

# Queer Worldings: The Messy Art of Being Global in Manila and New York

Martin F. Manalansan IV

*Asian American Studies, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Urbana, IL 61801, USA;  
manalans@illinois.edu*

**Abstract:** This essay is an exploration of queer (im)possibilities and of the “worlding” of urban spaces by focusing on voices from below. Using ethnographic fieldwork and queer theory to bear upon a conceptualization of “queer” and urban world-making in terms of mess, this essay focuses on the lives of two Filipino working class queers living in Manila and New York. Located at the fringes of gay global modernity, these subjects inhabit recalcitrant and chaotic spaces and quotidian practices that re-narrate and resist the idealized integrative spatial order of global queer cities. This essay contributes to a critical theorization of queerness and urban spatial politics within a transnational framework.

**Keywords:** queer, worlding, Manila, New York, everyday life, urban space, mess

Queer global cities in the North such as New York, London and Sydney are often popularly imagined in terms of their sleek grids and their integration and centralization of gay life, culture and spaces.<sup>1</sup> Queer global cities in the South such as Bangkok and Manila are often described in terms of their exotic chaos and collective aspirations for a gay globality that aspires to the gleaming modernity of their counterparts in the North. Critiques of what has been called “metronormativity” or the urban-centric studies and frameworks of queer lives are often based on such monolithic constructions and binaries.<sup>2</sup> However, scholars such as Jon Binnie and David Bell<sup>3</sup> have argued against these facile dichotomies as well as the utopic and pristine versions of the queer global city by pointing to the various elisions, inequalities and erasures that trouble and disrupt this gleaming picture of gay modernity.

Following Binnie and Bell, this essay departs from the idealized pictures of queer global cities by offering alternative notions of urban world-making and queerness as productively constituted by mess and disorder. Refusing the facile dichotomy between Third World disorder and First World slick urbanity, this essay maps out the continuities and discontinuities between mess and order *within* Manila and New York City. Focusing on marginal, transient and mobile queer subjects, this essay examines how these subjects establish alternative forms of urban world-making through a generative notion of mess. This essay takes the notion of “worlding” as an imaginative critical practice and grounds it within the specific and particular structural, cultural, bodily and biographical exigencies of two subaltern<sup>4</sup> Filipino working class queers. These two queers, Rolando and Imelda, are definitely not part of the Gay Index that the sociologist Richard Florida (2002) has touted to be instrumental in mobilizing the forces of neoliberal gentrification, urban renewal and economic prosperity. As such,

we are confronted with queer subjects whose precarious existence are often not seen as intrinsic to neoliberal urban transformation—they are dispossessed dregs of the city and yet they embody the very vital disorderliness that are constitutive of urban space and of queerness itself. This essay asks what do the seemingly ordinary and uneventful quotidian experiences of two Filipino queers,<sup>5</sup> one residing in a Queens neighborhood in New York City and another living in Manila, provide in re-imagining other possible modes of habitation in such urban worlds? In addition, this essay is interested in interrogating the productive possibilities of mess and disorder in understanding queerness, contemporary urbanity and the ways precarious lives are lived now.

This essay does not aim to compare the two urban sites but rather to ethnographically trace, map and draw the merging, diverging, fusing and defusing of borders and boundaries through the various ways Filipino queer subjects construct urbanity and its worldly dimensions. It is about the queering of the idea and processes of “worlding” through an ethnographic limning of Filipino queer experiences, imaginings and quotidian struggles. This essay limits its explorations to the experiences of subaltern or non-elite Filipino queer subjects and does not intend to provide a total, panoramic or extensive examination of Filipino queer urbanity but rather to showcase the messy, divergent and deviant trajectories of Filipino queer subjects living in the margins of a burgeoning Filipino gay/lesbian globality.<sup>6</sup> Through a brief unfolding of the experiences of two Filipino queers, I point to the fruitful consequences of confronting the various dimensions of queerness and urbanity through a critical practice of “worlding” and the embodied experience of mess.

### **Mess as Queer, Queer as Mess**

Queer, as I conceptualize it, is about messing things up, creating disorder and disruptive commotion within the normative arrangements of bodies, things, spaces and institutions. Queer is also about the productive possibilities of people who are left out, displaced, or dispossessed because of their position within the landscapes of the normal. To put it another way, queerness is a strategic vantage for forwarding an untidy yet effective framework to apprehend the circuitous and uneven terrains of queer global cities.

My conception of queer takes the anti-normativity stance into the realm of mess, disgust, dirt and chaos. Queer has always been conceptualized as an unsettling mode of analysis, one that disrupts and unsettles the blissful tidiness of the normal. Michael Warner (1993:xxvi) described the destabilizing aspect of queer theory in academia by considering this intellectual project as one that lets loose the rather wild smell of sexual rut to permeate, invade, stink up and as he puts it “mess up” the rather staid, desexualized and disinfected corridors and rooms of the ivory tower. While there have been critiques of this statement as “reeking” of various kinds of privilege, I draw inspiration from its strong assertion of the sensorial funk-up dimensions of queering and the possibilities it opens up for unraveling or exfoliating the layers of normative expectations, values, desires and bodily stances. My re-thinking of queer as mess also emanates from my ethnographic field experiences where everyday life is not a mere conglomeration of routines and clear tactics. Rather, my fieldnotes are filled with contradictory and often disconnected

ideas, quotes and scenes. Ethnography, I contend, is messy business and is a useful method for confronting my version of queer. My initial encounters and reactions of disgust with the cramped living spaces and jumbled up domiciles of the two queers, whose lives I narrate below, wrongly suggested that they were hoarders. Let me say at the outset that these two Filipino queers are not hoarders, however their stories can be best amplified through a notion of queer enriched by a critical consideration of contemporary media's fascination with hoarding.

Like many contemporary American viewers, I am intrigued by the reality TV show, "Hoarders: Buried Alive" for various reasons.<sup>7</sup> This reality show is really a makeover story of normativity or normalization. The basic story presents the hoarder as inhabiting a decrepit, dirty, smelly, dangerous and uncomfortable abode, then a relative or friend would come over and in predictable dramatic fashion would exclaim, "How can you [the hoarder] live like this?" A psychiatrist and a professional organizer are typically called in to rectify and bring order to the hoarder's chaotic pathological way of life. The ending is typically a kind of normalization and cleaning up of the psychic and material life of the hoarder. In other words, the show is a makeover from the impossibility of messy lives into one that is hygienic, normative and constitutes proper domesticity.

The show is also a didactic medium about the idea of value in terms of what things and ways of life are valuable, beautiful and should be preserved for posterity, and which ones are trash, of no value, are ugly, have no future use and should be disposed. I take queer as a refusal of this kind of teleological narrative of material, moral and aesthetic value.<sup>8</sup> Mess is a productive pivot for analyzing queerness, especially in apprehending lives lived through and despite the discomfort of disorderly domestic quotidian arrangements and the burdensome weight of structural condition as evident in queer lives lived in precarity.<sup>9</sup>

How can mess be generative and not just a prelude to a makeover, a cleaning up and domestication? Mess is not only a source of fascination for television viewers but also to management experts and social scientists. Law (2004) in his astute reflection on social science methodology suggests that the trouble with most empirical social sciences is the tendency to describe and transform what are otherwise untidy, complicated and confused dis-arrangements into neat, coherent structures. Roe (2013), in a similar vein, deplored the situation when managers and policy makers oftentimes see messes as rare anomalies and infrequent deviations from typical functionings of various systems. He looks at control room operators such as those in city water systems as exemplars of a better managerial approach to messes by considering them as part of the system and to be on the lookout for "bad" messes and to be able to be ready to engage and tackle them. Despite their limitations and conservative political goals, these scholarly engagements with the realities of mess encourage us to think of mess as part and parcel of everyday life and not as mere aberration. Mess is constitutive of social phenomena and is not a peculiar or irregular occurrence. It is also crucial in understanding how people make sense of power and space in cities and how global urbanity is created.

The worlding of cities involves the creation of material and semantic knowledges about space that are dependent on structural locations and power relationships. The way the city is mapped in people's lives, particularly those living in dire

circumstances, are important vantages that disrupt the kind of integrative and clean portraits of global cities mentioned at the beginning of this essay. In the next section, I explore the juxtaposition of worlding and mess as crucial to understanding urban world-making from below.

## The Messy Art of Worlding

Worlding is a concept with a Heideggerian provenance and its contemporary academic currency was established through the works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. For Spivak, worlding is part and parcel of the colonial enterprise and is a process that “inscribes” a specific set of ideas and “imaginings” about power within a particular landscape or space—in this case, the urban terrain. Spivak speaks of worlding as a kind of top-down forcible inscription by imperial powers on the colonial terrain to legitimate the unequal power relationships. Therefore, worlding is discursive, according to Spivak. Such discursive formations give rise to edifices of habits, ideas, relationships and social institutions:

As far as I understand it, the notion of textuality should be related to the notion of the worlding of a world on a supposedly unscribed territory. When I say this, I am thinking basically about the imperialist project which had to assure that the earth that it territorialized was in fact previously unscribed. So then a world, on a simple level of cartography, inscribe what was presumed to be unscribed. Now this worlding actually is also a texting, textualizing, a making into art, a making into an object to be understood (Spivak 1990:1).

The colonized, to use a phrase by AbdouMalique Simone (2001), were “cast into the world” thereby naturalizing the unequal relationship between colonizer and colonized. Such inequalities, though with different modalities, still persist in this era of postcoloniality and globalization. Globalization involves worlding tactics that emplace, displace and/or position spaces, bodies and collectivities. Most postcolonial scholars’ (notwithstanding Spivak’s (1999) later revision of her own position around the primacy of subaltern agency) focus on worlding as an “art” or more specifically an “art of being global” that needs to be recuperated by subalterns through a “re-worlding” or a remapping from the ground up.

Postcolonial scholars’ call for subaltern agentive encounters with worlding has been taken up by Simone (2001) and Wilson and Connery (2007). Simone attempts to map the possibilities of worlding “from below” through a case study of African cities. Focusing on Islamic institutions such as the *zawiyyah*, Simone argues that Africans are able to produce, enact and construct “shifting, localized and fluid tactics” that enable negotiated positions that oscillate between sensibilities of belonging, commonality and rootedness with the highly contingent and shifting ways of being global (2001:21) Cities, he argues, are “places of experimentation for engagement, the terms of which are not exclusively fixed or determined in advanced” (22). Far from being “cast into the world”, African cities provide opportunities for creative action that emplace and re-position ways of life, dispositions and institutions that are “everywhere and nowhere”. While Simone admits that fluidity and contingency are both weaknesses and advantages, he argues for the productive possibilities of hybrid and inter-scalar encounters that enact a “worlding” from the vantage of African agents and institutions.

Similarly, Wilson and Connery (2007) take up a similar though more overtly political stance by focusing on the importance of literature, theater and other cultural productions in intervening in US-centered neoliberal globalization. Part of their interests is to create “different modes of thinking, writing, studying, and teaching the world against and inside the beast of the U.S. globalization” (ix). Therefore, part of the mission of what they call the “Worlding Project” is to produce activist scholarship and cultural production through works of criticism, fiction, drama and poetry that seek to destabilize the existing hegemonic economic, political and cultural order. The project seeks to establish worlding as a critical practice through a deployment the arts as a counter reaction to the oppressive workings of global capital. In other words, they literally and figuratively are offering a manner of world-making or world formation that is fueled by progressive democratic politics. Wilson and Connery hope “to create a critical vernacular and pedagogy that establish a more intimate or ‘de-distancing’ approach to globalization” (34).

However, Roy and Ong (2011) warn against the romantic allure of subaltern urbanism and cultural politics as exemplified in the works of Simone, Wilson and Connery. While they recognize the value of such works, Roy and Ong argue that the various engagements, transactions and encounters in various scales are too complicated to be framed in terms of binary, dual and antipodal forces—subalterns and hegemon, the West and the rest—with the rest being equated as the “postcolonial”. Worlding practices, according to Roy and Ong, involve the unfolding and emergence of a multiplicity of aspirations, speculations and sensibilities that do not “fall tidily into opposite sides of class, political or cultural divides” and which open up “new channels or reconfigure new social universes” (Roy and Ong 2011:12). Roy and Ong further submit that worlding is experimental as much as it is aspirational when people act upon ideas and visions to struggle to attain worlds that are better than what they live with at the present time. They further assert that because of the divergent forms of “the global” at play, worlding projects are messy assemblages that are not about “singular or fixed standard of urban globality” (2011:12). They point to the complexity of the non-West that cannot be reduced to “a conceptual container of capitalism and subaltern agency” and how “an urban situation can be at once heterogeneously particular and yet irreducibly global” (2011:9).

In sum, worlding practices are constitutive, spatializing, signifying gestures that variously conjure up worlds beyond current conditions of urban living. They articulate disparate elements from near and far; and re-situate the city in the world. By eschewing singular concepts of worlding, single standards of urban ranking that take for granted the terms in and through which cities can be ranked, and unified ways of achieving an already given future, we open up academic inquiries into a diversity of urban activities engaged in the transformations of urban living (Roy and Ong 2011:13).

Despite the diversity and multiplicity of worlding projects, Roy and Ong provide some detail as to the mechanics of this art of being global. Worlding “refers not to a single unified political process, but to diverse spatializing practices that mix and match different component that go into building an emergent system” (2011:12). Furthermore, they write: “The art of being global ignores conventional borders of class, race, city and country. There are promiscuous borrowings,

shameless juxtapositions, and strategic enrollments of disparate ideas, actors, and from many sources circulating in the developing world” (23).

I take this “messy” notion of worlding or the art of being global as defined by Roy and Ong to be compatible with the notions of worlding by Simone, Wilson and Conner. Despite their obvious differences particularly with the issue of subaltern agency, both standpoints speak to the creative, fluid and contingent nature of worlding while at the same time being mindful of hierarchical tensions and horizontal solidarities. Both groups also construct worlding as a part of an ideational or aspirational attachment to particular kinds of “better” futures. Futurity enlivens and invigorate the process of worlding as it not a state of being but rather one of becoming.

Both groups of scholars focus on worlding as constituted by formal activities such as planning, policies, regulations, laws and other forms of governmentality as well as the exigencies of artistic or cultural productions. In this essay, I look to the contingent, uneventful, ordinary and banal routines and quotidian habits to provide a specific trajectory in establishing worlding as a critical and imaginative practice. I take the notion of “art” in terms of bodily skills including the training of the senses. If art or more specifically aesthetics is about the working of the senses, then I take the sensorial as the building blocks for the creation of structures of feelings, emotional and affective regimes that inaugurate worlding as messy world-making and world-critique.

These two seemingly opposing positions can be productively conjoined if not tentatively yet provocatively fused in my proposed framework that is positioned at the phenomenological level or at the scale of the body and other larger social scales. In this essay, I intend to recuperate subaltern creative agency as exemplified by the works of Simone, Wilson and Connery as well as the messy, potentially queer and unconventional nature of worlding as suggested by Roy and Ong.

Both standpoints focus on specific meso and macro-level actors/agents such as urban planners, artists, politicians, NGOs and corporations, but in this essay, I reposition the idea of worlding from the meso and macro levels and descend into the level of bodily knowledge or the micro-rhythms, habits, composites, feelings and affects that animate the everyday. The everyday is the messy ground upon which a kind of vernacular queer worlding occurs.

In the next section, I narrate the words and deeds of two Filipino subaltern queers as they inhabit particular urban landscapes. What follows is an ethnographic rendition of queer worlding “from below”. Like many ethnographic attempts, the narrative is both partial and incomplete but as I will point in the conclusion, this narrative offers provocative trajectories and itineraries for urban world-making. The next section also involves the juxtaposition of multiple voices—the two informants (the direct quotes are English translations from Tagalog) and my own fieldwork descriptions and observations.

## **Two Lives, Two Cities, Two Worlds?**

### ***Rolando in Manila***

Rolando is a 32-year-old Filipino queer. He does not live within the official city limits of Manila but rather resides in Quezon City. Quezon City is one of the many satellite

cities and towns that compose the Metro Manila area or more officially as the National Capital Region. Rolando lives in the densest part of Quezon City which borders the western edge of Manila. He lives in a series of blocks where Quezon City and Manila meet. The only physical marker that points to this division or border is a 6 ft concrete marker with the phrase “Welcome to Quezon City”. Indeed the marker denies the fact that people traverse these borders without any conscious reflection of inhabiting or moving across two cities: Manila and Quezon City. In the everyday life of Rolando’s neighborhood, the two cities are one continuous wave of buildings, peoples and streets, including two- to three-story concrete commercial and residential buildings, two-story apartments as well as “slum” shanties which are makeshift structures made out of plywood and roofing materials.

My neighborhood is very much like the others in the crowded sections of Manila. Our streets are always flooded during the rainy season. Few people here are rich. When I walk down the street where the salon is, you can feel the misery of the people. A lot of my neighbors, both men and women are sitting around in their stoops, the corner store, or just in the small alleys looking around. No work. Some of them are waiting for money from relatives abroad. Do you see that house [pointing to a newly painted apartment unit with an iron gate]? That is the house of [someone who is] abroad [using abroad as a noun to designate a migrant laborer working outside the Philippines]. The others are just waiting for nothing [wala]. Hoping for something to happen.

Rolando works in a beauty salon where he cuts hair and provides manicure and pedicure services. He lives in a small room behind the salon. The salon owner took pity on him when he heard that he was thrown out of his aunt’s household after a dispute about money. He was born and raised in a rural town two hours south of the metropolitan area. He moved to the city after his parents died when he was 20 years old and came to live with his aunt and her family. He did not finish high school but a couple of his queer friends convinced him to work in a beauty parlor after they had seen him in full make up and drag. He has been working at the beauty salon which is a lower middle class business in a small room with three chairs, mirrors and two hair dryers. His clients were mostly working class to middle class women who come to the salon for special occasions. He earns the equivalent of \$40–60 a month and sometimes more during the holidays.

I don’t mind being alone. In fact, being an only child gives me a lot of freedom. I don’t have to answer to anyone, especially my family. No one asks me why I dress or act a certain way. Other people might ridicule me for having no class but frankly, I don’t care. At least I make a living. I work and have a place to sleep and eat.

Rolando considers himself not so much as “gay” but as bakla (Tagalog word for homosexual, effeminate/gender transgressive and/or transvestic individuals) or more specifically as a parlorista. Parlorista, from the word parlor, is used to name working/lower class queers who are characterized as effeminate, loud and crass—the same qualities ascribed to queers who work in beauty parlors or salons. For Rolando, the word parlorista was not pejorative but rather fits his life conditions adequately. He admits that he is indeed loud and crass and did work in a parlor. Furthermore, he is not embarrassed when the upper class gays and queers would call him a parlorista in gatherings he attended in the past.

A lot of people say I should go to gay bars. Oh, that just means spending a lot of money. I know I am not like those gay men who have a lot of money. When I want to have fun I might go to my friends' houses. Or if the mood is right [he smiles] I just walk like a fashion model and go over to the corner store and see if one of those men are in need of cigarette or beer money. After a few minutes of magic, boom. Both of us are happy.

After 10 years of living in the city, he finds himself at ease with the tenor and cadence of city life. He would talk about how he basically lives most of his days at salon and would venture out occasionally to get food from the small restaurant at the corner or the food stalls at the market a few blocks away. He rarely went out to see a movie and he admitted that he has seen Makati, the business and affluent section of the metropolis, only twice through the windows of a bus. His map of the city is couched in the sensorial as cultural theorist Neferti Tadiar (1996:16) has argued that Manila is an "assault" on the senses.<sup>10</sup>

Manila is noisy and smelly. When I go out of the parlor I immediately smell and hear people, cars and buses. Even in Makati, the streets are also very noisy. Maybe it is a little cleaner but still noisy. I hear that Tokyo and New York are the same way. I have seen the movies. Manila is no better or worse.

In as much as he acknowledges to having very minimal physical mobility, he says he "knows" the city, the various neighborhoods, the bus and jeepney (modes of mass transports developed from US military jeeps) routes. He got to know these routes from clients, friends and relatives who come from different parts of the city. He watches local, Asian (mostly Korean) and American TV shows and films avidly. He said that through films, TV shows, pictures in fashion magazines, and from letters and stories from his friends and relatives who live and work abroad, he is able to know about the world at large.

I know when people look at my room behind the parlor, the first thing that comes to their mind is that it is too cramped. Actually, my friends say it is too chaotic with all of my possessions piled high on top of each other. But then, I hear that in Tokyo you pay a lot of money just to sleep in what looks like a tomb, or a closet. At least here in Manila, people are able to get by. Things just need a little re-painting, cleaning up. Maybe if we get more money from those working abroad, we can make things better.

### ***Imelda in New York***

Imelda is a 60+ –year-old Filipino transwoman who at the time I was interviewing her has been in the US for two decades as an undocumented migrant. She has worked in several odd jobs, including as a clerk, supermarket cashier, cook, dressmaker, dance instructor and other temporary jobs.

She has lived in Jackson Heights for close to 30 years. I met her at a party given by one of my informants. After a year of several informal encounters, she then confessed to me that she is an undocumented immigrant and she lives in a one-bedroom apartment with five other undocumented immigrant queers from South Asia and Latin America. However, the term household cannot capture or is eluded by the rather messy, fleeting if not altogether makeshift character of these six

people's lives together. While the rent is pooled from their meager salaries in various service industries—waitressing, sex work, busing tables, sporadic carpentry or housecleaning jobs, babysitting etc.—much of their daily lives are spent apart in their own separate occupational and leisurely pursuits. Spatially, each member has sequestered a corner in either the living room or bedroom and a small section of the one lone closet for their possessions. Temporally, each member has particular work and leisure habits that do not easily coincide with each other. Having said this, Imelda pointed out the chaos of the living room and lone bedroom as the contents of each sequestered corner and closet space spills over into some kind of flea market disarray. But this disarray of “stuff” “spilling all over is considered by the apartment residents as just as a series of “natural physical barriers” that they have to navigate on their way to the kitchen, bathroom or main door. Eventually, Imelda admits that the household members more often than not find their way to where they want to go or find what it is they have been searching for despite the tumult and anarchy of various everyday paraphernalia. But then she adds, when they find “it”, it may be too late. The thing may be broken and is rendered useless. Then one has to throw it away.

The disparate daily schedules of members do not in any way ease up the congestion as evident from the sleeping arrangements or dis-arrangements when people contort, recline, curl up or simply slump over a sofa, mattress or thick blanket. Cramped quarters give rise to moments of desire between household members. Natalia, one of Imelda's roommates, an Ecuadorian, says it was important to put matters of “lust” aside. She adds that it is important to be “deaf” to one's desires as one should do in trying to get to sleep with all the sounds of snoring and farting that are emitted in the two rooms of the apartment. Being “deaf” is good she says. “You just go about your own business.” Imelda agreed when she said:

One thing I have learned in the years I have lived in this apartment is that while we may not be able to converse with each other fluently, we manage to stay together by being able to move and position your body, make facial gestures ... in other words, know how to maneuver with the mess without making a big scene and disrupting the peace. We may not be chummy with each other but we can live with each other—or despite each other (laughter).

Imelda's neighborhood, Jackson Heights, is like many other neighborhoods in the New York City borough of Queens (the most ethnically diverse borough) because the physical layout looks like a veritable cultural and ethnic mosaic which can be visually confirmed by businesses signs and billboard ads in various languages along the main roads and the racial composition of pedestrians on the streets. Sights and sounds of Spanish, Korean, Hindi and many other languages declare the panoply of peoples and cultures that criss-cross and overlap each other. To the casual observer, Queens is not marked by a systematic grid of numbered streets and avenues like Manhattan and is often touted by outsiders to be a confusing jumble of streets and avenues with no center or core.

Historically, Jackson Heights and Queens occupy a peculiar location in popular cartography of the city. Jackson Heights is now part of a constellation of “hot spots” or gentrifying areas in the so-called “outer boroughs” that have become the refuge

for many of those fleeing the spiraling rental and home buyers' market in Manhattan. Traditionally an Italian and Irish neighborhood starting in the early twentieth century until the early seventies, Jackson Heights has become in various turns Little India or Little Colombia for the numerous South Asian and Latin American residents in the late twentieth century. New immigrants such as Koreans, Puerto Ricans, Filipinos, Afghans, and other Latinos and Asian Americans have transformed it into a multi-ethnic residential and business district.

As part of a global and uneven process of neoliberal capitalist restructuring, the processes of rapid gentrification in various parts of New York City that escalated during the Giuliani administration is still in full swing in this neighborhood despite the national housing crisis and the post 9/11 infamy of South Asian and Middle Eastern enclaves in this area. This has caused upheavals and displacements. As a gentrifying area, Jackson Heights has been touted to be a new gay mecca a few years ago and has now gained a moniker and a mascot created by local developers and business owners—Jack Heights, a stylized caricature of a male figure with a top hat whose body is composed by the letters J and H. It actually looks like a contortionist—undulating to some tacky show tune.

Imelda's own historical understanding of the place is marked by racial and class transformations brought about by gentrification and immigration.

Things have changed since I came here in the late 70s. It was mostly immigrants and some white folks who must have been here a lot earlier. A lot more Latinos and Indians came a few years later. Some Koreans. Filipinos. It is a United Nations. You look at every corner it is as if you are in another country. This is not the case in Manhattan. Everything is white unless you go to Harlem and Chinatown. But after all the years I have lived here, the most drastic change is the rent. Rich people are coming in and the big buildings where the rent has been cheap are now condos. Selling for half a million! Wow, and people used to rent those condos for less than 500 dollars a month. Now Jackson Heights is very chic. Now people like me would have to look for cheaper places farther from the train station. I am too old to take several buses plus the train.

For many people, including its own inhabitants, Jackson Heights is outside "the city" which is Manhattan. As such, it also occupies a relative outsider status in relation to the mainstream gay neighborhoods of Manhattan like the Village, Chelsea and recently, Hell's Kitchen. As *HX*, a popular gay magazine (now defunct) puts it, Jackson Heights and all the non-Manhattan neighborhoods are all "Out There" which is the category that catalogues all the gay activities that happen beyond the glare of mainstream Manhattan limelight.<sup>11</sup>

Jackson Heights's gay bars and other queer spaces co-exist with the multi-ethnic enclave economies that inhabit the same geographic location. At the same time, residences of various kinds from buildings to brick townhouses or row houses that span out from the main thoroughfares particularly Roosevelt Avenue where the main arteries of the New York City subway system converge around 73rd and 74th streets.

Many of my informants who have lived in the area for more than 10 years have told me the recent history of the neighborhood not through a linear chronology but in terms of aberrant cycles, disintegration and reconstitution of spaces. From

the 1970s onwards, gay bars on Roosevelt Avenue have come and gone, including a couple of “private” bars or hangouts for which one needed a password or someone from the neighborhood to gain access. All of these places have also been shut down or gone out of business only to be replaced by flashier versions of bars much like those over the bridge, in Manhattan.

This aberrant cycle is apparent in the ways in which spaces in the neighborhood have been subject to the conflicting processes of disappearances, disintegration, disciplining as well as emergence and so-called renaissance of gay places and venues. For Imelda, these transformations are clearly irrelevant, particularly as she has become less “social” but also, more importantly, she could no longer afford to indulge in the new nightlife the neighborhood has to offer.

In terms of “whoring”, you really need to be aware of what is out there and what is not available. You need to know what to do in the streets and in the bars. In recent years, this place [Jackson Heights] has become a major gay area but you know what, it really doesn’t matter. Many people like to be on the down low. I am fine even if I do not go out to the bars too often. Who has the time? Besides, I am an Asian princess—and I am not prime commodity [in the bars] ... Frankly, I don’t know if I has gotten better or not. It’s complicated. It chaotic [magulo].

When I asked her what she meant. She said:

You know, at my age—and yes I am still young at 40 [giggles] and now with my boobs and long hair, I don’t think I am looking forward to finding a handsome boyfriend. Instead I am focusing my energies on becoming financially stable. How will I do that? I don’t know. I have some savings. Maybe if a rich man wants to keep me. But seriously, being an undocumented immigrant [she used the word TNT which is Tagalog slang to tago ng tago or “in hiding”] what kind of future is there for me? Well, I will keep on working. Maybe it may be wise to go back [to the Philippines]. But right now, who knows?

During all the years I have known Imelda, she was typically working in three to four part-time jobs, including cooking, sewing and hair styling, like the rest of the household members. She faced the insecurity of these flexible working conditions as she often tries to get an occasional party gig where she might be able to help in the décor or food preparations. In the midst of her day-to-day struggles, she acknowledges and laments the uncertainty of her future and the discomfort of her living conditions. But she oftentimes ended our conversations with a shrug and a hopeful gesture to another “bukas” or tomorrow.

## **Impossible Subjects, Cramped Spaces and Expansive Worldings: Mess and Queer Futures**

What do we make of the messy narratives of Rolando and Imelda? While they are clearly not urban planners, politicians, cultural producers/artists or NGO staffers, they can lay claim to a valuable form of worlding. At first glance the two narratives seem to be about two queers who are living like other struggling working class individuals. However, I argue that what arises in these stories is a powerful vernacular form of queer urban world-making amidst precarious conditions.

Rolando's and Imelda's narratives of desire, gendered performances and classed habits oftentimes meander and fall apart into messy disarray. People who are confronted with Rolando's and Imelda's lives would often react to what they perceive to be the messy impossibility of such lives. *How can they live like that?* I would argue that this very sense of impossibility or untenable chaos lies at the heart of a queer worlding. Their lives exemplify the ways in which their lives embody a queer and wayward art of being global. The tangled and untidy nature of their lives and experiences precisely positions them in a queer location outside the realm of the normative, the possible, the desirable and the orderly.

Consider Rolando's seemingly trite and simplistic mapping of cultural connections between Manila and other cities, his cartography of the spatial and sensory morass that exists in other urban spaces and the ways he conjures the ecology of misery that pervades his neighborhood. Consider Imelda's bodily maneuvers in the one-bedroom apartment, her corporeal knowledge of the streets and her seeming short-sightedness regarding her future as an undocumented immigrant. I would argue that these two lives constitute gritty, haphazard if not provisional and fleeting modes of dwelling or impermanent forms of emotional life, bodily stances and composites. Such forms of habitation inscribe and signify the very instability of a worldly urban landscape and the continuously shifting terrain of people, desires, material goods and meanings. These two lives narrate an ethical story of incomplete and uneven persistence and of lives under the strain of dramatic economic, political and social upheavals. Most importantly, these lives compel us to direct our attention to the recalcitrant kind of urban world-making process that is grounded on unconventional aspirations, diminished expectations and deferred futures.

These two impossible subjects are not the "good Gay Index citizens" who "creatively" consumes and enable new modes of urban affluence. However the very impossibility of their lives animate a particular political stance. Their messy lives do not lead to a cleaning up or a normative makeover but rather to the questioning of the dominant forms of urban habitation and world-making. Their lives therefore pose ethical questions regarding the moral and social consequences of the normalizing and mainstreaming of "gay" lifestyles in terms of domiciles, fashion, politics and feelings. Should there be a gay makeover or lifestyle transformations for Imelda and Rolando to make them proud, Prada-wearing, marriage-bound, tax-paying, legitimate citizens of the queer global city? Despite whatever anyone may think, even these kinds of lifestyle "interventions" are themselves impossible in the homonormative order of neoliberal things.<sup>12</sup>

Queer theorist Gayatri Gopinath (2005) convincingly argues that queer impossibilities<sup>13</sup> open up rather than foreclose the issues and struggles that these marginalized, dispossessed urban queer subjects confront. She emphasizes the value of mapping spaces of impossibility in queer lives which can productively lead to envisioning other "possibilities of existence exterior to dominant systems of logic" (2005:20). Indeed, Imelda and Rolando's disturbingly confused, scrappy, uncomfortable and untidy dwelling spaces and unruly biographical trajectories demand distinctive approaches and unconventional rationalities that reject domestication and integration to the normal.

Finally, the messy urban vernacular mappings based on the two queers' cramped domiciles and daily lives ironically open up the very panorama of worlding. They invoke alternative urban world-making routes that lay bare the strictures and constraints brought about by neoliberalist policies that promote disparate access to emotional, material and symbolic resources. Instead of creating futures based on an unhampered progress, these narratives deploy limits, messes and illegibilities that will foster and mobilize critical dialogue towards a more capacious way of engaging with urban life-worlds and subaltern bodies.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> See Sassen (2001) for the tropes of integration and centralization as prime characteristics of global cities.
- <sup>2</sup> See Halberstam (2005) and Tongson (2011) for recent trenchant challenges to metronormative conceptions of queer lives. While they offer useful and much needed critique of city-centric analyses, they nevertheless posit a more singular notion of the metronormative or a rather monolithic notion of the urban. In this essay, I am arguing for a critique of queer global city by focusing on the hierarchical unevenness within a particular urban landscape that does not depend on the rural/urban dichotomy.
- <sup>3</sup> See Binnie (2004) and Bell and Binnie (2000) for astute discussions of the politics of queer global cities and citizenship. Diaz (2012) provides a broad-ranging critical assessment of humanistic and social science-related queer work on global cities and makes similar as Bell and Binnie.
- <sup>4</sup> I use subaltern in an undisciplined way to denote working class and racialized marginal social positions.
- <sup>5</sup> Fieldwork was conducted in New York City in intermittent periods from 2001 to 2011 totaling 26 months. Fieldwork in the Philippines was conducted in intermittent periods from 2006 to 2013, totaling 8 months. Funding was provided by the Research Board of the University of Illinois. Pseudonyms are used for the informants as well as some changes to particular facts to protect their identity. The fieldwork in Jackson Heights, Queens in New York City is part of an ongoing book project entitled *Queer Dwellings*. The Philippine fieldwork is part of a project on Manila, return migration and modernity.
- <sup>6</sup> See the works of Benedicto (2008), Garcia (1996) and Johnson (1997) for a rich and expansive analysis of the Filipino gay/transgender/bakla subjects and globality. My fieldwork in both New York and Manila suggests that perceptions and aspirations toward a gay globality are oftentimes marked by class privilege. Such elite trappings seem to deny and elide the "provincial" dreams of many non-elite queer subjects.
- <sup>7</sup> See Herring (2011) for an incisive and innovative analysis of the show and its potentials for understanding the queer dimensions of material culture.
- <sup>8</sup> I thank Lisa Yoneyama for this wonderful point.
- <sup>9</sup> See Butler (2004) for a generative idea of precarity and precarious.
- <sup>10</sup> Also see Fajardo (forthcoming) for a fascinating theorization of "gulo" which is Tagalog for (among other things) commotion, mess and chaos. Similar to my theorization of queer as mess, Fajardo offers up the productive possibilities of critically understanding at Manila through "gulo's" aesthetic and political contexts in cinematic and literary productions about the city.

- <sup>11</sup> See chapter 3 (“Out There”: The Topography of Race and Desire in the Global City) of my book, Manalansan (2003) *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora*. In this chapter, I argue for the intersecting “grids of difference” that both fragment the queer spaces in New York City and at the same time create and constitute a unitary narrative of inside/outside and colored/white.
- <sup>12</sup> See Duggan (2004) for the most elegant exposition of the queer dimensions of neoliberalism and the rise of, what she calls, homonormativity.
- <sup>13</sup> See Ngai (2005) for a parallel though not necessarily legibly queer notion of impossibility through the mechanisms of racialization and immigration law.

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