



On a warm May evening in 1976, Patricia, a lanky girl of nine who, besides being her mother's namesake, possessed her small, tilting eyes, and nut-brown skin, ran breathless along a skinny *esquinita*¹ in Sta. Ana, into their house. She had been in the company of her older brother when they had heard the thrumming of the drums signaling the approach of the *Santacruzán*² which, just then, was turning the bend by the *sari-sari*³ store at the mouth of the alley where they lived. Her excitement over this evening's shimmering procession of beautiful women and their handsome male escorts was owed to the fact that the be-sequined, tinsel-and-lace, alabaster *reynas* who provided the biggest draw at any *Santacruzán*, were whispered to be, in the case of this one, not women, but men passing as women. She dashed into the house to bring news of this stunning reversal of the accustomed order of things to her Lolo Pulong, in joyful anticipation of the exhilaration it would bring him.

Even now, in her mind's eye, she could see him fresh from his bath, towel wrapped all around his darling head, clad in the white floral pajamas that he himself had sewn, gliding over the floor to where the dresser was in his small bedroom, to be greeted there by the well-scrubbed and gleaming face

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¹Alleyway.

²The *Santacruzán* is a quasi-religious procession held each year in May in various parts of the city. It commemorates the search and recovery, by St. Helena and her son Constantine, of the True Cross. Taking on, over the years, a pageant-like quality, it prominently features local beauties dressed up to look like royalty (*reynas*), and their handsome male escorts, usually celebrities from local showbusiness.

³*Sari-sari*: literally, "all and sundry." A local retail store dealing in a variety of household items, the *sari-sari* store is a ubiquitous presence in the Philippines.

that smiled back at him from the mirror, then making this face over — plucking his eyebrows, carefully penciling them back in, patting modest amounts of powder on his cheeks, rubbing light-pink rouge onto the bridge of his nose and chin.

It was a sheer delight for Patricia to be able to observe her beloved Lolo (the seventy-year-old brother of her mother's mother), sift through his daily ritual of self-constitution. He, for his part, was happy to oblige this curious, sometimes pesky, little girl, his favorite niece's daughter, as she alternately squinted and stared at him out of a pair of little-girl-eyes.

Tearing into his room, she found him, not at his accustomed chair by the window, stitching together some new garment even as he puffed away quietly on his favorite *La Yebana* cigar, but sitting up on his bed, his back arched, his head thrown back, and his face paler than she had ever seen it before. Before she could blurt out to him anything about the procession, he whispered to her that he wasn't feeling well, and that she should get her *Nanay*⁴ to come right away. The room, he told her, was spinning about in his head, its walls, heavy with the framed photographs that had accumulated there over the years, were going around and around in his head! Patricia's parents took him to the hospital that same night, where he expired before seeing the dawn. Patricia, who had stayed behind in his room, keeping vigil under the benevolent gaze of the mysterious, exquisitely clad figure looking out at her from every picture on the wall, missed seeing the *Santacruz*an.

Looking back on that night's sequence of events, a grown-up Patricia, wiser to her own body's sorrows and joys, conjectures that her Lolo Pulong died either of a stroke or a ruptured aneurysm. Memories of him are stirred up nonetheless by her many special and enduring friendships with gay men. What is distinctive about them is that they all come home to roost in that magical room from the past, with its strange gallery of pictures.

A great number of the pictures were destroyed in a fire that, nearly a decade ago, had struck at the house of her childhood. From the few scarred and crumbling photographs that survived, the luminous face looks up of a man who, undaunted by the onset of years, transfigured himself daily into the subject of his photographic shrine to Beauty.

⁴*Nanay*, meaning "mom" or "mother."

Patricia keeps them in an album which, for the benefit of her gay friends, she every now and then takes from its hiding place. These friends are slightly envious of the fact that Patricia grew up in the care of a man who was certain of what he wanted in life, and did everything possible to possess it — indeed, to *become* it, as the photographs attest. They are, at the same time, grateful to Patricia, for they discern in the photographs a vaguely recognizable likeness of themselves, an emergent ancestry.



Pulong in the late 1920's, in a native costume

Lolo Pulong was born Crispulo Trinidad Luna, on June 10, 1903. The third child in a brood of four, he was the son of Pedro Luna and Candelaria Trinidad, both from Sasmuan, Pampanga. He grew up in Orani, Bataan, where his father had fished for a living. After her husband died, Candelaria moved the family to Tondo, where they stayed together until the time came for each of them to move out and build a family of his or her own.

Because Pulong, even as a very young boy, had been “soft” and “womanish” — his skin was fair, which made him appear “*mestizo*,” and his features delicate — it surprised no one in the family that he did not marry, as all of his siblings had done. Patricia’s mother recalls that each time a well-meaning relative made the offer to find him a wife, even at the ripe old age of fifty, invariably, his response, delivered with unflappable grace, was, “*Pero por Dios, babae ako!*”⁵ Pulong was never subjected to a moralizing judgement by his siblings or by anyone in their families, and in fact petty jealousies erupted among them whenever Pulong chose to live with any one family for too long.

The oldest photos here were taken in the late 1920s, or the opening years of the 30s. Presumably, in the earliest of them, Pulong was at least 25 years old. According to the older Patricia (whom I will call, for the sake of convenience, Aling Pat), Pulong had made friends with the owner of Victoria Studios in Paco, Manila, where these pictures were taken. This studio was located close to the home of the sibling with whom Pulong was staying at the time. As was the case with other establishments of its kind, a customer wishing to be photographed by Victoria could choose to avail him- or herself of any of the costumes which the studio kept in its wardrobe. Pulong had pictures of himself taken, well into his twilight years. He ended up with a sizable collection of these visual self-representations which, arranged chronologically, comprise the narrative of a life. In them, we find him all dressed and made up in feminine poses and styles, reflective of the fashion of the time.

⁵Roughly translated: “But for heaven’s sake, I’m a woman!”



Pulong in the early 1930's, as "Madame Butterfly."



*Pulong in a contemporary
dress (standing, right), 1930s,
in the 1940s, wearing a
flower-printed tapis*

In one photo, Pulong has transformed himself into some kind of a “Madame Butterfly”—complete with the kimono and geisha headgear—probably in homage to Puccini’s benighted heroine, whose opera had just opened in Manila. In another photo, Pulong, wearing a more contemporary American-style dress, stands beside a seated woman in a *traje de mestiza*.⁶ (Lest the viewer be misled, I should add that the third figure in this photo is most probably also a man).

It needs to be said, however, that although Pulong’s effeminacy shifted effortlessly from “simple” (speaking in a soft and singsongish manner, walking demurely, acting like a *dalagang Filipina*⁷, etc.), to “moderate” (putting on a little makeup, wearing women’s undergarments and accessories), to “elaborate” (going in full drag), only occasionally and inside the privacy of this friend’s studio did he let his hair down, and go the whole hog to pursue the dream of crossing over. (If these pictures are any indication, we might say he *sometimes* succeeded in this regard). In other words, although always feminine-acting and -sounding, he was, generally speaking, not anything like a full-time transvestite.

Soon after these pictures were taken, Pulong became involved with and eventually played “wife” to a certain *maestro carpentero*,⁸ a strapping man five years younger, whose name was Juan. The two of them lived in their own dwelling-place as a “love-nest” of sorts. This was an arrangement that family members on both sides of the relationship appeared to have no trouble with. The romantic in me would like to believe the years with Juan were the happiest in Pulong’s life, and while nobody now can say this for sure, his nieces remember he would on occasion tell them that Juan was the first and last “love” of his life. It was also while living with Juan that Pulong sharpened his home-making skills, the most noteworthy of which were cooking and sewing. Pulong kept a clean and cozy house for his partner, and later in his life, he would continue to do the same for the family of his sister, Miguela, and later on with the family of this sister’s daughter, *Aling Pat*.

⁶A Spanish-inspired dress usually cut out of cloth made from of pineapple fiber.

⁷Literally, “Filipino maiden.” This was also the title of one of the most popular pre-war *sarsuelas* (musical plays) in Manila. Consequently, the phrase *dalagang Filipina* became synonymous with the feminine ideal of the beautiful and demure young Filipino woman.

⁸“Master carpenter,” or the equivalent to a foreman in a construction site.



Pulong and Juan, in the 1940s.



Pulong and Gelay in Santa Ana, mid-60s.

This “conjugal bliss” lasted only a few years. Working on a house one day during the Japanese occupation, Juan fell from the scaffolding, and from the fall suffered an internal injury which caused his death about a month later. Following the liberation from the Japanese, Pulong moved into Miguela’s (Gelay), house in Santa Ana. As if providing Gelay assistance managing her household was not work enough, he found part-time employment at a store owned by *Aling* Sabel, a family friend, and accepted to do laundry-work, and perform many other housekeeping chores, for friends and acquaintances who could meet his fee. Pulong decided to stay with Gelay because she suffered from the tragic fate of losing her babies to crib death one after the other. Out of a total of 14, only six of her children survived, including *Aling* Pat. He played a very important role raising these children, teaching them, particularly the girls, how to be “decent,” how to keep themselves clean all the time, to wash, iron, mend clothing properly. He gave them strict instructions in the matter of boyfriends, and imposed curfews whenever they went out. Of course, it was not beneath *Tio* Pulong to size up his nieces’ prospective suitors. We can only imagine how terrorized those poor boys must have been, every time they came to the house to call.

But even if he devoted a good part of his life to helping his sister raise her family, he usually managed to get a few moments to himself. *Aling* Pat recalls that after *Tio* Pulong had moved in with her in 1970, the old man would sometimes go out to watch movies with an effeminate friend, a bubbly, grey-haired man he called Tiago. Other than the movies, the two of them also liked taking long, leisurely strolls down Hardin Botanico, which in another incarnation came to be known as the Mejan Gardens.

Patricia remembers that toward the end of his life, Lolo Pulong received regular visits from his friends, Josie and Tessie, a pair of garrulous gay beauticians from the neighborhood who tended to be a little loud and swishy. These two were given to calling the old man, endearingly, their “Lola Pulonia.” Sometimes, when Lolo Pulong could no longer abide their brash and unladylike ways, he would shush and promptly reprimand them. The three of them comprised a happy bunch, breaking out in giggles over stories of sexual escapades both remembered and imagined. During these times, Lolo Pulong’s face could be seen to light up, as though in his mind he was already somewhere else, sashaying in a floral sun-dress in a life he’d always wanted and once

probably did get to have, dreaming he was with his beloved Juan once more, young and looking fabulous as always, and free.



Despite its “smallness” and seeming insignificance, the life that was Lolo Pulong *does* extend beyond his time and his own person, to remind us of one crucial, by now paradoxically unrecognized fact: while gender distinctions may have been with Filipinos for a long time now, the distinctions of sexuality or sexual orientation most certainly haven’t. That is, Pulong’s identity made sense to him and to his society primarily as a form of “womanishness,” or *pagka-babae* (Pulong himself would say, of his self-understanding: *pusong-babae*, or “woman-hearted”).

What’s important to note here is that none of this was appreciated by the culture at large as a strict function of Pulong’s sexual desire for men, which, when anyone came to think of it, was viewed, not as the originary, underlying cause of his “inward femininity,” but as attendant upon it, as one of its effects — just as his preference for women’s chores and for women’s dress was seen as an “effect.” Pulong, therefore, was not a “homosexual” in the sense in which we apply the term today. (If anything, it might have even been the case that during his time men desired him or others like him just as much as if not more than Lolo Pulong and his “kind” did). Neither, for that matter, could it be said that Juan or any other non-effeminate man, was a “heterosexual.” If we examine the construction of the concept of masculinity — with Juan as an example — we see that the men of his class and social background were considered men precisely because of a rudimentary masculine “temperament,” an “essence,” a self-image and -presentation, that normally translated itself into a preference in occupation, regardless of what interest, evident in Juan’s case, they might have in entering into sexual relations with other men, especially of the “somehow-a-woman” sort, which certainly was how Pulong both viewed himself and was viewed by his society.

Of course, all this needs to be qualified as a function both of the historical period in which Pulong and Juan lived and loved, as well as of the socio-economic class to which they belonged. Even though they grew up and met during the American occupation or the Commonwealth period, at this time discourses on sex and sexuality were practi-

cally non-existent (except perhaps inside the confessional). In fact, as my research into the subject has shown, the introduction of the idea of sexual orientation came about only following the Second World War, largely as a consequence of the increasing availability and credibility of psychological logic, and the propagation of secular discourses on sex in schools and through the mass media.

And even if some medicalized form of sexual discourse had already been “transplanted” to the Philippines during the time that Pulong was growing up, his peasant background and lack of education æ his “sexual self-ignorance,” so to speak æ would have still worked to insulate him from any of its deleterious effects. In a way, therefore, it can be said that even now, in the sexually self-conscious present, the great masses of our people most probably remain outside the homo/hetero distinction. This must obviously be the case, since this distinction exclusively attends the acquisition of learning æ particularly learning of the highly psychological, Westernized sort. Quite unlike the educated gay or *bakla* of the last three decades, Pulong didn’t grow up getting told and subsequently believing æ sometimes æ that he was “abnormal,” “maladjusted,” “orally and/or anally fixated,” “diseased,” or “insane.” Although highly provocative, these sadly ignorant ideas are relatively recent in our history, following on the heels of a new, psycho-sexual perspective toward the dynamics of social behavior. To be precise, this “sexological turn” most probably began in the 1950s, just when the country was finally emerging from the ruins of the war. This was a time when psychological concepts came increasingly to be used in academic and mass-media discussions of such new social problems as juvenile delinquency, criminal insanity, and sexual deviance, the most conspicuous of which was æ judging from the preponderance of the *bakla* and the *tomboy* in every nook and cranny of Philippine life æ that terrible, *new* thing called “homosexuality.” Needless to say, unlike me or my Catholic-school-educated gay friends who grew up together in the 1970s, Pulong in the 1920s or 30s didn’t have to deal with the onus of thinking he was mentally “ill” simply because he found some men sexy and exciting. That is clear from the self-confidence he exudes in the photographs. So perhaps the primary attraction of these pictures is the story they inductively tell of “freedom.”

Here is a *tao*⁹ who lived and loved in the greater part of this century, and he enjoyed a freedom that, on the level of the everyday negotiation of his identity, of his happiness, of his dreams, was never abstract. Here is a man who traversed, like many others before and after him, the chasm dividing the male and female “worlds,” and lived out the role of a “gender-crosser,” if not always physically, then most certainly emotionally and within the sanctity of his imagination — an imagination caught on film by means of the many sepia-colored images in Patricia’s album. Here is an identity that turned itself historical and “real” by the unimpeachable act of its will. Here is freedom not merely fantasized or thought, but “performed,” almost as a question of ritual: *embodied*.

And certainly, Lolo Pulong exemplifies another kind of freedom: the freedom of not having been represented, of not having been subsumed into any of the official narratives of Philippine life, a freedom from the structures of knowledge. In this respect, he was not any different from the great majority of his people, whose lives remain stubbornly beyond the comprehension of Western social science, beyond theory, beyond empirical description and prediction. Indeed, the Philippines itself, being largely under-represented as a body of knowledge, being largely un-codified and un-inscribed as discourse — being in a sense more *performative* than *significative* — always managed to slip past the fingers of all colonial attempts to understand it. This was true during the time of the Spanish and the Americans. And this is true up to now.¹⁰

Which is just as well: we have already told ourselves, as social scientists, as “theorists,” as “thinkers” in this day and age, that all totalizing models of the world are necessarily false, that Power and History and the Self are nothing if not quaint improbabilities, selfish and ultimately self-annihilating concepts that distract us from what may well be the only real things in this world, or more accurately, in *these worlds*. These are: the politics of the everyday, the actor and his or her acts, the local (which is always already *translocal*, as might be seen in the “American”

⁹A very difficult word to translate, as it can lend itself to a gamut of connotations. The safest — and in light of the salient character of its ungenderedness — may be “person” or “human being.”

¹⁰With this I mean to admit to the delusion I may have lured myself into: certainly, not even this paper succeeds in “knowing” Lolo Pulong.

and “Japanese” appurtenances that facilitated and underwrote Pulong’s pictorial excursions), the temporal, the countless “microexercises of power” by individuals, on or against one another, as well as on or against themselves.


But look at what we keep doing, almost to the point of weariness: extolling heroes, weaving grand narratives about a collective community we call *bayan* or “the nation,” waving flags of understanding across an eternal present upon which we desperately try to build an imaginary identity that is supposed to explain us to ourselves. While I find that I, too, can hardly resist the millenarian lure to mythify, to indulge the atavistic quest for, lost origins (this essay could be read as an attempt to establish some of my own missing, much missed “foundations”), I try at the same time not to say the same things everybody else has been saying, not to join in singing the same tired hymns over and over again.

When Lolo Pulong had these pictures taken, like anyone else who ever poses for a shot, he must have merely acted on the purely personal impulse of vanity, not out of the arrogant desire to install the self *as* art, to locate the self outside the wages of sin, beyond the ravages of time. Yet, these pictures appear to be heavily invested with considerably more than passing intentions. Although Pulong did not signify himself by means of the written word, he did inscribe that self, that life, in the photographs. The photographs are, in a sense, Lolo Pulong’s own texts, written with the body and its many looks, guises and disguises. Lolo Pulong’s body itself, gone but for these strangely remote, fragile and dimly-lit simulacra, becomes a kind of script that begs now to be made sense of after seventy or more years, begs now most ardently to be “read” æ which is to say, *written*. Reading/writing is all there seems to be in these pictures. Did Pulong and Juan know how telling their portrait would be to someone in the remote future who wished *to be told*: the elbow of one resting casually on the other’s knee, their confident gaze taking hold of the camera’s own obscuring gaze, locking its eye into a frame of recognition — *See: we are as much friends as we are lovers?* Was it just me that read/wrote this — that is to say, subjectified the present object of my attention, subjected it to my own intentionality, coaxed it to lay itself open to my interpretive probing, seduced it to yield a meaning?

Or was this meaning already there to be apprehended in the first place: a suggestiveness of texture, an inner signifying surface, a virtual

visual proffer that proves how symbolic everything in our life really is, how necessary human symbols are, and how we can no more cease making symbols — indeed, no more cease reading and writing them æ than cease existing altogether.

With this short “tribute,” I hope I have not only ventured a reading/writing of these mute, sepia-tinted words, but also turned what was simply an inward-looking, personal choice into something a little more open, a little more political. From a simple and deliberate act of someone who once lived, loved, and died, to something more enduring, more magnificent: a beloved *lolo*’s evening kiss on the forehead of his dreamy-eyed *apo*,¹¹ transformed into a form of heroism, a kind of martyrdom.

A gesture toward history. 

¹¹*Apo*: meaning, “grandchild.”

