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Buhay Bahaghari: The Filipino LGBT Chronicles

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Taylor's admiration for Ne Win is mostly based on "negative achievements": the general steered a fairly subtle and successful course through the dangers of the Cold War, keeping Burma out of major regional and geo-political conflicts, and avoiding the large-scale loss of life associated with other newly independent Southeast Asian countries, such as Vietnam and Laos, and particularly Cambodia (5, 543); he avoided the temptations of developing a cult of personality; his regime was not particularly corrupt by the standards of the region, and indeed Myanmar was for many years regarded as a relatively egalitarian if authoritarian society. Taylor nevertheless identifies significant failings of Ne Win's regime: economic stagnation, particularly in the latter years (including disastrous demonetisations in 1985 and 1987), and an increasingly dysfunctional government bureaucracy, where important decisions were avoided by middle-ranking bureaucrats and corruption became increasingly widespread (480–481).

The marshalling of facts and historical scholarship is impressive – although even the most dedicated reader may sometimes find the detailing of Ne Win's various foreign trips and speeches rather tiring. Although Taylor often takes questionable government data at face value, particularly in his defence of Ne Win's development record (544–550), he nevertheless provides much useful information, for example on peace talks with ethnic insurgents in 1963 (294–295). A striking omission is anything but the most superficial acknowledgement of the Ne Win regime's human rights abuses – violations which increased in intensity and extent under the successor post-1988 military government. Given its author's focus on the Myanmar Army, there is surprisingly little in the book on military matters, such as the military's successful if brutal counter-insurgency strategy.

Ne Win stepped down in July 1988, in the context of widespread student-led demonstrations against his quarter-century of rule. In the first years after his resignation, he wielded some influence behind the scenes. His final years however were rather pathetic, being under house arrest at the time of his death in December 2002.

Robert Taylor has given us by far the most authoritative account of Ne Win's life, embedded in a useful history of Myanmar from independence until 1988. While clearly sympathetic to his subject, Taylor is aware of Ne Win's flaws as a political leader, and the sad legacy he left the country he led, and loved.

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Buhay Bahaghari: The Filipino LGBT Chronicles, Eva Callueng *(ed.)* Diliman: University of the Philippines Center for Women's Studies, 2014

The Foreword to this collection argues that the general consensus about the historiographic work of the local lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) literature in the Philippines is that its production is mainly from gay studies scholars. *Buhay Bahaghari* interrupts this. It is an edited collection of personal essays largely by lesbian, bisexual and transgender authors. In the Introduction, Eva Callueng describes her collection as "similar to the Pinoy LGBT channel of the Philippine Online Chronicles" and "the first of its kind." Many of the writers are affiliated with the University of the Philippines, Diliman, while each is also an activist. One of the significant contributions of this book is that in dealing with the traces of internalised homophobia in Philippine society, it also occasions

opportunities to think about ways in which LGBT and non-LGBT communities can continue to co-create spaces of solidarity.

The book comprises 36 personal essays organised under four themed sections which represent, "the four different struggles that LGBT people usually face": (i) identities and struggles; (ii) tensions, anxieties, relations; (iii) love and lessons; (iv) challenges, changes, and our community. The first section foregrounds the explorations of, and the conditions that enable, LGBT identity-making in the Philippines. The opening essay by Fire Sia, "The space in between light and dark" is about the "grey area." She writes that this "is a space between light and darkness … it defines itself … with its own look, feel and name." It is a space where one can define who they are "without doubts or fears of becoming straight or gay in the end" (18). Meggan Evangelista's "Happy together: An unfinished tale of a TG and her jowa," relates precisely to this grey area and locates in it tensions one traverses while nurturing a relationship with another and with one's transgender self. The grey area exists as an inconspicuous ground from which certain decisions are reached – the decision to come out in one's own terms or to live together as same-sex partners – revivifying resistance to systems of power with which one has "learned" to endure. These and other essays in this section signal the reality of a human aspiration for recognising one's self in the midst of regulatory structures and ephemerality of sexual identity.

The second set of essays addresses issues of "recognition, acceptance, religiosity, and different beliefs on morality" (11). Opening this section is Annamanila's, "Babae po ang anak ninyo, Ma'am!" ("Ma'am, your child is a girl!"), an essay on her relationship with her lesbian daughter, framed in terms of acceptance:

> Hindi ako kuntento sa "acceptance" nang dahil lang ayaw kong mawalan ng anak. Inambisyon ko na tanggapin ko siya hindi lamang yun ang tamang gawin kundi dahil wala namang mali sa nangyari sa kanya o sa kung ano siya ngayon (53).
>
> [I am not content with the kind of "acceptance" that stems from a desire to not lose a child. My desire is to accept her, not because it is the right thing to do, but because no mistake has happened to her, and because there is nothing wrong about who she is now.]

Not only does Annamanila's essay reveal the social and affective labours involved in forming her re-configured relationship with her daughter but it also explains the search for self-understanding. In the same vein are pieces like "Sa apat na sulok ng silid-aralan" [The four corners of a classroom] by Eva Callueng and, "Being a Catholic lesbian" by Miel Feria, that give emphasis to self-reflection and the work behind re-negotiating the meaning of one's faith. Overall, the essays in this section pose a connection between psychic and social transformations. The possibility of this is derived from a re-articulation or re-discovery of one's kinship with others and interwoven with a sense of concern for one's authentic self.

Section three considers issues of "love and lessons." It includes an essay called, "I'm in love. Now what?" where blogger Firewomyn (firewomyn.blogspot.com) writes about the web as a realm filled with women seeking to love and to be loved by other women. By presenting the virtual world as another mode of contact and limitless possibilities of knowing another person, of revelations, conversations and intimacies, she explores "virtual-lived" LGBT partnerships and experiences as anti-normative enactments of sexuality. It is precisely the virtual world that Libay Linsangan Cantor problematises in one of her two essays in this section titled, "To reach the unreachable love." For Cantor, the "virtual context" offers contact that could only approximate the closeness one can experience from a reachable touch or a felt kiss. In her second essay, "To fight the unbeatable fight," Cantor hones in on some of the compromises Filipina lesbians make for love. In the Philippines, for instance, loving another woman requires both a certain level of willingness to travel (perhaps, time and again) with her "in the darkness of the closet" but also, a sense of bravery to recognise the signs for when it is time to come out. Overall, this section reveals

the centrality of labour – its performances and elicited compromises – to "make reachable" the promises of love itself.

The final section provides the reader with a range of essays that brings to view ways that LGBTs in the Philippines engage, organise around and deploy anti-oppressive strategies in relation to LGBT stereotypes, labels and discriminatory gender practices. Essays like, "Tale of the prodigal son" by Tatyana Ross, "An artificial divide" by Allan Paul Carreon, and "Katolikong beki" by Argel Tuason suggest both a conscious and cautious re-reading of one's acquired beliefs, whether they be of religion or sexuality. These and the rest of the essays in this section attempt to question the *ways* in which sex has been (and continues to be) put into discourse with religion, and vice versa. The book concludes with an essay by Richard Mickley which illuminates connections made, and advocacy, within and among the LGBT communities in the Philippines. This work, he suggests, will continue to address the traces of the dominant discourses that continue to threaten the promise of freedom and equality.

On the whole, *Buhay Bahaghari* identifies and signifies a space evocative of the ever flowing conversations and strenuous negotiations among contemporary LGBTs in the Philippines and their families and friends. It renders visible multiple ways in which love and performances of loving proliferate in the Philippines' present. *Buhay Bahaghari* is a major contribution that deserves a wide audience.

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Contemporary Islamic Discourse in the Malay-Indonesian World: Critical Perspectives, Azhar Ibrahim (Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2014)

In *Contemporary Islamic Discourse in the Malay-Indonesian World*, Azhar Ibrahim provides a detailed, engaging critique of public religion in Southeast Asia today. The book comprises six independent but related essays in which Ibrahim outlines the competing influences of religious traditionalism, Islamic revivalism and Islamic liberalism in Malaysia, Indonesia and, to a lesser extent, Singapore. His critique is comprehensive and, drawing upon a range of primary sources, succeeds in identifying the main contours of Islamic discourse in Southeast Asia. A proponent of the liberal Islam advanced by a new generation of Malay-Indonesian intellectuals, Ibrahim's analysis of Islamic discourse in the region is not neutral. But his own stance on socio-political issues does not detract from the quality of his research; indeed, there are observations and levels of detail in these essays which might elude a more distant observer. Ibrahim gives particular attention to questions concerning democracy and ethnic and religious pluralism in the region, arguing that only a self-critical, contextualised Islamic discourse is capable of promoting the development of a society that is both civil and Muslim.

The first three chapters trace the influence of two conservative forces in Malay-Indonesian society: Islamic traditionalism and the *dakwah* (preaching of Islam) revivalist movement. Islamic traditionalism is characterised by its concern with personal piety and the afterlife as well as a literal reading of the Quran. According to Ibrahim, this transcendent orientation frequently leads to a retreat from daily life, especially political life. The political disenfranchisement of rural Malays and Indonesians, among whom Islamic traditionalism is