A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Media and Gender Identity

Over dinner after a recent meeting of a feminist NGO to which I belong, a colleague asked whether we thought she was a lesbian. Without waiting for a reply, she announced that as she grew older, she noticed that she was becoming attracted to men. Another colleague piped in and related that a friend, a woman-loving-woman (WLW), has married a man in her middle age. On the other hand, the second colleague, who used to identify herself as a straight woman, who was once married, and who has children, has been identifying herself as a lesbian or a WLW. A mutual friend, a former colleague in our feminist NGO, expressed herself when she was a young woman as a lesbian until she married a man and had a daughter, then subsequently left the marriage and began a relationship with another woman.

The casualness of the dinner exchange indicated an acknowledgement not only of the fluidity of gender identities but also the fact that the non-fixity of identity is taken for granted, in this case gender identity, commonly defined as one's deeply felt psychological identification as female, male, or another gender, which may or may not match one's physiology or assigned sex at birth. The increasing challenge to the notion of an essential gender identity, problematized not only in academic discourses but also reproduced on popular culture, has exposed the instability of the gendered self as well as the possibility of remaking the self.

The subversion of the gender binary female-male has moved beyond the LGBT (for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) identities and all the

other alphabetic markers of gender identity, e.g., Q for queer as well as for questioning; I for intersex; A for agender as well as androgyne, ally and asexual; C for crossdresser; etc. There has been a growing scrutiny of the previously unquestioned assumption that all genders besides the heterosexual male and heterosexual female may fall under the general category "gay" or "homosexual." Transgenders, or transmen and transwomen (I've been told in the Philippines the increasingly preferred terms are transpinoy and transpinay), who identify as men and women, respectively, begrudge the apparently mechanical presumption that they are lesbians and gays rather than men and women.

Moreover, a disconnect between sexual orientation and gender identity is gaining conceptual understanding not only in the classroom but also in media. Thus, a person may identify himself as a man and may be sexually attracted to men, as in MSM or men-who-have-sex-with-men; or one may identify herself as a woman and be sexually attracted to women, as in WLW or women-loving-women; or one may be a pangender, who may be attracted to all or many genders; or one may be a pansexual, whose sexual orientation and/or gender identity is fluid; or one's gender identity, which may be aligned with her/his assigned sex at birth, may be expressed in nonconforming ways, such as in cross-dressing. Thus, neither sexual orientation nor gender identity can be assumed to be stable or static. Thus, the radical notion that gender identities, or even other identities such as citizenship, are in flux; that the taken-for-granted boundaries are dirtied by, for example, relatively recent awareness about the intersex, or those with physiological characteristics of both female and male, whether chromosomally, hormonally, or by the presence in varying degrees of both sex organs, some more externally obvious than others.

Plaridel contributes to the emerging and proliferating discourses on gender identity, particularly as they are represented in media. The issue puts together essays that examine gender identities as well as the ways in which these are rendered unstable or, ironically, re-configured in order to preserve traditional gender demarcations. The investigations, which may be considered part of queer studies under the rubric of cultural studies, inquire into the workings of the media to offer insights about shifting gender identities as well as struggles to comprehend these shifts.

The first of the six essays, "The Power of Anonymity: HIV/AIDS in the Philippines and the Internet" by Fernando A. Austria Jr., problematizes identity by denying it and then, by valorizing anonymity. Austria's premise is that the Internet provides those living with HIV/AIDS or at risk of contracting the virus a secure site within which users form a caring community that fights the disease by sharing often critical information. The author shows how real world identities are suppressed or ignored online, allowing everyone to slide into the safety of anonymity and escape the stigma and discrimination associated with

sexual orientation, often assumed by the uninformed to be the sole cause of the disease.

The next two essays inspect shifts in the imaging of the feminine. One author situates her critique in a contemporary time-space while the other, in history, but both look at re-configurations of the feminine through advertising. Maria Alicia A. Sarmiento's "Spaces for Stardom: Urban Spatial Practice and the Feminization of Flânerie in the SMDC Advertising Campaign" explores, among other concepts, how the ad campaign exploits reconfigurations of the domestic sphere within the so-called New Economy, and the shifting role women play within it. Sarmiento's reading of the ads exposes the insistence of the ads on traditional images of women as consumers and decorative elements while concealing their role in the prosperity that made the present capitalist consumer culture possible.

Echoing Sarmiento's critique of the persistence of traditional images of the feminine obscured by ironic representations of a recast femininity, Fernan Talamayan's "NEPA *at Kababaihan*: *Pag-aaral sa Ugnayan ng Pagsasakatawan ng Kasarian, Pagganap, at Pagtanggap ng Isang Identidad*" ("NEPA and Women: A Study of the Relationship Between the Representation of Gender, Fulfillment of a Role, and Acceptance of an Identity") analyzes the media materials released by the National Economic Protectionism Association or NEPA in the 1930s. Talamayan shows how the role of women in society was represented from 1934 to 1941, and how this representation translated to the creation of a Filipina identity in this critical period of nationhood.

Two of the essays present fascinating annotations of emerging masculinities. "Breaking down Bromance: An Analysis of NigaHiga's *Bromance Music Video* and *Word of the Day: Bromance* episode" by Isabel Patricia C. Soresca looks beyond the etymology of the term "bromance" to chart the ways in which it is defined and re-defined in its performance by masculine friends whose bond is so strong and intimate that it blurs the border between brotherhood and romantic, homosexual relationships. Another term that describes the relationship is "homosocial." Soresca discusses men's struggles to keep homosocial relationships while maintaining masculinity. The process thus presents opportunities for re-defining masculinities.

Similarly, Janyn P. Berame's "The Ideologies of the Octagon: The Ultimate Fighting Championship as a Manifestation of the Postmodern Phenomenon" examines how masculinity may be undermined in its performance. Berame looks into the creation of hegemonic masculinity in the popular televised sport Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) as portrayed in the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC). Using a postmodern framework, the author contends that masculinity exhibited through violence in sports is countered by the physical intimacy of MMA as a combat sport, where fighters in the Octagon go against each

other skin-to-skin, displaying homoeroticism. The sport exerts hegemonic masculinity by deflecting homosexuality and femininity, but is countered by the intimacy of its performance.

The last of the essays is another examination of masculine representations in action films. Rommel B. Rodriguez's "*Representasyon ng Pagkalalaki sa Pelikulang Bakbakan ni* FPJ" ("Representations of Masculinity in the Action Films of Fernando Poe Jr.") forms new categories of such representations created by said films as infantilized, trigger-happy, and sadistic. The author, attempting to apply his observations to an analysis of the larger social context, uses the categories to critique the visual representations of that social context, such as those produced by an urban renewal project.

Consistent with the issue theme, Marie Deanne Therese O. Correa's review of the anime "Ghost in the Shell: A Cyborg-Feminist Review of Mamoru Oshii's Animated Film" examines identity in an early film production of the popular Japanese text that has been produced and re-produced on several platforms such as a television series, video games, and films, the most recent of which may be a re-creation in Hollywood. The film's exploration of identity refers not only to gender identity but to humanity as identity. Correa asks whether technology can be used to cope with sociopolitical issues such as inequality in class, gender, and ethnicity. To find in the film an answer to her question, she examines the hybridization of humans and machines in the anime, otherwise known as the "cyborg," which ironically creates what the author calls a new gender: the non-gender.

Plaridel's interview this issue is with psychologist, author, and educator Margarita Go-Singco Holmes. Conducted by Mikee N. Inton, the interview presents Holmes's views on the media's contemporary imaging of the LGBT. She talks about her books on sexuality and her online programs and invites readers to contribute their own views and questions on gender and sexuality, while enumerating some of the topics that she had discussed online: overpossessive partners, lesbians/lesbianism, LGBT, male sexuality, sex stories, and sex videos.

Though the issue fails to offer a comprehensive range of views on an expanding list of gender identities (sorely missing are, among others, essays on lesbian and gender queer identities), it is hoped that it opens up opportunities to further examine gender identity and its diversity. Of particular interest to *Plaridel* is the way the media mediates those identities, notably when the media encourages audiences to challenge traditional, limiting, and oppressive definitions of who people are and may become. We are seeing evidence of this, happily, in media texts, more significantly in local media texts, such as in the hugely popular telenovela "My Husband's Lover" and a growing filmography that includes previously absent lesbian themes.

The media has often been accused of many sins—negative effects on audiences as well as, conversely, being a powerful force for the status quo, thus resisting liberative social change. But the media is not monolithic; it serves as an arena for contending ideologies, offering many possibilities for struggles for change, including the opportunity to defy the cultural and discursive binary of gender identity.

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