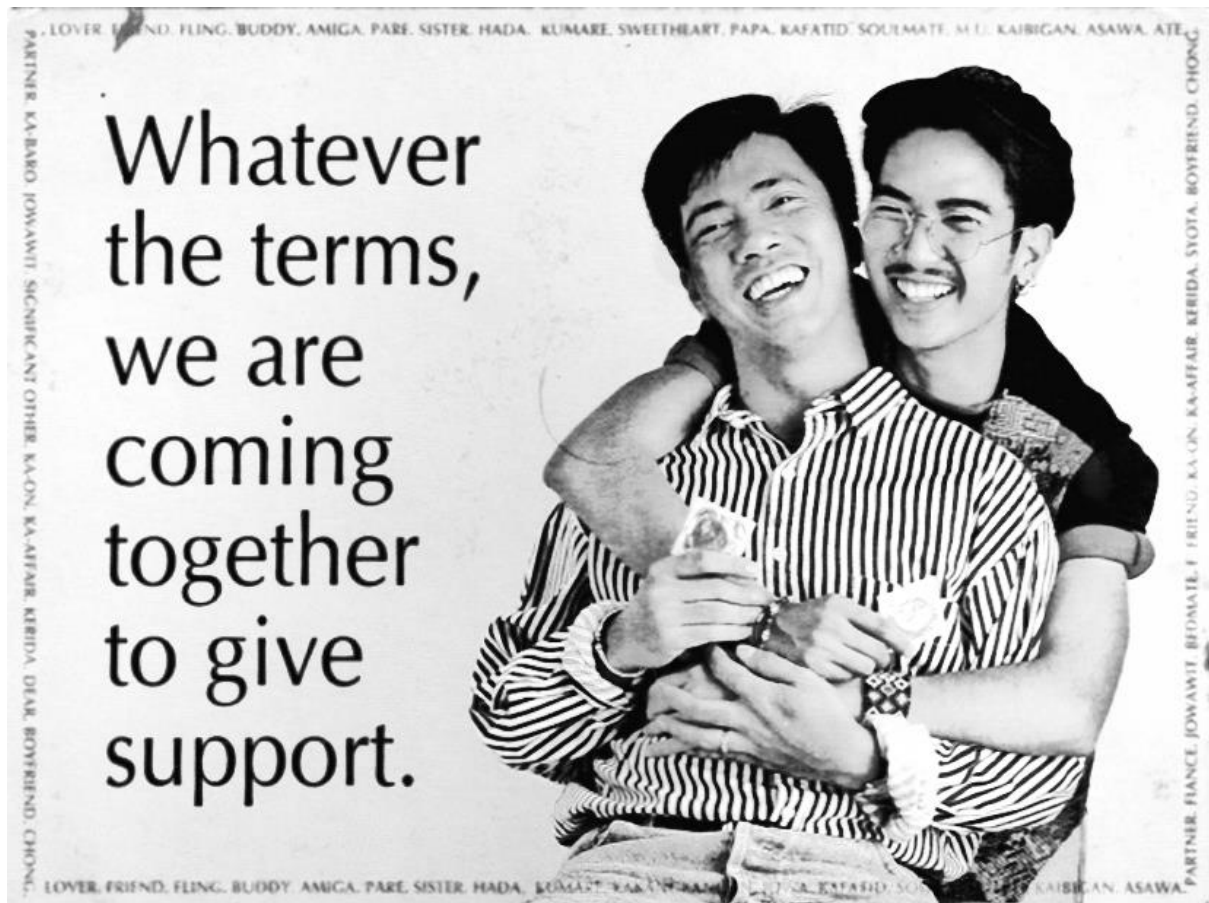


Fear of homosexuality in media

BY DANTON REMOTO

The discrimination, if not outright bashing, remains apparent



AT last, an upbeat – and tasteful – postcard by gays.

IF you're gay or who has overcome repression, or are trying to, or would love to, this one's for you. The Library Foundation, a nongovernment AIDS service organization, has reopened its community center in the same location it had two years ago: 956 Malvar corner Agoncillo Street, Malate, two streetcorners, behind Philippine Women's University (*Its phone numbers: 588-974 and 509-726*)

As in the past, the center is open to all members of the community and to other organizations. Being gay doesn't only mean thumbing your nose at repression borne by Catholic guilt and authority figures with medieval mind-sets. Being gay also means

belonging to a *community*, and this center is one home that can foster this sense of community.

After a soft opening early this month, the center began its work. Every Friday is discussion night on gay issues; Saturday is socials and *chikahan*. Nov. 11 was SRO night with Rev. Richard Mickley of the Metropolitan Community Church talking about "Homosexuality and Spirituality." I think it's one strong way to begin the work at hand, since gay Filipinos go through a difficult time shaking off the distorted gay images inflicted by society, particularly those who drop quotations from the Bible.

They can quote to death, but they shouldn't forget that meanings are culture-specific and time-bound; readings change across the centuries. The Old Testament was strung together across so many years by very human hands, then collated and translated.

Last Friday, I was the resource person for a discussion on "Gay Bashing in the Media and Other Forms of Repression." I was invited because I just co-edited with J. Neil Garcia the book "*Ladlad: an Anthology of Philippine Gay Writing*" published by Anvil.

With some teachers, I am also developing a course on the Literature of Sexuality which we may offer at Ateneo de Manila University, where I teach, in the coming semesters.

So in quick succession, I ticked off instances of homophobia (fear of homosexuality) in the media and of so-called celebrities in the last six months. There was Vice President Joseph Estrada, who blamed the mediocrity and mess in the film industry on the gay and lesbian reporters. There was an editorial writer who blithely claimed that gays aren't oppressed in the Philippines. Oh, yeah? Then why do the gay yuppies in Makati have to make sure their voices don't curl, their wrists don't limp, the whiskers above their lips are lush as ever? Somebody I know topped the battery of tests in a corporation, but was bluntly told in the interview that he couldn't be hired because he is "obviously" gay. I told this friend I would have sued that corporation and drove it to the poor house. To which my friend snapped, "Well, if I did that, then who would hire me?"

During the Gay Pride march last June 26, a photographer from a daily paper asked me to kiss (to kiss!) my gay friend standing beside me, holding a poster which spelt the words "*Itsugi ang VAT!*" I looked at the photographer's press card, told him I know his managing editor and he shouldn't do

that. But he disregarded me, and just repeated his stupid request. I wrote a strong letter to the editor in chief, and the crass photographer was fired.

Of course, we also have two cartoonists whose ideas of gays are old men with sunken cheeks, wearing minis and fishnet stockings. As I've written, this is already 30 years behind fashion! Neil Garcia also had to endure an AM radio deejay's remarks: "*Hoy, ano ba ang ginagawa ninyo sa UP, bakit may mga kabaklaan na kayo diyan?*"

On TV, the gay group UP Babaylan walked out of the taping of "Mel & Jay." They protested the inclusion of the Religious Right, embodied by this young man who claims he was an ex-gay (as in, ex-convict?) and a priest whose readings had not gone beyond Vatican II. UP Babaylan was reportedly told that the Religious Right should be there, or the show might have problems with the MTRCB. If this were true, then there is, indeed, (self-) censorship on Philippine television.

In music, The Youth's song "Mga Multong Bakla" exiles gays into the margins of society. Somebody I know informed me that the group's intention was to blast our politicians with that song. Then why compare them to gays? The problem with some of our rockers is that they aren't bold enough, carrying their ideas into the edge of things. Long hair, torn jeans, ear-splitting sounds don't mean a new way of singing if your ideas are still stereo-types.

Another gay-bashing in music is The Singing Cooks and Waiters' song, "*Silahis*," where the persona is torn between genders. The group's proffered solution: "*Mabuti pang mamatay na lang*." It takes a passive, defeatist attitude, as if a person's life has been cast for him simply because of his sexual orientation.

Of course, what takes the cake is that political carnival at the Luneta last Aug. 14,

where you had our toadlike politicians sharing centerstage with Cardinal Sin. The Central Board of the Ateneo Student Council issued a statement against the rally, citing instances in which students, even those in the Catholic grade schools, were forced to attend the rallies.

As one student wrote in the *Kampus Tok* #5: "I can't understand why the Grade 3 pupils at SSC were forced to attend. Why, do they now know how to use IUD and condom?" Or this wicked line from another student: "*Kulang sa Pan-Sin*" (pun on Lacking in Attention/Cardinal Sin's name).

In a breathless rush I cited these things, then TLF's Joel de Mesa asked the others in the audience for their experiences. Oscar Atadero, who also writes on gay issues, has received three hate letters for his articles.

Another said he bought a P5 brochure being sold in front of Robinson's Galleria. The brochure trots the usual things: Sodom and Gomorrah, la-dee-dah. Then the truly atrocious drawing of people burning in hell. This all reminds me of what Jesuit priest Roque Ferriols said when he read his translation of Sappho's poems. The poems of the Greek poet Sappho were burnt by the bishops because they celebrated women loving other women. Before reading his crystalline translations in Filipino, Father Ferriols looked at the audience and said, "Now, it's the bishops who are burning in hell for what they did."

If not the demonization of homosexuality, then labelling it as "like scoliosis," the way one bishop did. Since I'm still a closet Catholic, I just listened to him. But after he was finished, I took him to task for that, telling him that words are weapons and we should be careful how we wield our words. The good bishop answered that he was only using a metaphor. But without skipping a beat, he next compared homosexuality to "pedophilia." Forthwith, I read to him a Reuters report which said that straight

people are 100 more times more likely to molest a young person than a homosexual.

When you go to these fora, you notice that the other side is always defended by people who are simply content with parroting words. Notice: these people invariably have stopped reading, not updating themselves on their religious scholarship.

Instilling guilt and fear simply does not wash anymore. Today, Catholics are no longer a dumb flock of cattle to be driven to the ravine's edge. Hey, even Forrest Gump had his sharp moments, moments of lucidity.

At Malvar Center last Saturday, there was also a poetry reading and this Friday, there will be a discussion on Gay and Lesbian Marriages. Two couples will give testimonials on the validity and joy of having loving same-sex relationships.

Another project is a mini-concert by Kinselo and a photo exhibit of baby photos by participants in the Healthy Interaction and Values workshop run by The Library Foundation.

There are also activities being planned for World AIDS Day on Dec. 1. Membership is still open to the Journal and Counselling Committees, and to a theater group.

The Library Foundation also produces eye-catching postcards and info on safer sex. Unlike the cheap and tasteless projects by Reach Out Philippines -- zero-value brochures, HIV testing on the lobby (yes, the lobby) of a third-run theater in Quiapo, the vulgar and witless names of the drinks in Condom Cafe -- TLF runs a tight ship. Not only is its print matter informative, it is also designed with taste and style.

The mood of the postcards is cheerful, glad, even upbeat. One postcard shows two beaming models fully clothed. A pair of hands holds an unopened condom; the other

pair of hands are affectionately clasped to each other. The text reads: “Whatever the terms, we are coming together to give support.” And on the borders are these words: lover, friend, buddy, sister, sweetheart, papa, fling, soulmate, m.u., partner, fiance, bedmate, f' friend, dear, significant other, *amiga*, *pare*, *kumare*, *kafatid*, *ate*, *jowawit*, *ka-on*, *ka-affair*, *kerida*, *syota*, *chong*, *ka-baro*, *asawa*, *kaibigan*. In short, the whole vocabulary that circumscribes gay relationships.

After our poetry reading last Saturday, we are eating in the lobby and filling in each

other on the week's news when the phone suddenly rings. Sam picks it up. On the other end of the line was a young gay man. He said he was “very depressed” and in need of somebody to talk to. Sam gave the receiver to a TLF officer, who calmly sat down and talked to the guy.

Seems like the Malvar Center is shaping up like a voice on the other end of the line. Its warm and comforting words will be there, driving away the cold and angry voices in the night.

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