the recounting of their life stories as part of the fight against AIDS. In fact, some of my informants who were living with AIDS talked about their lives as if they were recounting a moral fable. Jesse, who died a few months after the interview, perceived the life narrative as a way of "helping others." In providing the public with an account of his life trajectory, he was then giving the people a kind of example and giving the disease a Filipino and an Asian face. Jesse was well aware that at that time, the representations and images of AIDS in America never included anybody who looked like him, who did not look white, black, or Latino. Jesse was worried about his other Filipino friends and other Filipino gay

men who were not aware of how AIDS is transmitted and of how vulnerable they could be. Because of his Catholic background, he had first laid the blame on himself. After receiving some counseling, he eased his burden and accepted the diagnosis. He said, "Blaming myself was a waste of time. I got over that real quick." What he did not get over was his overwhelming need to make some sense of his predicament. He said that he had readily consented to participate in the interview because he knew that many Filipino gay men would be reading about it. He insisted that I use his real name. He saw his very public avowal of the disease as a kind of intervention into the silence and denial that permeated the Filipino American community at that time.

Those who did not have AIDS and were not HIV positive saw the whole interview process as being related to the epidemic, even if only a section of the interview was devoted to the subject. AIDS provided a kind of signpost or a historical marker for their own narratives. "Before" or "pre" AIDS and "after" AIDS are periods that mark many of the narratives. For many of the informants, AIDS was a way to differentiate the way their lives were lived before the pandemic and the way their lives were lived now. Many had witnessed people, including friends and lovers, die. These deaths and illnesses had been turning points in their lives. AIDS permeated the ways in which they viewed their sexuality, particularly in the kinds of caution and trepidation that many of them expressed about sexual practices. As many of them said, one needs to be careful "these days." Finally, the presence of AIDS was apparent in informants' perception of the necessity of the narratives. With many people dying, informants were worried that the stories of Filipino gay men would never be told. As one of my informants said in mocking jest, "You better take down our lives, we may not be here tomorrow—you never know."



Narratives and the Mapping of Identities

I have not exhausted the many connections between the production of life narratives of Filipino gay men and the arenas in which identities and experiences are performed and articulated. The three examples that I

have very briefly presented extend what is simply seen as a tool for data gathering into a dynamic social activity like other rituals, routines, and practices in everyday life, fraught with the tensions and ambivalence created by racial, class, sexual, or gender issues.

Life narratives and their elicitation, then, are like the frontier, an eminently rich space for exploring and locating selves and groups. However, unlike the popular conception of the frontier, in which that supposedly virginal space is seen as detached from and existing independently of the larger social world, the production of life narratives is intrinsically linked to arenas in which identities and experiences are contested. In gathering Filipino gay men's life narratives, I amassed not only the richness of the actual life experiences themselves but also the valuable understanding of a myriad of issues brought about by the process. Whether it involves negotiating with the language of the interview, deciphering the "real" and the "dissimulated," or conversing in the shadows of the pandemic, the production of life narratives is a dynamic event in which people position themselves continuously within history and social life.



Notes

1. For critical discussions of life histories/narratives, see Personal Narratives Group (1989), Langness and Frank (1981), and Watson and Watson-Franke (1985).

2. These 50 Filipino informants live in the greater New York area. Most lived in Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, and Jersey City (New Jersey). They ranged in age from 22 to 60+ (two older informants were vague about their age). All but one of these informants worked in jobs, which ranged from fashion designer to computer programmer to bank executive. The lone nonworker was an undergraduate student. The informants can be divided into three groups. The majority included 37 "immigrants" or those who were born and raised in the Philippines until they were 18 or over. The next group were five informants who are popularly called "one point fivers," or those who came to the United States from the Philippines when they were less than 10 years old. Seven were born in the United States or U.S. territories (one was born on a U.S. military base in Europe). All those born in the United States were from California. All informants had lived in New York City for more than 2 years.

3. *Bakla* is a Tagalog word whose meaning encompasses homosexuality, transvestitism, hermaphroditism, and effeminacy. Though most of my informants identified as gay, they used *bakla* in specific situations, particularly in defining or differentiating themselves from American gay men.

4. Swardspeak is a popular way of connecting with other Filipino gay men living in America. Though some refuse to speak it because they see it as an anachronous practice, many informants report that it was one way of creating affinity between two or more Filipino gay men. Although there were a couple of U.S.-born Filipino gay men who understood and even used swardspeak, the argot was seen as part of an immigrant's cultural baggage. See my essay (Manalansan, 1994) for a more extensive discussion of the subject matter.



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18

Throwing the Baby Out With the Bath Water

*Situating Young Filipino Mothers and Fathers
Beyond the Dominant Discourse
on Adolescent Pregnancy*

Antonio T. Tiongson Jr.



The "Problem"

According to the latest health assessment report of Filipinos in San Francisco (Pilipino Health Mini-Forums Committee, 1993), Filipino teens have the highest pregnancy rates among Asians (6.7%) and, in 1991, had the highest rate of increase in the number of births (65%) compared to African Americans, Latinas, whites, and other Asian groups (see Table 18.1).

In 1992, all ethnic groups exhibited a decline in total number of births to resident teens. Filipino teens, however, had the smallest percentage of