

## Queering things up

Interview with Martin F. Manalansan IV

Jaime Oscar M. Salazar

Martin F. Manalansan IV is Associate Professor of Anthropology and Asian American Studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, where he also holds appointments to following: the Gender and Women's Studies Program; the Unit for Criticism and Interpretive Theory; the Center for East Asian and Pacific Studies; the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies; and the Global Studies Program.

He is a noted scholar in the field of queer studies, where he has published widely and to critical acclaim. His book, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora*, published by Duke University Press in 2003 and by

Ateneo de Manila University Press in 2006, is a pioneering ethnography that explores the transnational aspects of queer identity as performed in the realm of the everyday by Filipino immigrant men in New York City. *Global Divas* won



the Ruth Benedict Prize from the Society of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists in 2003 and received an Honorable Mention from the Association for Asian American Studies Book Award for Cultural Studies in 2005.

Manalansan is presently developing a book on the lives of the members of a household composed of undocumented immigrant queers. Among his research interests are socio-cultural anthropology, race and ethnicity, immigration and globalization, cities and modernity, affect, senses and embodiment, and food and culture.

In this interview conducted via e-mail, he discusses his commitments and projects as a queer intellectual of color, reflects on what queer theory can do in the Philippine context, and makes a case for the value of the quotidian in challenging hegemonic power.

**Jaime Oscar M. Salazar (JS):** In a public lecture at Brown University last February,<sup>1</sup> you mentioned that your scholarship has so far made no radical departures from what you were doing while you were working on *Global Divas* (Manalansan, 2003), saying, “No matter how you try to get a new project, it never really is new.” What would you say are your primary commitments as a queer thinker? Which of the trajectories that you followed in *Global Divas*—and perhaps earlier—do you continue to pursue?

**Martin F. Manalansan IV (MM):** “Newness” is an over-valued quality of Western modernity. I work against this fiction. My scholarly trajectory is marked by enduring questions and underlying influences particularly around queer studies and theory. These influences and questions are based on my understanding of “queer.” The vital dimension of queer is not “what queer is” but rather “what queer does.” Queer enables and produces a critical vantage for analyzing the workings of power and the normative. As such, my projects—whether they are about Filipino gay immigrants, about sensorial experiences of food, or about care labor—all partake of the intellectually productive process of queering that maps out and unravels the fraught interconnections between individual personhood and communal struggles, and between race, gender, sexuality, class, nationality, etc. Such interconnections are never neat but are rather messy, incommensurate, and ambivalent. This dynamic aspect of queer is what guides my current projects, which I consider as the consistent thread running through all my works.

**JS:** In connection with the previous question, your statement regarding the “non-newness” of your current projects does not, of course, necessarily mean that no changes whatsoever have occurred. What would you say are some of the significant developments that have taken place in your thought since *Global Divas*? Have you shifted or are you in the process of shifting your position on any issue or aspect of gay and other queer identities? Why or why not?

**MM:** Clearly, things have changed in the world after *Global Divas*. My engagements with queer studies and theory are never fixed or static. My research has increasingly become more focused on the phenomenological and socio-structural frames of bodily knowledge and historical and cultural exigencies of ethical and moral dilemmas and issues. I am increasingly drawn not only to issues of affect and emotions in relation to political economy but more importantly to embodied sensorial experiences around food, migration and marginality. I am interested in putting pressure on the idea of survival, endurance, and resilience, particularly in the plight of people in the midst of precarious and violent conditions.

As a scholar committed to intellectual renewal, I am continually influenced and enthralled by emerging ideas from such scholars as Jack Halberstam, Gayatri Gopinath, Lisa Duggan, Richard Rodriguez, David Eng, Roderick Ferguson, Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant and others. I am also in awe of and follow the provocative ideas of Filipino and Filipino American scholars such as Rick Bonus, Allan Isaac, Jose Capino, Eufracio Abaya, Augusto Espiritu, Robert Diaz, Lucy Burns, Dylan Rodriguez, Ann Guevarra, Linda Maram, Nerissa Balce Cortes, Richard Chu, Jeffrey Santa Ana, Robyn Rodriguez, Rhacel Parrenas, Michael Tan, Kale Fajardo, J. Neil Garcia, Martin Joseph Ponce, Sarita See, Victor Bascara, Neferti Tadiar, Ferdinand Lopez, Gary Devilles and Roland Tolentino, just to name a few.

**JS:** Given that your engagements with queer studies “are never fixed or static,” would you please go over some of your ongoing engagements? Perhaps you might begin with your research into the lives of a household of undocumented immigrants, whom you call the “Queer Six.”

**MM:** Right now, I am finishing a book, tentatively entitled *Queer Dwellings*, that examines the lives of a household in the borough of Queens in New York City. This household is composed of a Filipina, three Latin Americans, and two South Asians (Indians), who are undocumented immigrant queers.

My focus is on the creation of bodily knowledge, sensorial ecologies, and affective environments in the daily lives of the household members whom I affectionately call the “Queer Six.” I am interested in the complexities of bodily knowledge and ethics as instantiated by neoliberal endurance or resilience amidst precarious living conditions. I attempt to limn the lives of these queer subjects in terms of their ongoing complicit and resistive strategies to neoliberal capitalist consumption, ethos, and personhood.

Phenomenologically and ethnographically based, this manuscript is about the messy routes and paths of queer desires and longings that are enlivened and animated by material relationships and other worldly attachments, [and which] then give rise to possible alternative politics that are capaciously framed. My chapter on fabulosity and precarity documents and analyzes the dynamics of the unlikely intimacy between fabulosity (which is a performative sense of self that pivots on consumption) and precarity (which describes the dire conditions of intermittent or “flexible” labor in late capitalism). I argue that the queer intimacies between fabulosity and precarity can enable particular kinds of broad-based progressive politics that hopefully will create fundamental structural change.

Queer, in this intellectual iteration, is an engagement with the elusive yet powerful contexts of affect, feelings, emotions, and the senses. In a way, it is about the power and instability of perception as action and the queerness of bodily knowledge and habits.

**JS: Where do you situate your work in the increasingly diverse field of queer studies? To whom and for whom do you believe your work speaks first and foremost, and why?**

**MM:** My work speaks to and is in conversation with particular communities of queer scholars who work under the aegis of critical ethnic/racial studies, diaspora and migration studies, social justice and globalization. In particular, I align myself with the Queer of Color Critique (QCC) group as posited and theorized by Roderick Ferguson. As such, I am interested in the particular workings of “queer” in the lives, politics and cultures of queers of color in America and how such visions and ideas might intersect with other queer experiences across national and local spaces.

**JS: Who are the other scholars who are part of or are associated with the QCC group? What have you and your fellow thinkers been able to accomplish as a collective?**

**MM:** QCQ is an informal grouping and is not an established school of thought. Most of the people I mentioned as my major influences in a response to an earlier question are part of this group of people. An important aspect of what we try to do—despite the diversity of our archives and disciplinary or interdisciplinary leanings—is to center the notion of race as a pivotal juncture in the articulation and expansion of queer. QCQ is composed of people who emerged as young scholars in the mid- to late 90s, but far beyond a generational cohort, it also marks a paradigmatic shift in queer scholarship as it repositions sexuality within the assemblages of subjectivities and social institutions.

**JS: Global Divas was published in 2003. At the time, what were your expectations about what it would accomplish? As of this moment, almost ten years after the book came out, what do you believe that it has been able to accomplish?**

**MM:** I had very modest goals when I wrote *Global Divas*. In part, I wanted to create a space to talk about Filipino gay immigrant experiences and to reflect on the AIDS pandemic which was a crucial pivot in my own personal and intellectual transformation. I wanted to write an ethnography that told the story that was accessible to many people. I think it has succeeded in that endeavor. While people might either laud or “accuse” me of being one of the original members of the Queer of Color Critique group, I wrote *Global Divas* as an intervention into prevailing conditions of lesbian and gay studies and of the ethnography/anthropology of global migration and contemporary America. In many ways, I am satisfied with what I did and, with the book on its ninth printing, I think my soul and pocket are quite content.

**JS: What is the place of nation in your work, which deals with the global, transnational and diasporic aspects of gay and other queer identities? Is the national question an important one for you? Why or why not?**

**MM:** The nation is something that is critiqued and engaged with extensively in my work. Recent works by Lisa Duggan, Lauren Berlant, and Jasbir Puar point to the complicity of the state and the idealization of the nation with the concomitant deployment of the homosexual as the sign of (Western-modeled) modernity and cosmopolitanism. Despite the fact that the nation no longer possesses its foundational epistemological grip, it still

remains a crucial yet complicated node in the articulations of subjectivity, personhood, community solidarity and the global. My work on diasporic communities, more specifically on the Filipino global diaspora, focuses on the nation not as a bygone relic of another time and place, but rather as operating in multifaceted ways.

**JS: What is the relevance of queer theory, which has specific Western historical and social roots, to cultural politics in the Philippines? How can it help to render visible and account for the emergence and proliferation of Filipino gender and sexual identities?**

**MM:** This question would necessitate a chapter if not a book in order for a proper response. Queer theory is first and foremost about analyzing sexuality and gender within the complex grid of power. What queer theory can do in the Philippine context is to enable a more expansive critical analysis of sexuality and gender that refuses to only focus on the imperatives of identity-based categories or narratives.

**JS: How would you, for heuristic purposes, draw distinctions between “bakla,” “gay,” and “queer?” How do you understand “queer,” in particular, and how can it be made to encompass “bakla,” which, to a certain extent, can be seen as complicit with heteronormativity,<sup>2</sup> something that “queer” repudiates? How does “queer” avoid becoming a homogenizing umbrella that elides or effaces specificities that are endowed nationally or otherwise?**

**MM:** A dynamic notion of queer refuses homogenizing tendencies. Queer is about messing things up—that is, [looking] at the counter-intuitive nodes and circuits of complicities and solidarities. It “rubs up” against the tendencies around the fixing of identities, relationships, and subjectivities. The distinctions I made between “bakla” and “gay” in *Global Divas* was a way of queering things up—that is, [of disturbing] the normalizing tendencies of “gay” in the late 90s. So I take the valences of queer—like anything else—as contextual. What is the historical and cultural situation? What is being normalized (or what are the power relationships involved)? Then it leads to that vital question: What is in this context that would profit from a queering or queer analysis? I used the notion of profit here based on an idea of the value of social justice and the struggle for equality.

**JS: Filipinos and Filipino-Americans have figured prominently in American popular culture in recent years. There are boxer Manny Pacquiao, singer Charice, and several American Idol hopefuls, of course, but there are also gaymen like RuPaul's Drag Race contestant Manila Luzon and pornographic film actor Brandon Lee, who was the subject of a chapter by Nguyen Tan Hoang (2004) in *Porn Studies*, a book edited by Linda Williams (pp. 223-270). Has there been any subsequent impact on Filipino representations, queer or otherwise, in the United States?**

**MM:** It would be a mistake to think that popular culture figures readily lead to significant political shifts in the ways Filipinos and Filipino-Americans are perceived and located within various structures of power. Filipinos are still a major part of the subterranean world of flexible service workers all over the world. Would media luminaries eliminate this reality? I would think not. That said, I think the glimmer of Manila Luzon's gown, the impeccable tone of Charice's voice and the menacing image of Pacquiao add to the creation of an ecology or climate of affective energies around being Filipino or Filipino-American. These potential energies are passions that need to be harnessed in some organized way in order to make any kind of significant impact on those kinds of representations.

**JS: What, for you, are the limits of a queer politics of representation? How can attempts at subversion or transgression elude containment or domestication?**

**MM:** This is quite a big question that is unfair to ask in an interview, but I will respond to it in a preliminary and abbreviated manner. Subversion or transgression in any situation always leads to other confrontations that may attempt to contain or domesticate such acts. To think that any kind of subversion is complete is an ideological illusion. The only reality that I am willing to accept is the reality of constant, if not perpetual, struggle.

**JS: How can various queer groups with different, even competing interests, come together in order to struggle collectively? Should these groups form coalitions to begin with? If so, what might the points of convergence be? If not, why?**

**MM:** This is another difficult question to answer in a couple of paragraphs. Coalitions are fleeting and temporary, [consisting of the] strategic coming

together of disparate groups for one specific cause or set of causes at one specific temporality. Politics and any kind of struggle will fail without coalitions. Points of convergence are specific to the causes and struggles so I cannot map that out for you. The qualities of queer involve never-ending exhortations to struggle, to fight against fixed teleologies of various struggles.

**JS: The Internet is becoming an increasingly important venue for the performance of everyday life for many people around the world. What are some of the effects of the Internet that you discern in the lives of diasporic gay or queer men?**

**MM:** The Internet has provided new ways of visibility and invisibility, re-routing circuits of desire and creating avenues for information flows in ways that make time and place somewhat irrelevant. An important caveat is that the Internet is not an open-ended and unambiguous democratic space. Critical scholars need to find the various ways in which virtual space, [much like any other space], are subject to various forms of structural constraints and exclusions.

So while queers all over the world might revel in the connections that are being made through this technology, we need to listen to what anthropologist Anna Tsing in her book *Friction* [has] to say about such connections. She wisely reminds us that these connections, or the “rubbing up” of subjects, communities and other entities in various global circuits and scales are oftentimes “awkward, unequal and unstable.” The allure of the sleekness and speed of Internet connections might lead to the increased primacy of universalizing narratives to the detriment of particular and specific local experiences.

**JS: What do you believe the role of the intellectual is in everyday political struggles? How do you see your work contributing to and shaping the daily lived experience of the subjects of your studies? How can an understanding of the arena of quotidian struggles improve the prospects for action?**

**MM:** As an anthropologist, I am interested in analyzing, describing and valorizing human experiences as embodied in and instantiated by the everyday. My interest in the quotidian has to do with my fascination in daily tactics and strategies people deploy in confronting power. People might call



these acts as grassroots, but such a term [...] delimits the capacious ways in which the quotidian operates. The ordinary and banal habits people enact day in and day out might seem to have nothing to do with grand-scale politics; however, it is through these micro-struggles that narratives of all-encompassing seamless power are dismantled.

In negotiating, domesticating, co-opting, re-making and transforming the workings of hegemony, ordinary people—not professional activists, policy-makers, scholars or politicians—are creating new blueprints for struggle and activism. The “dailyness” of life creates new affective and sensorial ecologies—passions and feelings of hurt, anger, perseverance, hopelessness, disaffection—all of which are important components of a politics that can potentially fuel future collective action and struggles.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Manalansan, one of the speakers of The Precarious University lecture series sponsored by the Department of Theater Arts and Performance Studies at Brown University, delivered “Fabulosity and Precarity: Queer Embodied Struggles in Immigrant Quotidian Lives” on February 16, 2012.

<sup>2</sup>This is one of the arguments made by Garcia in *Philippine Gay Culture*.

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