

Alter(n)ation: Costume Metaphors in Filipino American Performance Art

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“We call it butterfly dress because after independence from the US in 1947, Filipino women could really fly.”

Paola Isabella Rocha Tornito,
Puerto Rican-Pilipina “socialite”¹

“Dresses are props in racialized constructions of identities”

Laura Lopez, “Writing on the Social Body:
Dresses and Body Ornamentation in
Contemporary Chicana Art”

Introduction: The *Terno* as Metaphor

It is an evening of performances by and about Pilipina American lives. In a one-act entitled *de blues*, performed at Bindlestiff Studio in San Francisco, California, a woman in her 30s comes onto the stage, halfway clad in a *terno*.² The dress drags on the floor, with its infamous “butterfly” sleeves, which typically stand stiff at the shoulders, remaining limp on the woman’s shoulders. An argument ensues between the young woman and her mother. We soon find out that the occasion for the evening is the daughter’s *second* debut. This ritual is designed to introduce to society young Filipinas who are of marriageable status. The “repeat” debutante no longer fits in her *terno*, much to her mother’s chagrin. The first cotillion did not yield a husband and thus the need for a second attempt. Her mother insists that the daughter dress herself in this national vesture, the only feasible clothing for a ritual of passage that pronounces the formal (re)entry of a young woman into society. The mother’s determination to find a suitable escort for her daughter underscores the function of this coming of age ritual in upholding hetero-normativity. In this struggle between mother and daughter, it becomes apparent how the debutante’s body is made to perform the stature of the dress, but also, how the body resists or exceeds the expectations of the *terno*’s grandness.

In this performance, the physical comedy of actress Bernadette Sibayan Rosquites enlivens the contrast between the regal *terno* and the aging debutante. Rosquites performs her character as falling out of the seams of the *terno*, constantly fidgeting and uncomfortable in the formal dress. While the mother pontificates about the importance of the occasion, the debutante rolls her eyes and tugs on her dress. She responds with: “The cotillion is one of the “three evils of the Pilipino culture,” along with “Capitalism and Catholicism.” The over-the-hill debutante is literally unable to fit into the *terno*, and figuratively unable to live up to what the *terno*, in this instantiation, symbolizes—a highly feminized, demure,

and upper class Filipina. Through parody, *de blues* critiques the institution of the cotillion as a cultural mechanism of gender formation through heterosocial ritual practices. It exposes the hierarchical gendered and classed structure of Philippine society, normalized through social practices such as the *debut*, and markers such as the *terno*.

The appearance of the *terno* in this evening of performance works focusing on Filipina identity is, in many ways, inevitable. After all, this national costume is the vestimentary icon of the ideal Filipina. I begin with this iconic image of the maturing debutante, ill fit to wear the *terno*, as an exemplary mobilization of the *terno* in the works of contemporary performance artists in the Filipino diaspora. I analyze how performance artists deploy the *terno* as a dense metaphor for the proper and improper Filipina. Two performance art groups, Barrionics and Mail Order Brides (MOB), take center-stage in my discussion as they comment on the construction of Filipina/Filipina American femininity in their reconfigurations of the infamous “butterfly dress.” Through a performative and literal alteration of the *terno*, these contemporary performance projects variously theorize gender formation, belonging, and the diaspora. These works interweave queer sexuality, feminist politics and performance methodology, and U.S. Filipino/a racialization. In particular, I argue that their deployment of drag, as performance methodology, defamiliarizes feminine constructs that operate both in the nation and the diaspora. Performative devices such as intertextuality in the work of Barrionics (where high art such as *baroque* is juxtaposed with national markers such as the Philippine *terno*) foreground the entanglements of colonial and neocolonial histories within the current global circulation of Filipina bodies.

I turn to the deployment of the *terno* in these performance sites to address the foundational (and often overlapping) critical concerns in my larger study of Filipino