



# Bakla in the City: Toward a Reluctant (Queer) Poetics

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MANY YEARS AGO in Bulacan, I and a team had just wrapped up a routine annual report shoot when our subject, a farmer, uttered what has been to this day the only homophobic slur hurled directly toward me in my presence. The interview done, I had stood up to shake his hand and the burly father of seven, with a warm chuckle, loudly remarked on how soft my hand was. Then with the requisite sing-song, he transferred the adjective—“malambot”—to the rest of my person.

I felt a distinct shiver, part shame, part rage. But good-natured laughter punctuated the quip; even my photographer, a Malacañang veteran for a broadsheet and with whom I had been doing corporate gigs for years, conceded a smile. In the lull, sandwiches and lukewarm Coke were brought into the fenced yard, and in the proceeding small talk about the price of corn and the latest corruption scandal—the hum of feudalism and state neglect around us—I found myself belatedly tossing my own tentative grin into the fray, embarrassed by my offense.

I recounted this long-ago encounter to a friend years later, in Hanoi’s old quarters over beer and spring rolls. It was the summer after my first year of teaching, which I did next after five years of freelance writing. How sad, he said, not looking sad. Not to be outdone (because gays are innately competitive because othered), he shared that a stranger once called him a “faggot” following a misunderstanding in an ATM





queue. He nearly burst out crying, he said, and his sister, seeing him, had to accost the culprit all the way to a nearby grocery.

That gave me pause. This friend, a brilliant writer and my former editor at the college paper, is easily one of the most assertive, caustic persons I know. He told harsh jokes about AIDS and genocide, upbraided careless waiters, and, once, flatly refused to pass on the fare of a fellow passenger onboard a near-empty jeep. His sense of self was adamant, at times to a fault, but there he was, demolished by that word. A word that we used on each other with ironic fondness so we knew its power resided outside its six letters and two tiny syllables.

I peg my inauguration to homosexual identity on something similarly hostile. It was 2004 and I had just turned eighteen. It was ten years after the first course in gay literature was taught in UP Diliman, where I was a sophomore. It must have been around midnight, the vicinity of Orosa and Nakpil in Malate starting to become packed, when a group of friends and I tried to gingerly go inside a club called Mr. Piggy's (a name which I realize now combined faux innocence with Tagalog double-talk—"babuyan").

It was my first time inside one such club, which coddled the same porcine bacchanalia only distinguished by the extent and democracy of the gratification that took place inside, from wholesome flirtation to impromptu orgies. The place, I remember, pulsed with the deep bass of house music (Square Heads' "Happy," I recall in particular, a touch of prophecy). Figures swayed and neon lights fluctuated, vaguely apace with the beat. Smells pummeled each other: whiffs of cloying cologne with blasts of nicotine, pungent beer. The dance floor, innocent site of "preliminary" activities, was on the first floor, while the so-called dark room, where things "culminated," was on the second.

For an hour or so I stood alone on the crowded dance floor, more shifting than dancing, a bottle of San Mig Light growing warm in hand; once or twice I felt a body behind me, an invitation, but I was young and heinously insecure and my innate self-loathing had newly coalesced with a fledgling understanding of the gay community's vicious vanity, so I didn't turn around. I didn't dare. The dark upstairs, I knew even then, would be more hospitable to my desire.

In his study of the homosexualization of rundown movie houses in downtown Manila, Chuckberry Pascual examined why phenomena like darkness and filth seem to figure in the negotiation of homosexual spaces. Such spaces, he said, have always occupied a middle ground between public and private, beyond the heteronormative policing "outside." But while a seeming casualty to ostracism, these places are also gestures of subversion; their very existence, after all, is contingent on their performance. Dark rooms in Malate, like the muggy balcony sections of movie

houses in Avenida and Quiapo, thus represent the simultaneous emancipation and marginalization that homosexual spaces often enact.

I didn't know this then. I also didn't know that you were supposed to guard your pockets the moment you join the slithering silhouettes inside dark rooms. It was too late when I realized that my wallet and phone were gone. Right away I disengaged from a nicotine-laced mouth, pushed someone's head away from my crotch, and made my way outside. It was around four in the morning; the crowd on the streets had dissipated (an hour hence and the bars would start playing Sarah Geronimo to drive away overstaying patrons). The people I was with, whom I would never see again after that night, gave me enough money for *taho* ("para kumalma ka") and a jeepney ride home.

My education in literature would reduce (or elevate) this experience to the archetypal loss of innocence, but I would remember that ordeal most for two things: the sense of exclusion that I felt so strongly inside that club and the silence of the morning after (the enervated hum of *What Now?*). In many ways my experience of gayness strikes me now as a montage of such: rejection and empty aftermaths. There would be a guy—a nurse, an Ecstasy dealer, a theater actor, a call center agent, someone named Gerry—and a departure, often unceremonious, now and then unbearable. Sometimes so unbearable that I needed to recast the experience into a version that I could live with. Thus: fiction.

Early last year, a Filipino poet asked if I could help edit a "queer Southeast Asia journal" that he was setting up. There was alarm in the invitation that was uncommon for literary projects. It was a response, he said, to the recent flare up of violence against homosexuals in Indonesia. I thought about it then demurred, with the usual empty praise for the project and suggestions of other, better names. I also cited—what sounds now as high-minded bluffing—the timid gender politics in my work.

Since I started writing, I had resisted any categorization of myself and my writing as "queer." My attitude about identity politics had unduly suffered from the kind of hardline pre-intersectionality Marxist-Leninist-Maoist education I soaked up in college, aided in no small part by my stint with the *Collegian* (where, ironically, the oppression of outnumbered heterosexuals was a running joke). The "gay struggle," as it privileges the self as a locus of understanding the world, was not materialist enough, not collective enough. It fractures and distracts. It is a lens that is at best incomplete and at worst deleterious. If there was a hierarchy of exploitations, gender would need to jostle its way to the top.

This is strange, looking back. My first attempt at fiction consisted of quasi-plagiarizing a heterosexual love story called "Pulitika at Skateboarding" by Ina Silverio that we took up in a Philippine literature class. Structured as a series of letters

between a young New People's Army cadre and her boyfriend in Manila, the Tagalog short story was among the first materials that would begin my (aesthetic) education in Philippine society. At that time, a brief dalliance with a student leader had fizzled out just as I was becoming acquainted with the student movement on campus. In writing the story, I retained the central conflict between desire and ideology but did away with the epistolary form. Like a true amateur, I also applied my own realities to the story and thus turned both characters gay.

This makes it sound more premeditated than it was. I had not taken a class in fiction then. I remember beginning, as I still do today, with ideas, guided more by an essayistic "groping intention" than fiction's conventional preoccupation with narrative. The decision about gender seemed automatic, politically neutral, I thought. I simply had neither the imagination nor stamina (or desire) to craft central characters whose desire was ultimately alien to me. While I could perhaps convincingly conjure heterosexual desire on the page, the details that bedevil it, I thought, were inaccessible to me.

In hindsight, there was a disconnect here, between the theoretical sidestepping of gender, on one hand, and what the formal decision on characterization entailed, on the other. After all, I must have intuited that the story had something to gain, beyond personal catharsis, from the reconfiguration of the protagonist's sexuality. That there was power in that uneasy juxtaposition of two planes of "rebellion," in both desire and ideology. This ambivalence about gender would solidify in my later work, which, save for a few outliers, would all revolve around one gay protagonist, whose fictive function (my shady thesis adviser would never fail to remind me) was to serve as my convenient, unimaginative mouthpiece. When asked about gender, I haughtily proclaimed that *not* thinking about gender—insisting on its normalcy, on it being a non-factor—was in itself some form of agency. But when my first book came out years later, I noticed that it did elicit particularly chirpy attention from queer (and women) readers. This observation, while by no means scientific or backed by data and purely based on anecdotal encounters, diverged from the few ways in which I frequently characterized the book, all of which did not take into account the text's queerness.

How then to account for this insistence of queerness as a politically potent but default, unmediated position? Can a piece of writing foreground a gay experience, emanate from a lived gay identity, but somehow, by sheer authorial demurral and claim of political misgivings, elide the uneasy burden of classification of "queer" literature?

It was a reality show called *RuPaul's Drag Race* that would guide me toward an answer, no matter how provisional or unsatisfactory. The show would encroach on my life, although "encroach" might be a euphemism. After watching one episode,

I proceeded to hungrily binge-watch season after season, not leaving my room in days-long marathons, stopping only to sleep and eat, missing meetings and asking deadlines be moved. After finishing all extant episodes, I turned to adjacent franchises like *Untucked* or *Drag U*. With that depleted, too, I sought out my favorite contestants online, saw fan videos, rewatched old episodes, finding a fresh nuance each time or laughing anew at an old joke.

The show, I found out, tended to colonize one's life, like a welcome rash. Soon, a stranger's plump torso would elicit "Back rolls?" Any mention of "sugar daddy" would get my hopes up for a lashing out. When someone would raise their voice, I'd tell them their tone seems pointed right now. I'd constantly admonish friends to conquer their inner saboteur. Bongbong Marcos nearly won the vice-presidency and I thought, "Not today, Satan." Whenever *Drag Race*-watching friends and I meet, our answer to "Kumusta?" was an accounting of the latest shenanigan on the show, the latest scandal or meme from Reddit.

After a while I was getting mild stiff necks from too much side-eyeing. I had replaced periods with pathetic attempts at tongue pops. Sipping through a straw entertains me senseless. My Spotify is locked into a playlist of the songs used in the lip syncs. Our cab once passed by the city library in Baguio and I told my companion, with absolutely no forethought, that the library was open. To be broke is to be *pulubi* realness. For a time all my posts on social media included #shade.

It got worse. When a contestant named Kennedy Davenport, lip synching to "Roar," jumped from the runway to the floor into a split, for days I brought around my old clunky Acer and ordered random friends to watch it. In India, after a haggard hours-delayed train ride to Benares, I plopped down on the hotel bed and, with much histrionics, told my companion I needed to watch an episode or two of the show "so I'll feel like myself again." In Hanoi, a beautifully decrepit colonial house swept into view and what came out of my lips was "Yassss!" as if the house, swathed in vine, on the stoop the usual bevy of bored-looking women, was a queen sashaying down a colonial runway.

The *Drag Race* addiction is clinically logical to friends, many of whom are in academia, some with astute comparatist training that had turned them—us—into chronic overreaders. Drag is, of course, inherently political, contingent on the interrogation of traditional notions of gender. *Drag Race*, we concluded, is easily an artistic tradition in itself, its texts—the episodes, the queens, their buffooneries and tomfooleries—always in conversation with each other (echoes of its own mega-text, *Paris Is Burning*, reverberate through the show). And what characterize this tradition are things all too familiar to queer Filipinos, I thought: the relentless punning ("Fu Manchu better work!"); the effervescent word play ("Impersonating Beyoncé was not



your destiny, child.”); the jokes (“What’s the hardest part of roller skating? Telling your mother you’re gay”), and chronic slapstick and camp (Tempest DuJour, in her entrance, spreading her legs from between which a toy baby dropped). In everything a sense of humor that is so bakla, which is to say, often clever but sometimes wala lang, always irreverent and tongue firmly in cheek, with that surfeit of joy that is often a surplus of great suffering.

Needless to say, the joy that *Drag Race* exhorts is great partly, precisely because it thrives in defiance of structural exclusion, from your everyday homophobic slur to more entrenched, institutional forms of discrimination. And so while my queer subject position renders the joys of something like *Drag Race* uniquely legible, that same queerness is by no means constantly affirmative or triumphant or humorous.

I understand, for instance, that the subversion that drag enacts does not necessarily apply to a television franchise that, with seemingly increasing crassness, commodifies the self-same subversion, the self-same politics. It is perhaps trite to attribute this to late capitalism’s totalitarian tendency to co-opt anything of value, including and specially cultural phenomena, but, really, why did I think it was somehow exempt from capital’s grasp? Of course it had to (strategically) navigate a web of contradictions and complicities, like NPA cadres using MacBooks and social media and the Internet to disseminate information from the countryside. And as I waded deeper into the *Drag Race* fandom, the rose-colored glasses through which I used to see the show began to shatter and my appreciation for it as a political artifact, I hope, gained complexity even as the show was properly demystified, disrobed of its trimmings and emerging as something even more beautiful (like lip-syncing contestants taking off their wigs to reveal another wig underneath). Queerness then, as Eve Sedgwick famously put it, is “recurrent, eddying, troublant. The word ‘queer’ itself means cross.” It is a state of permanent transition and unease.

Aside from *Drag Race*, another fixation that helped me probe the dizzying complexity of queerness is the city. Neocolonial spaces like Manila, replete as they are with modern ideas on sexuality from global centers, figure prominently in the creation of this ambivalent condition, writes J. Neil Garcia in “The City in Philippine Gay Literature.” While urban centers permit, he says, “sexual self-realization,” they are ultimately ambivalent, “at once welcoming and alienating,” “at once enabling and subjugating.”

My experience of queerness, true enough, had in one way or another run alongside this infatuation for the city. Once, one Sunday dawn after a night of drinking in Malate, a group of friends and I walked the length of Taft Avenue from Orosa-Nakpil to Quiapo Church to accompany a heartbroken friend to mass, half of which he spent uncontrollably weeping, heedless of the judging looks from the other



church-goers. A decade later, the turbulence of a relationship would be foreshadowed by a boyfriend's profound anxiety at the sight of dusk slowly covering the city's streets, a restlessness that I could not for the life of me share and which I felt was taken against me ("Mahal mo talaga itong lungsod, ano?").

But beyond its usual role as *mise-en-scène*, the city, its simultaneous embrace of queer identity and claustrophobia regarding this self-same identity, had always been a space with a clear determinative force. If any lived space typifies relations of power, the city—in particular mad and tumultuous Manila—can perhaps be expected to mediate in some way the vexed relationship between queerness and desire. How did that oft-quoted line from Tony Perez's *Cubao 1980* go? "Sana'y ako na lamang ang posteng kahoy sa daan—laging nakatanghod sa buong lungsod ngunit di umiibig."

Literature as refuge, again and naturally. Even the ethos of *Drag Race*, I realize, while escapist in a consumerist sense, can offer ways of seriously engaging the practice of writing. I do not only refer to the sort of ventriloquism—the accommodation of provisional "voices" or "characters"—that both drag and writing simultaneously demand and celebrate, and which certainly has its value. In "The Essayification of Everything," Christy Wampole proposes that the essay form's meditative and meandering spirit could present an antidote to "the renewed dogmatism of today's political and social landscape," how the genre, harnessed well, was ultimately an "imaginative rehearsal of what isn't what could be." In fiction as in drag. It can be this broad premium on the power of imagination that may well be these two points' most salient intersection.

My experience of desire in the city, debilitating as it is, was thus always tempered, made bearable if not by fictionalizing experience then by a keen self-awareness of such variety, due in part to an exposure to and engagement of the arts, a position of privilege in a country where only one in five finish college due to financial constraints. Some years back, one featureless morning after a one-night stand, I found myself in front of a motel in Sta. Mesa eating *kwek-kwek* from a roadside cart, crisscrossing arms and rubbing elbows with groggy-eyed menial laborers for whom the street food constituted breakfast. "Para akong nasa Tagalog short story," I texted someone, half-awake.

I had in mind the long tradition of social realism in Philippine literature, characterized by an incurable alertness to the everyday contradictions of a semifeudal, semicolonial society. That quip, that ability to annotate my experience in such a literate fashion, already diminished my already tenuous attempt at solidarity with my fellow *kwek-kwek* eaters, with the majority of Metro Manila's twelve million residents whose lives are so deadened by menial violence that they would rather watch (free) escapist *telenovelas* than read depressing fiction in a foreign language.





“Ang mahal, tapos ang hirap basahin!” exclaimed the guard of the building where my school’s English department was located, holding a paperback for sale at an adjacent stall.) My rah-rah college self would ask: outside (literal) spheres of desire, did my queerness matter at that moment?

I recall the slur from the farmer and realized that my protracted diffidence toward notions of “gay pride” tacitly relied on the idea of a self that could be compartmentalized, that an aspect of it, imbued with cultural and intellectual capital, should have been invincible to such violence, that it was a violence to be levelled only at a certain gay demographic, the type that frequented clubs called Mr. Piggy’s and engaged in casual sex in public restrooms. There is a class element there, of course, but more importantly it reveals an edifying, self-glorifying attitude toward artistic production, that it is exempt—and the artist salvageable—from valid taxonomies of oppression, including gender.

After all, entering the motel the night before, I recall, entailed steeling my already lowered voice at reception, affecting a casual air with my companion at the waiting area, and, in the elevator, ordering myself to ignore a young straight couple’s undisguised gaze. That I feel it is within my ability to define myself (and my writing) in terms that are sovereign from my sexuality thus overlooks such quotidian skirmishes, which simmers beneath the cosmopolitan surface of twenty-first-century Philippines, only awaiting the next trigger.

What could trigger it? It could be as innocent as an offered hand, deemed too soft for a guy; it could also be life-ending, as in an orgy of consenting adults that just so happened to involve illegal substances that constitute this regime’s favorite scapegoat, or a rich oil kingdom reintroducing stoning to death as a penalty for homosexual behavior in 2019. These violences, as many have noted, intersect rather than diverge, and in engaging their roots there is always room for kindred interrogations.

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