The effect of mass migrations has been the creation of a radically new type of human being, people who root themselves in ideas rather than place, in memories as much as material things; people who have been obliged to define themselves — because they are so defined by others — by their otherness; people in whose deepest selves strange fusions occur, unprecedented unions between what they were and where they find themselves. The migrant suspects reality: having experienced several ways of being, he understands their illusory nature. To see things plainly, you have to cross a frontier. — Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*

I left the Philippines for America to become the international beauty queen that I was meant to be. I thought everything will be like the movies and TV shows that I have seen when I was growing up. Well, I have had some disappointments. I still wonder what would have happened if I were still back home. Would I still be the exotic beauty of my childhood or the blond bombshell that I am today? I am very
No Borders?

It was 4 o'clock on a Sunday afternoon in Greenwich Village. In keeping with urban gay weekly rhythms, gay men were converging for tea time, or tea dance. This ritual has nothing to do with the British custom of drinking the brew and eating fancy sandwiches. This is the moment when gay men who have been up the previous night carousing go off to their favorite bars or dance clubs for one last chance to cruise or hang out before the much-dreaded Monday morning. Exotica, my main informant, and I were in a gay bar, which at that time (August 1987) was the in place to be on a Sunday afternoon.

We were doing what most of the natives were doing—sex, or “standing and modeling,” that is, trying to appear nonchalant while attentively appraising the crowd. Suddenly, Exotica nudged me and said, “Tingnan mo, isang pang Philippines.” [Look, another Miss Philippines.]

In the middle of a small group of white men was a seemingly uncomfortable Asian man who would approximate what I would consider a Filipino (on the basis of my extended experience). Exotica suggested that we approach him. After some initial greetings and small talk, Arturo (the other Miss Philippines) started to warm up to us. He mentioned the fact that he had been in America for more than five years and that he lived in Jersey City, New Jersey.

Exotica asked, “Atche, ang ganda-ganda mo e bakit ka parang napapaso. Parang hindi ka nag-enjoy.” [Big sister, you are so beautiful, but why do you look uncomfortable? You don’t seem to be enjoying yourself.]

Arturo said, “Ay hindi matake ng biyut ko ang drama dito sa bar.” [Oh, my biyut (I) can’t take the drama in this bar.]

“Vakit?” [Why?] Exotica and I both chortled.

Arthur countered, “Puro mga bakla este gay ang mga tao dito, walang totoong lalaki. Kung hindi lang ako pinilit ng mga putting ito, hindi ako pupunta dito.” [This place is full of bakla. I mean gays. There are no real men here. If these white folks didn’t cajole me into going, I would not be here.]

Arturo mentioned a section of Jersey City that is home to a large number of Filipino immigrants and even has a street called Manila Avenue. He said that among his Filipino neighbors he had found his one true love.

Then he described his boyfriend/lover as “Totoong lalaki, ‘di tulad ng mga tao dito—macho! May asawa pa!” [A real man, unlike the people here—macho! He even has a wife!]

Exotica gushed, “Ay mamá, talagang orig pa rin ang drama mo, made in the Philippines!” [Oh, mamá, your drama is still original, made in the Philippines!]

Arturo said, “Parang hindi nagbabago pero iba na rin ang drama ko ngayon.” [It seems to be unchanged, but in fact, my drama is different now.]

This conversation occurred in what can be considered the quintessential space for gay identity and culture everywhere—the New York City gay bar. For many lesbians and gays, this space evokes a sense of community and solidarity. Activist Simon Watney (1995: 61) suggests that the gay bar is the site for ubiquitous homecomings for gay men and lesbians around the world, the one place where despite divergent origins and agendas, queers readily feel at home. He writes, “Few heterosexuals can imagine the sense of relief which a gay man or lesbian finds in a gay bar or a dyke bar in a strange city in a foreign country. Even if one cannot speak the local language, we feel a sense of identification. Besides, we generally like meeting one another, learning about what is happening to people ‘like us’ from other parts of the world” (ibid.).

Watney’s statement resonates with the popular view that gay identity and space are intrinsically and organically linked. By this logic, Arturo is not quite “like us” and thus not included in the “we” of Watney’s vision of the modern lesbian and gay world. Instead, in these terms, Arturo occupies an anachronistic pre-gay if not pre-modern state of being. Others might go so far as to fault Arturo for being “internally homophobic” or self-hating or for being an ignorant immigrant who is “fresh off the boat.” Their logic goes this way—given time Arturo will be as comfortable in and assimilated into the Ameri-
contradictions, discomfort, and disparities between the three of us in the bar to complicate the popular and hegemonic tableau of a world turning gay or of queerness going global.

The idea of a global lesbian and gay culture has become part of most popular discourses around queer visibility. Consider this specific example. The theme for the New York City Lesbian and Gay Pride Month celebrations in June 1996 was “Pride without Borders.” The official guide to the different activities and parties read:

We are so different from one another. The places where we live, the colors of our skin, the possessions and beliefs we hold dear all conspire to divide us and remind us of our difference, but all over this city and in this state, in these 50 states, and in provinces, cantons, parishes and hemispheres so convenient for maps and for separating us, the one thing that we are is gay and lesbian. And queer. And homosexual... We are so different. And we are everywhere... And we are dykes and fags and pansies and patas and sissies and so butch we're questioned in the ladies' room at rest stops... We know we are everywhere and that we have always been everywhere, and that knowledge should make all of us proud. We are strong because our love and our struggle draw us together. Our Pride, our desire to celebrate what we have made for ourselves and our determination to achieve everything that we deserve erases all the borders and makes the differences meaningless. We are so different, and yet we must work as one. (New York Lesbian and Gay Pride Guide 1996: 12)

The text begins and ends with difference and yet is permeated by political exhortations of its elision. The 1996 theme not only implies an engagement with diversity, but also idealizes the globalization or universalization of lesbian and gay identity. At the same time, it engages with a popular “McDonald's” notion of the global as a homogenizing process that emanates from above. Thus, while there is a perfunctory gesture toward differences, the final act is to break down these potential barriers to community. The rainbow flag (a flag with horizontal stripes in the colors of the rainbow), an important symbol of gay and lesbian identity and community, is an example of some of the ways by which the lesbian and gay “community” has attempted to recognize diversity. Seemingly separate bands of color are fused into a unitary belonging. While these important symbols and meanings of unity provide a potent impetus for community efforts, they at once obscure contradictory and uneven queer spaces. As in the case of Arturo in the gay bar, fissures and borders crisscross the seemingly placid terrain of queer communities. How do we understand these differences in the face of the global dispersal and movement of people beyond a teleological narrative of the movement from tradition to modernity, and from discomfort to settlement into gay and lesbian life?

Globalization is often seen in extreme terms either as a foreboding specter of a catastrophic future or as a cause for a celebratory jubilation over the resolution of local repressions (Giddens 2000). In queer discourses, redemptive narratives of the global abound and are deployed in various venues such as gay pride parades, mass media, gay rights groups, and most notably in the twenty-fifth anniversary celebration of the Stonewall rebellion held in New York City in 1994 (Manalansan 1995). On the other extreme, various nation-states forestall what is perceived as a contaminating global flow of Western queerness as a means to erect and resurrect legal, cultural, and political-economic barriers (Alexander 1997). Indeed, ideas about diaspora and globalization have invaded even the most mundane aspects of queer lives. Such words as globalization are used to index or mark sophistication and cosmopolitanism in queer culture. At the same time, skeptics have used the words as ominous signs of more insidious processes such as Western capitalist expansion and queer cultural imperialism and exploitation.

These facile yet dangerous ideas have necessitated what has been called a “transnational turn” in lesbian, gay, and queer studies (Povinelli and Chauncey 1999). This shift in lesbian, gay, and queer studies in the past ten years recognizes the limitations of place-based queer politics and at the same time conveys the complications brought about by migration and travel of queer peoples and cultures.

Queering the Diaspora and the Global: Whose Gaze? Who's Gay?

The transnational turn in lesbian, gay, and queer studies has not produced a singular mode of inquiry. One group of scholarly works focusing on the global and transnational has insistently examined gay and
and lesbian social movements and their growing strengths within specific national and regional contexts. These works often suggest that globalization can best be gleaned in the activities of established and institutionalized social movements and negotiations with state institutions and processes. This leads to a rendering of diaspora and migration, if mentioned at all in these works, as insignificant after-effects or vestigial processes of queer globalization. At the same time, diaspora and migration stand in for the idea of America as a monolithic and powerful center of queerness, ready to spread its influence all over the world. Unfortunately, these studies unwittingly posit a white gay male gaze — namely an omniscient, unreflective observer whose erotic and practical politics are based on an imagined level playing field for all queers. Within this framework, queer globalization is primarily a privileged form of “optic” — or a vantage point that allows a certain kind of ownership of global gayness or lesbianness in various locations and thus enables the right to claim queer spaces everywhere as “home.”

Competing with these scholars are practitioners of what I call the “new queer studies.” While the now established works and scholars in queer theory, including Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Michael Warner, and Biddy Martin among others, have emerged out of disciplinary concerns of reading canonical works or popular media texts, the scholars of the “new queer studies” have come out, so to speak, from the intersection of established disciplines and formerly marginalized terrains of the American academy such as ethnic studies, postcolonial studies, women’s studies, and gay and lesbian studies. The new queer theorists critically locate themselves and their works in local and global processes to produce scholarship that Gayatri Gopinath (1998: 117) aptly describes as “a more nuanced understanding of the traffic and travel of competing systems of desire in a transnational frame . . . and of how colonial structures of knowing and seeing remain in place within a discourse of an ‘international’ lesbian and gay movement.” This body of work can best be examined in terms of the political stakes in positing a particular understanding or vision of the global. In other words, these bodies of works that constitute the transnational turn in queer studies can be exemplified by what Appadurai (2000) has called the “optics” of globalization. Who gets to see globalization and in what way? For whom and to whom does this vision of queer globalization speak?

6 Global Divas
talk about the ways in which cosmopolitanism is not always privileged. Immigrant queers of color in particular demonstrate how mobility is not only about the actual physical traversing of national boundaries but also about the traffic of status and hierarchies within and across such boundaries.

At the same time, important books on globalization and transnationalism have disregarded or decentered the place of gendered and sexual subjectivity. In fact, Povinelli and Chauncey (1999: 445) bemoaned the tendency of “the literature on globalization . . . to read social life off external social forms—flows, circuits, circulations of people, capital and culture—without any model of subjective mediation.” Global Divas addresses this gap by presenting an ethnographic case study of how processes of globalization and transnationalism are negotiated through the processes of identity formation and everyday life of Filipino gay immigrants in New York City. I trace the historical and cultural parameters of Filipino immigration in general and the issue of Filipino gay immigration in particular as a way to offer a window on how these supranational elements and processes are not creating generic “McDonaldized” lives but rather intricately woven lives that are at once global and local. This ethnography, while based in New York City, is far from the traditional view of a local picture of a group of people. Rather, this book presents a complex picture of interconnections and disjunctures faced by this group of men. As such, the lives of these men are historically and culturally counterposed to the networks and movements of people, ideologies, technologies, capital, and the whole enterprise of diasporic travel in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

“Belonging to the World”:
The Transnational Sites of the Filipino Gay Immigrant

Dapat ka bang mag-iibang bayan?
Dito ba’y wala kang mapaghayag?
Bakit pa iiwanan ang lupang tinubuan?
Dito ka natuto ng iyong mga kalokohan.
Baka akala mo ganoon lamang ang mamuhay sa ibang bayan.
Tungkol sa babae, dito’y maraming okey.
Dito ang lihik ang kulang.
perils of murder, rape, and/or diseases such as AIDS further amplified this view. However, although these stories strengthened the heteronormative underpinnings of Filipino male patriotism, they did not diminish the allure of economic benefits brought about by dollar remittances and other material rewards of life abroad.

The Filipino diaspora in the last two decades of the twentieth century reached astronomical proportions. Labor migration has become a highly institutionalized practice in the Philippines with the state functioning in more than a facilitating role together with private and nongovernmental/nonprivate organizations. This has lead to the Philippines becoming the "world’s largest exporter of government-sponsored labor" (Tyner 2000: 132).

Anthropologist Jonathan Okamura summed up the far-reaching range of the Filipino diaspora when he wrote, “Filipinos can be found in more than 130 nations and territories throughout the world including both developing and developed countries” (1998: 101). Computer programmers, nurses, doctors, construction workers, domestics, entertainers, and sex workers are a huge part of the mobile labor power leaving the Philippines.”

Epifanio San Juan, a prominent Filipino literary theorist, eloquently described the Filipino as “belonging to the world,” meaning that Filipinos when they migrate “become assets, ‘human capital’... exchangeable commodities” as part of the global labor market (1998: 7).

However, in the past twenty years, Filipino labor migration has become increasingly female.10 Thus, in many ways, the song “Pinay” may seem to have become an obsolete paean in that the Filipina, or the Pinay, has become the paradigmatic migrant laborer coming from the Philippines and not the one who stays put. Filipinas work in such jobs as domestics, entertainers, teachers, and nurses in various countries in Asia, the Middle East, and North America. This gendered transformation did not alter the heteronormative underpinnings of nationhood, however. Rather, many discourses about several tragic situations that have befallen these women abroad have intensified the normalized and naturalized positions of women. At the same time, there is a strong acknowledgment among Filipinos of the global demand for female labor and despite particular misgivings about women leaving their families, these women are almost defined by the government and mass media to the point of martyrdom or heroism.

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In the 1970s, the song “Pinay” became the anthem for a predominantly male migrant labor flow from the Philippines to the Middle East. Pinay is a Tagalog slang term for Filipina, or a Filipino woman. The song’s initial mournful invocation of national belonging is coupled with the sexualized and gendered dimensions of the nation. Indeed, the song prescribes heterosexual marriage and desire to be the saving grace for the potential male migrant worker. Moreover, the song strongly suggests that the female body and the Pinay’s excellent domestic skills should be more than enough reason for the potential migrant to stay home in the Philippines.

The song constructs the space outside the nation as dangerous for heteronormative masculinity.8 This song’s viewpoint has been supported by gossip and stories about life outside the homeland. Stories about Arab men preying on beardless and relatively hairless Filipino men were rampant and included episodes of homosexual rape. Fur-
States has remained the ideal destination for Filipino immigrants. The largest Filipino overseas community is in the United States and numbers about 1.4 million (Okamura 1998: 101). After independence from U.S. colonial rule in 1946, the Philippines maintained close cultural, economic, and political ties with its former colonizer. These relationships have forged popular imageries that normalize and naturalize the links between the two countries.

Imaginary topographies that construct the United States and the Philippines as physically contiguous are part of many Filipino immigrant life narratives. Roberto, one of my informants, told me that while he was growing up he had always thought that America was just an hour bus ride away, hidden by the mountains of his home province. As a child, he had watched gray buses containing dozens of young American men with crew cuts running down the main highway near his home on their way to some spot in the mountains. It was only when he was eleven and he took a trip to Olongapo City that he learned that the America he thought was in the mountains was in fact only a military facility and that America was indeed very far away.

In the novel *Umbrella Country*, Filipino American author Bino Realuyo weaves a gay coming of age story set in the Philippines, where the persistent background image of America propels personal yearnings and an imagined future. A bittersweet tale of a young boy aptly named Gringo amid the lower middle-class mayhem of a Manila neighborhood, *Umbrella Country* is punctuated by scenes and dreams of America. At first glance, this story may be seen as a mere echo of a million other dreams and aspirations of would-be immigrants to America from all over the globe. However, as many scholars have argued, Filipinos occupy a unique position among diasporic groups owing to their colonial and postcolonial relationship with America.¹¹

Some commentators such as Pico Iyer (1988: 151–93), a popular travel writer, suggest that the Filipino is a sad, almost pathetic, copy of the American, an empty cultural shell devastated by Spanish and American colonialism. He further suggests that while Filipinos are virtuoso performers of American culture, they are left with the dubious heritage of disco, rock and roll, and the beauty pageant. In other words, Filipinos have nothing substantive to show except the shallow features of American popular culture.

However, more astute observers such as the anthropologist Fenella

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11 Performing Selves and Transforming Citizenship: The Filipino Gay Immigrant in the Modern World

The processes of globalization and transnationalism have complicated, if not transformed, the ways subjects create a sense of belonging and identity.¹⁵ Notions of being Filipino, American, or gay cannot be easily apprehended in static, essential terms alone. While nationhood is no longer the primary anchor for creating a sense of citizenship and belonging, the situation is far from a simple dismissal of the nation. Despite what many herald as the demise of the nation, the contemporary moment has created a “crisis of citizenship” (Castles and Davidson 2000). Place, identity, and belonging can no longer be regarded as logically connected in the midst of globalizing tendencies (Gupta and Ferguson 1992), but at the same time people on the move are not just free-floating monads or cultural vagabonds who are unmoored to specific spaces and identities. In the face of these realities, queer diasporic subjects, particularly those from the Third World, who are confronted
creating and refiguring home.

I argue that Filipino gay men are not typical immigrants who “move” from tradition to modernity; rather, they rewrite the static notions of tradition as modern or as strategies with which to negotiate American culture. Immigration, therefore, does not always end in an assimilative process but rather in contestation and reformation of identities.

The juxtaposition of performance and citizenship is based on the anthropological notion of cultural citizenship. Following Rosaldo (1994), Ong (1999), and Rofel (1999), I consider the process of citizen formation not as a mere political process but one “in which culture becomes a relevant category of affinity” (Rofel 1999: 457). Here, I take these scripts of belonging to include the “right to be different and to belong in a participatory democratic sense” (Rosaldo 1994: 402; see also Ong 1999). Cultural citizenship, therefore, is constituted by unofficial or vernacular scripts that promote seemingly disparate views of membership within a political and cultural body or community. Citizenship requires more than the assumption of rights and duties; more importantly, it also requires the performance and contestation of the behavior, ideas, and images of the proper citizen.16

I am interested in the way in which performance in diasporic queer communities is part of Filipino gay men’s attempts to write or rewrite scripts or modes of behavior and attachments. As May Joseph (1995: 6) aptly puts it, the conjunction of performance and hybrid subjectivities in this context “[makes] possible competing epistemologies of mutually afflicted, dissonant, and contesting narratives of empires, bodies, localities, and nations.” Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1994: 42) argue convincingly that Third World transmigrants or, as they call them, “hybrid diasporic subject[s],” are “confronted with the ‘theatrical’ challenge of moving, as it were, among the diverse performative modes of sharply contrasting cultural and ideological worlds.” The immigrant is continually made aware of the performative aspects of survival so much so that he or she is continually compelled to move or “travel” (albeit discomfitingly) between various codes of behavior. The immigrant has a heightened consciousness of the importance of having a bricolage’s sense of the right or appropriate conduct. Such valuations of conduct continually change depending on who is (over)-

Performance as a paradigm in the humanities has been seen as a universalizing process that is inherent in such matters as gender (Butler 1990, 1991, 1993).17 More importantly, the intersections of performance with race, class, and ethnicity have remained largely unexplored. I suggest following Rosalind Morris’s lead, that in order to understand both these situations, the interpenetration of the everyday with spectacle and theater must be placed in the center of the analysis. As Morris brilliantly notes, “Gender [and sexuality] may not be the primary object[s] of identification. . . . We need a conceptual vocabulary that permits discussion of engenderings that are multiply refracted in and through other categories of identities that are not reducible to gender. . . . We still need ethnographies that explore the constitution of racialized and ethnicized genders and/or genderized races and ethnicities” (1995: 585). To accomplish this task, one needs to locate performance within various hierarchical relationships, which implies divergent engagements of actors with so-called “scattered hegemonies” (Kaplan and Grewal 1994). In other words, performance is constituted through and contextualized by power and history.

My preoccupation with performance as part of citizenship developed from consistent themes that arose from fieldwork encounters with Filipino gay men. In many instances, informants’ discourses and behavior have presented a persistent performative view of the world.18 This is evident in the pivotal idioms of biyut and drama. As I have briefly explained in the preface, both idioms pertain to aspects of personhood, demeanor, and self-fashioning. Biyuti, unlike Cannell’s (1999) transliteration, is not the same as the English word beauty but extends to other realms of social and personal life. I have deliberately changed the spelling to reflect the difference in meanings as well as the pronounciation and speaking situations among Filipino gay men. I deploy the idioms biyuti and drama from Filipino gay men’s language to encapsulate a self-conscious notion of performance that is embedded not only in gendered phenomena but in the exigencies of everyday life, including those of kinship and family, religion, sexual desire, and economic survival. These idioms serve as a means of understanding the world, and, more importantly, assessing proper conduct and action.

However, as Arturo and Exotica’s words imply, the dramas of Fil-
negotiations of bakla and gay traditions. The cleavages and differences that exist within the so-called gay community, as exemplified by Aruro’s discomfort, should be seen not as temporary irritations or momentary lapses on the path toward becoming full-fledged gay citizens, but rather as part and parcel of the diversity of performances of selves in the gay public arena and in everyday life. Cultural citizenship then is not about monolithic constructions of identity and belonging, but rather about competing cultural traditions and ideologies of self and personhood.

My work highlights the ways the everyday lives of Filipino gay men inform and are informed by the idioms and processes of religion and theater. In other words, I want to explore the dramaturgy of Filipino gay men’s lives not only as an aesthetic exercise, but also as a way of understanding the articulation of their identities and the conditions under which they live. The primacy of the everyday provides an ethical basis for considering the theatrical aspects of social life. Performance in this book, therefore, is not only a matter of just “acting,” but rather is about the aesthetics of Filipino gay men’s struggles for survival. They are agentive sexual subjects who defy their representations in either mainstream films or in gay male porn (Fung 1991a, 1991b). They move beyond the stereotypes of houseboys, farmers, feminized sexual vessels, innocent waifs, and other “Oriental” icons in both genres (Ogasawara 1993).

This book is an ethnographic study of how Filipino gay men, most of whom are immigrants or long-time residents, negotiate between hegemonic American/Western and Filipino/Southeast Asian sexual/gender ideologies. Bakla is concerned with the manipulation of surface appearances in such a way that a singular consistent self is not suggested. Rather, bakla self-formation involves a range of possible scripts and the scripting of divergent selves, each of which is embedded in a specific social situation and network of social relationships.

Filipino gay men construct their sense of self and citizenship through negotiations between bakla and gay traditions that occur in quotidian and spectacular arenas. In the next five chapters, performances of these negotiations and engagements are portrayed in the interpenetration of time and place, images and memories, actions and counter-actions of both “staged performance” and performance in everyday life. While American/Western sexual ideology is not totally foreign to Filipino gay

hybrid amalgamations of practices and beliefs. This book attempts to re-imagine this highly contested terrain by releasing seemingly static concepts such as bakla, gay, Filipino, and American from their incarceration within specific places and ideas. By doing so, I open up the possibility of rethinking these identities, practices, and ideas within the grounds of history and culture, and I lay out the possible ways Filipino gay men create a sense of cultural citizenship amid and despite economic, political, and cultural spatial constraints.

As such, Filipino gay men’s experiences with modernity and with America are suffused with the ambiguity and ambivalence of immigrant life. Filipino gay men’s experiences in a drag beauty contest in Manhattan or in riding the New York City subways reveal the instability of boundaries and at the same time portray how, in many instances, such boundaries can also be experienced by these men as essential, fixed, and unchanging nodes of difference and/or affinity. While most accounts of postmodern or late modern travel and diasporas articulate a kind of mournful, if not listless displacement, the narratives in these chapters complicate this rather one-sided view. Consider the words of Leilani, who said, “Coming to and living here in America may be difficult at times, pero [but] I think it is all worthwhile. I think you can’t forget the good and bad side of immigrating here. But consider the things that opened up for me when my biyut arrived here.” I submit that together with experiences of alienation and displacement come the experiences of a rebirth or a second chance, or more succinctly, experiences of pleasure and settlement. The ceaseless dialectic between unbounding and fixing, displacement and emplacement becomes apparent in the narratives and life events of these informants in the next five chapters. Furthermore, I argue that experiences of immigration and displacement guide Filipino gay men’s “readings,” or interpretations, of gay cultural events and identity as well as shape their reactions to and engagements with these phenomena.

The succeeding chapters present a nuanced and complex tableau of experiences that both demarcate and unbound the borders between the bakla and gay ideologies. These experiences, I would argue, are mediated not only through the trappings of Western modern elements such as a gay consumer lifestyle, but also through the vigorous process of vernacularization. This process occurs not only at the level of language but also on the level of cultural practices, which include the pervasive
some people may apprehend these elements as either anachronisms or vestigial aspects of homeland culture, I argue instead that such elements are vital symbolic and material anchors for these men’s lives and are instrumental in the creation of a particular form of modernity that is constructed by multiply marginalized peoples.

Filipino gay men in the diaspora are not mere members of a “post-Stonewall” generation that emerged out of the ushering in of modern gay identity. As immigrants and as queers, Filipino gay men are destabilizing the idea of “generation” and geography. I veer away from a strict chronological conception of “generation” as a temporal or cohort marker. Instead I recast the term as constituted by cultural displacement and temporal-spatial intersections. By doing so, these men’s lives are seen to be complicating the ways gay, lesbian, and queer histories and cultural studies can be written and new queer activism forged. Positioned at the intersection of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender), ethnic, global, area, and postcolonial studies, this book pushes the boundaries of queer scholarship by going beyond nationalist and disciplinary restrictions.

The Book: An Itinerary

Global Divas is marked by a nonlinear trajectory. As Clifford (1992: 105) rightly describes it, an itinerary can offer a “way into” the various chapters of a book by presenting them not as a series of tightly chained ideas but rather as a more dispersed “history of locations and a location of histories.” In this vein, every chapter in this book speaks to and against the others.

Chapters 1, 2, and 3 map out the linguistic, cultural, and geographic spaces in which Filipino gay men’s border crossings take place. These three chapters in fact set up the stages on which enactment of crossings, contestations, resistance, capitulation, pleasure, and survival are played out. These chapters describe and analyze institutions, identities, practices, and persons that constitute the material and symbolic borderlands in the lives of Filipino gay men. Linguistic, cultural, and geographic borderlands are necessarily contingent and always in flux, particularly in terms of how gay and bakla traditions are marked, reconfigured, and realigned with other experiences and practices in the lives of Filipino gay men living in New York City.

and gay. While maintaining their permeable cultural boundaries, bakla and gay also have concepts and ideas that do not “travel.” Foremost among these is the idea of coming out, which is crucial to a gay self-formation and which does not translate to a particularly meaningful bakla category.

Chapter 2 discusses swardspeak, or the queer vernacular/code spoken by Filipino gay men, and especially focuses on the pivotal roles of the idioms of biyuti and drama. It describes how queer language functions as the medium through which Filipino gay men in the diaspora create new meanings and worlds to negotiate between the promise of transnational migration and experiences of displacement. The processes of vernacularizing and translating diasporic experiences are rendered in swardspeak terms and strongly demonstrate the continuities and discontinuities of queer immigrant life.

In chapter 3 I describe the organization of gay life in post-Stonewall New York City. This chapter interweaves narratives about the various ways in which gay places, practices, and images inflect and demarcate race, class, and gender. I then move into a discussion of the place of Asians and more specifically Filipino gay men in New York City gay life. Far beyond a description of an ethnographic setting, the chapter argues that an examination of queer spaces in New York from a particular marginalized gaze can provide a complicated yet positioned view of gay urban landscape in the late twentieth century.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 are the heart of this book and provide thick descriptions of Filipino gay men’s negotiations between bakla and gay traditions. In each chapter, Filipino gay men’s crossings and transgressions between the two traditions are marked in particular spaces such as everyday life, ritual or stage spectacles, and the AIDS pandemic. Filipino gay men’s performances are located or positioned in the aforementioned spaces and are placed against experiences of immigration and displacement.

Chapter 4 narrates/unravels the dramaturgical dimension of everyday life among Filipino gay men. Discussions of various spaces and practices, such as domestic space and weekly routines, are provided in order to present issues of race, class, and other forms of social relationships (i.e., religion, family) as part of Filipino gay men’s negotiations with various instances of differences and exclusion. This chapter argues that everyday life is an arena for contestation and resistance
cultural displacement and marginality. Moreover, Filipino gay men's quotididian struggles are in fact part of a drama of survival that goes beyond performances of gender and sexuality, and that brings into focus the predicament of being an immigrant of color in the late twentieth-century United States.

In chapter 5 I consider the Santacruzan, a traditional Filipino religious ritual that is performed by a group of Filipino queers and becomes the context for an examination of Filipino gay men's negotiations in the public arena. A specific performance of the ritual in 1991 by a group of Filipino gay men in New York City is presented to lay bare the issues of race, gender, and class, and the tensions between bakla and gay traditions as they are manifested in the contested practice of cross-dressing.

Chapter 6 explores how AIDS has transformed or affected the lives of Filipino gay men, who have the highest number of HIV cases among Asian Americans. Conversely, it examines the discursive practices Filipino gay men have employed to confront and indeed transform AIDS. Using life histories of both Filipinos with and without AIDS, the discussion centers on Tita Aida, the idiom Filipino gay men have coined for AIDS and the concomitant practices and beliefs that surround it. I demonstrate how such an idiom connects various Filipino ideas about homosexuality, gender, religion, cross-dressing, death, family, and illness, as well as the whole enterprise of immigration and transnational lives. The relationship between AIDS and immigration among Filipino gay men illustrates how the intersections of place and time are highlighted, particularly in trying to come to terms with the suffering involved in the pandemic and the struggle for some kind of transcendence.

In the conclusion, I reflect on the various themes encountered in the ethnographic chapters, particularly focusing on the location or position of Filipino gay men's performances or articulations of being and belonging within a global and transnational context. I explore the dialectic of arrivals and departures as a means to nuance the implications of this work in terms of possible academic and political routes to the future.
to analyze the public negotiations of Filipino gay men between the Filipino bakla tradition and American/Western practices and beliefs around gay identity. I focus on a detailed analysis of a public cultural event, a cross-dressing performance of a Catholic ritual, the Santacruzan by Kambal sa Lusog, a group of Filipino gay men and lesbians, to showcase the poetics of the Filipino gay diasporic experience. I conceptualize the ritual as a public arena in which individual and collective identities of Filipino gay immigrants are articulated and represented. In particular, I briefly demonstrate that identity formation among this group of diasporic men and women involves the incorporation and creative amalgamation of practices and ideas from different historical, cultural, religious, geographic, gender, racial, and class locations including colonialism and folk Catholicism. With the historical shift from a gendered homosexuality to gay identity in Western societies, cross-dressing becomes a kind of borderland in which such historical moments are replayed and refigured. At the same time, cross-dressing has been disparaged as a premodern vestige of an archaic homosexuality that existed before Stonewall. Contrary to this view, I deploy cross-dressing in this chapter as a space or arena of contestation and rearticulation of identities and a strategic practice in refiguring difference and hierarchy. I position this argument in relation to the notion of the bakla as cross-dresser and how this is articulated with prevailing hypermasculine images and ideals in the mainstream gay community. Most importantly, I argue that cross-dressing practices and rituals are vehicles and spaces through which Filipino gay men in New York City create and promulgate their sense of belonging and citizenship amid competing images and practices of the “gay community” and the nation.

The Performance: A Cross-Dressing Santacruzan

In March 1991, Filipino queers in New York City established an organization called Kambal sa Lusog, which literally means “twins in health,” but is interpreted as “comrades in the struggle.” Kambal sa Lusog was unique among the city’s Asian gay groups because it included gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals. The reasons given for creating the organization vary. Some members said that the group was formed in part owing to the controversy surrounding the production of the...
fense (a national gay and lesbian civil liberties group) not to cancel its benefit for the gala opening of the show. The broader context of the controversy, which I have discussed in an earlier work (Manalansan 1993), revolved around the alleged racist hiring practices and the Orientalist overtones of the play’s libretto and narrative. The controversy within New York’s gay and lesbian community left Filipino gay men in an awkward position. Many Filipino gay men were ambivalent about the controversy because Lea Salonga, a Filipina, was the star of the show. Filipino cross-dressers were known to appropriate images and songs from the show, but a few other Filipinos were steadfast in their opposition.

One of the founders of the group offered another explanation for its formation. He suggested that many Filipinos did not relate to other Asians or to an Asian identity. This belief was shared by other Filipino gay men. Many informants perceived the term Asian only in terms of geography and believed that significant differences existed between other Asians and themselves. They perceived Asian to mean East Asians—Japanese, Korean, and Chinese. A number of informants mentioned having more cultural affinity with Latinos. Thus, many felt that their interests as gay men were not being served by a group like GAPIMNY (Gay Asian Pacific Islander Men of New York), which was largely composed of East Asian men.

Kambal sa Lusog met as a group every month at the Lesbian and Gay Community Center in Manhattan and published a newsletter. They held fundraisers and other group activities such as socials, video/film screenings, and discussion sessions. The Santacruzan, held in August 1992, was one of the group’s fundraising activities that also attracted Filipino gay men and lesbians who were nonmembers. This traditional Filipino ritual evoked the kind of community and identity formation Filipino gay men in the area were struggling to achieve.

The Santacruzan is an important traditional Catholic celebration in the Philippines and began as a response to the radical changes caused by Spanish colonization, which started in 1521 and ended with the conclusion of the Spanish-American War in 1898. Celebrated every May, the Santacruzan has been appropriately called the “Queen of All Filipino Fiestas.” The procession, which essentially begins and ends at a church, is a symbolic reenactment of the discovery of Christ’s cross by Queen Helena, or Reyna Elena, the mother of Emperor Constantine

peror Constantine’s life. According to popular lore, Emperor Constantine, a non-Christian, had a dream that he would win a battle if his soldiers would mark their shields with the cross. When he did as his dream suggested, he won the battle. Grateful about the outcome, Constantine urged his mother to look for the cross. The procession builds on this basic story.

The ritual combines biblical myth with world history (from medieval times to the modern era). The procession includes a series of sagalas (muses). These sagalas are a constantly changing coterie of personages, which makes it possible to adapt the ritual to changing historical and cultural contexts. Because of this characteristic, the procession has become more than a religious procession of biblical figures. It has been transformed into a pageant of Philippine history. Although the main character in this ritual is always Reyna Elena, the creation of new muses or personages in each performance of the ritual is constrained only by the imagination of the people staging the procession.

In the Philippines, the important figures in the Santacruzan processions are usually portrayed by women with male escorts. Apart from the bishop of Jerusalem (who is not portrayed frequently), Constantino is the only named male figure who is usually played by a child (either male or female). In typical performances of the ritual, young women from a particular town or city district are chosen to participate. To be chosen is perceived to be a singular honor for both the woman and her family. Like some kind of postcolonial potluck, the procession is constructed as a showcase of family pride and honor, not simply for the women’s family but also for the families who sponsor a feast and, in some cases, underwrite the expenses of putting up the Santacruzan. Sponsoring a Santacruzan means that a family or household must spend a lot of money on food and decoration, and sometimes on the gowns of the Santacruzan queens. Failure to do so would bring shame to the families concerned. In addition to individual families’ honor, at stake are the town or district’s collective pride and solidarity. Comparisons between the scale of different towns’ Santacruzans become part of the rivalries and lore between neighboring districts.

Many Filipinos regard the Santacruzan as the quintessential Filipino ritual despite its foreign roots. Travel posters, school textbooks, and tourism advertisements usually include an image of this ritual. Nowhere else is the Filipino’s appreciation for spectacles such as
procession usually carry candles, sing religious hymns, and/or pray. However, in this gay rendition, the audience hollered and screamed phrases of encouragement that came right out of voguing, or house culture, phrases like “work it girl.” In the typical Santacruzan, the popularity of specific queens was seen in terms of the number of people who lighted her way through the procession and formed part of her entourage; in this case, audience applause and comments became the barometer of popularity. In a double departure from the traditional procession in which Emperor Constantine is usually portrayed by a male or female child, this version featured a man clad in Speedos. In the usual procession, Constantino would move along the route to act as Reyna Elena’s escort. In the Manhattan performance, he remained on stage during the whole time to escort each queen from the side of the stage to the runway. He resembled the macho or exotic dancers/strippers who performed in many gay bars in the Philippines and New York.

The other traditional muses were also reinterpreted in complex and hilarious ways. Reyna Banderada, or the Queen of the Flag, who usually carried the Philippine flag, incorporated the symbols of the flag in a slinky outfit. In this deconstruction of the Philippine flag, the three stars were strategically placed, one over each nipple and a third over the crotch. A mask of the sun was carried by this new version of the motherland, who eschewed the prescribed demure walk for a prancing display of seductive and slutty poses. Reyna de la Libertad, or the Queen of Liberty, was dressed as a dominatrix complete with a whip. Her costume was composed of straps and pieces of black leather that strategically left parts of her body—notably the derriere—teasingly exposed. During the performance, Reyna de la Libertad pranced menacingly at the audience and before stepping down from the stage he simulated whipping the behind of Constantino. Rosa Mística, or Mystical Rose, a theological emblem for the Virgin Mary and not an actual person, was wearing a multi-colored, sequined cocktail dress. Many people in the audience started snickering when someone said “Fourteenth Street Special,” meaning that the dress was bought in a bargain store. Both Rosa Mística’s interpretation and the audience response suggested the mutual recognition not only of the theatrical or comedic form of drag but also of the way the drag persona fulfilled the demands of “femme realness.”

A new kind of queen was created for this presentation in the person
gown and hair curlers, Reyna Chismosa screamed on a cordless phone, then walked up and down the stage teasing people from the audience while they egged him on. He also worked the audience to a teetering frenzy by screaming bitchy comments like “Your mother said that you should go home” to individuals he singled out in the crowd.

The three Virtues were the only figures portrayed by lesbians. Two wore denim shorts, combat boots, and barong tagalog (the traditional Filipino male formal attire) while the third wore a cocktail dress. The “femme” or feminine lesbian was the only Virtue to walk the runway. Like Constantino, the other two remained on the side and acted as escorts.

Reyna Sentenciada, or the Queen of Justice, usually portrayed carrying scales of justice or blindfolded with her hands tied in front of her, was again dressed in leather sadomasochistic dominatrix garb and dark sunglasses. His hands were tied by a black leather strap as he took to the runway, and he untied himself at the center of the stage. Before he left the stage, Reyna Sentenciada lifted his wig to reveal his bald head.

Another muse was the Infanta Judith, or Judith of Bethulia, who saved her people from the domination of the Assyrians under the leadership of a man named Holofernes. In the biblical account, Judith seduced Holofernes and beheaded him. In this performance, which was held during the 1992 presidential election campaigns, Judith came out as a Greek goddess dressed in flowing robes; instead of the head of Holofernes, the gay Judith revealed the head of George Bush.

However, the finale of the show returned to tradition as Reyna Elena and Emperatriz (the empress) came out dressed in traditional gowns and tiaras. Reyna Elena carried flowers and an antique cross as all Reyna Elenas have done in the past. There was no attempt at camp; rather, there was an insistence on, to use a word from voguing, or house culture, “femme reality” in deference to tradition. Or more appropriately, there was a return to the kind of mimicry or imitation that was valorized in the Philippines.

Walking through the Runway of Difference

The Santacruzan as a ritual provides a heuristic dimension that furthers the understanding of its performers. Clifford Geertz (1986: 373), paraphrasing Victor Turner, writes:

performances, whatever—we traffic: a carnival, a mural, a curing rite, a revitalization movement, a clay figurine, an account of a stay in the woods. Whatever sense we have of how things stand with someone else’s [or some other group’s] inner life, we gain it through their expressions, not through some magical intrusion into their consciousness. It’s all a matter of scratching surfaces.

Rituals are important social practices because they present a metacommentary on the world (Bruner 1986: 16). For an immigrant or exile group, “rituals provide the terrain in which the consciousness of communal boundaries is heightened, thereby confirming and strengthening individual location and positionality as well as social identity” (Naficy 1997: 295).

In a world where identity is not rooted or territorialized within a specific place, rituals become the signs at the crossroads. Rituals, which are public arenas of liminality, provide the most appropriate points of departure in trying to apprehend the lives of a group of diasporic gay men of color since as James Clifford has noted, “Diasporic histories may not be necessary conditions for developing performative visions of gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, but their liminal spaces, displaced encounters and tactical affiliations provide apt settings for such visions” (1994: 331). The queer performance of the Santacruzan creates a vital liminal site in which the conjunctions of identities, cultures, histories, and geographies are played out and performed.

The combination of secular, profane, and religious imagery as well as the combination of Filipino and American gay/mainstream icons provided an arena where symbols from the two countries were contested, dismantled, and reassembled in a dazzling series of cross-contestatory statements. I consider this ritual as a perverse, dissident, or transgressive performance of identities. Not only did the elements of the ritual deviate from the dominant regimes of meaning, they did so through inversion, subversion, and reversal of dominant symbols (Dollimore 1991). This particular perverse performance was structured according to the following multiple hierarchical, or power, arrangements, which are mutually reinforcing:

God — Men
Sacred — Profane

“To Play with the World” 133
White — Nonwhite
Colonizer — Colonized
Adopted Land — Homeland

These hierarchies reflect both the colonial and postcolonial experiences of Filipinos with Spain and the United States. The images and practices in the ritual were in part due to what a popular Filipino cliché explains as “more than three hundred years in the convent [with Spain] and thirty years of Hollywood [with the United States].”

The partial secularization of the ritual allowed a wider range of social commentary. First, the head of George Bush enabled the group to make a political statement during the 1992 presidential election. It localized this transnational performance by an allusion to this important American political event. Furthermore, it pointed to the putative citizenship status of the performers by providing a space for a momentary critique of the then ruling regime. These men were able to make some provisional statements regarding their need to address questions about sexual freedom. As we have seen in performers’ translation and reinterpretation of Liberty, these statements involved articulations of Filipino gay men’s emancipation from the inabilities of Philippine and U.S. governments and established religion to deal with issues of homo-sexuality. Moreover, this ritual’s concession to American colonial rule became a complex icon of American imperial expansion, Filipinos’ postcolonial reconfiguration, and gay immigrants’ idealization of homophilic spaces of New York. Reyna Libertad did not symbolize the promise of economic prosperity for immigrants. Rather, her persona enacted the breaking of the chains of sexual puritanism and the conquest of new frontiers.

The characters of Reyna Banderada and Reyna Chismosa represented a kind of oscillation between idioms of vulgar sexuality and comedic domesticity. The spectacular Reyna Banderada, flimsily garbed in the diaphanous colors of the Philippine flag, reconceptualizes Inang Bayan, or the motherland, by wresting it away from its virginal and maternal tropes. Together with the half-naked figure of Constantino, Reyna Banderada invoked, defied, and hyper-performed the stringent national rules regarding the representation and handling of the Philippine flag. These rules, learned by all Filipino schoolchildren and by men in compulsory military training, were not really about the

Therefore, Reyna Banderada is an embodiment of the transgression of “love of country.”

Reyna Chismosa is an anomalous addition to the usual coterie of mythical and biblical characters. The persona combined the stereotypic dichotomy of housewife and whore prevalent in many cross-dressing events. However, the character was not just any housewife, but rather a Western or Westernized one who had the economic means to stay at home and gossip on the phone. Such a domestic persona was in sharp contrast to the glamorous figures of the other queens. He subverted the “proper” notion of the Santacruzan sagala, or muse, and provided an ironic figure that questioned the regal-religious status of the whole ritual. Signifying the liminal space of the domestic/private sphere, Reyna Chismosa confronted the forbidding image of the public arena (church and state) and parodied the notion of a sagala, or muse, which were usually figures from historic-mythical realms. The phone, in part, symbolizes one of the main connections of diasporic Filipinos to their homeland. More importantly, Reyna Chismosa provides an apt analogue to both church and government as instruments of surveillance. But gossip is perhaps one of the integral strategies of resistance of oppressed people against hegemonic structures and agents. The process of gossip, which according to my informants is a regular activity of Filipinos both gay and straight, provides one possible way of communication among equals in defiance of a superordinate arrangement.

The juxtaposition of religious elements with secularized, profane, and sexualized images not only allowed a wider range of social commentary (e.g., George Bush’s head) but also enabled the men to construct shifting notions of here and there. The sexualized images relocated the ritual from a religious domain to a gay terrain, thereby mimicking the movements and tensions between the nation of birth and the nation of settlement. Such shifts unravel the instability of the notion of “home.”

Such a tropic play emphasized the shifting nature of locations and spaces. Implicit in the structure of this ritual performance were the mercurial notions of here and there. The sexualized images relocate the rituals from the religious domain to a gay terrain. The remapping achieved in this ritual establishes the tension between the nation of birth and the nation of settlement, thereby unraveling the exigencies of
secularization process that supposedly happens to Filipinos in the diaspora, I suggest otherwise. My discussion in the previous chapter and the finale in the performance with Reyna Elena in the proper religious and cultural attire manage to “bring it all home” and create an underlying religious aesthetic that permeates not only the spectacular sites but also the quotidian spaces of Filipino gay men in the diaspora.

Invisible Baggage, Drag Persona, and Nostalgia

Apart from marking difference, nostalgia was an important element in the Santacruzan pageant. The pageant was a way of “resurrecting time and place” (Stewart 1992: 252) for the largely immigrant group of Filipinos present that evening, as well as a way of reviving memory and feelings of reterritorialization. As one informant said, “It made me feel like I was in Manila again.” Cross-dressing, therefore, was a vehicle for nostalgia. It accomplished this by shattering “the surface of an atemporal order” (ibid.). While this production may have had its distinctive elements, it nevertheless enabled them to think of other Santacruzan productions in the cities and towns of their childhoods. To some extent, the Santacruzan is part of the invisible baggage that they brought with them from their childhoods and that propelled them to travel back through their memories of “being there.” Even those who were born and raised in California talked about how the Santacruzan was a major event in their childhoods, and one of the few times they felt they were “Filipinos.”

The shock of the familiar, particularly in the finale with Reyna Elena, had a tremendous impact on many of the Filipino gay men present. Nostalgia revivified the image and memory of the Filipino homeland while at the same time acknowledging their settlement in a new home here in the United States. Paradoxically, it not only created an invigorating energy in which to imagine a “parallel comradiship” among these men, but also established a defiant marker of difference from the rest of America. As one informant noted, “Iba talaga tayong mga Pilipinos nga. [We Filipino bakla are really different.] When we get together we are able to express something that goes beyond the usual petty quarrels, gossips, and jealousies.”

The links between nostalgia and cross-dressing were further exemplified by a Filipino cross-dresser whose drag names included Miss and Sarsi Emmanuel, the name of a B-movie starlet in Manila during the 1980s. I met him at the New Manila, a restaurant owned and operated by Filipinos in Queens, the site of a big Filipino enclave. On this night (already discussed a bit in chapter 3) the usual karaoke segment was the first in a series of performances that highlighted sentimental folksy tunes such as Simon and Garfunkel’s “Homebound” and the ballads of Barbra Streisand. Afterward, while tables filled with regular customers, families with children eating Filipino food, a special event took place, a talent and beauty contest involving cross-dressing Filipino gay men. I was able to interview Sarsi, who organized the contest, and the two contestants, who discussed their chosen drag names and personas. Sarsi commented on the evening’s events:


[Aren’t we Filipinos unique? We are so good at imitating. Did you see that man sing Frank Sinatra? . . . I guess despite the lack of blue eyes, he was really great, don’t you think? He was singing that song that reminded me of the other popular English songs played on Manila radio stations . . . what was it? . . . I was getting homesick. Well, I think we bakla are even better. Take a look at me and my name . . . O ‘di va? (Isn’t it?) Don’t you feel nostalgic about Tagalog films? I don’t remind Filipinos here about the Philippines — I embody those memories — I look like her (like Sarsi), don’t I?]

Memories of the homeland and the issue of postcolonial cultural and psychic displacement persist in many Filipino gay immigrant lives. Sarsi’s image of his drag persona as memory invoking was similar to the power of the Santacruzan. It belied not only nostalgia but the very construction of the Santacruzan as multiply transplanted from Spain,
mind the mimicry that was seen as the natural fate of Philippine and other postcolonial cultures and peoples. Sarsi’s ironic and defiant statement, however, recognizes mimicry’s potential for engaging with inherently unequal relationships, such as the relationship between hegemonic Hollywood icons and non-Western performers (Cannell 1999).

Sarsi’s symptomatic, succinct, and brilliant statement of embodying memory or provoking homesickness is not an altogether isolated case. Other drag names and personas of Filipino gay men that I have encountered in different situations were again those of starlets or big Tagalog movie stars, as well as the names of specific places in the Philippines: Maria Christina Falls, Anna de Manila, Cory Antipolo, Lily Ermita, and the like. With the exception of Manila, only the well-traveled or geographically well-informed non-Filipino would be able to decipher these names.

For these Filipino gay men names are like coded messages, which on the one hand locate them temporally and spatially, while on the other hand provide them with mnemonic fuses. Through the process of imitating familiar gestures—acting demure or bitchy, holding the butterfly sleeve of the terno (the female native costume)—or familiar physical characteristics (e.g., a mole or long hair in a bouffant), these men are able to evoke memories of people and events from another time and space.

Far from being just a remnant or a vestige of homosexual traditions from the homeland, cross-dressing has become a space for articulating and marking difference and a particular kind of modernity. For many of my informants, cross-dressing was an attempt to mimic real women. In contrast, they saw another kind of cross-dressing popular among Caucasians that revolved around parody. According to my informants, Caucasians used drag as a way to reveal the very constructiveness of the mimicry, that is, to parody the real. The pageant oscillated between this theatrical or comedic form of drag to a kind of “femme realness” cross-dressing. Filipino informants have made a point about how their cross-dressing style differed from that of Caucasian Americans.

The comedic figure of Reyna Sentenciada pulling off his wig to reveal a bald head was set against the demure, femme real Reyna Elena. One Filipino gay man who was a member of the audience said that Reyna Sentenciada’s shocking act of pulling off the wig was not seen favorably by other Filipino gay men. While it was funny, he be-

stroyed the entire purpose of cross-dressing. As he said, “The illusion died.” The tension between these forms of drag was evident in the New York City Santacruzan. Shifts occurred between a kind of drag that most Filipino cross-dressers described as their own and in opposition to the parodic, scandalous, and comedic form of cross-dressing that they saw as a white or Western practice.

To understand this idea of cross-dressing properly, it is necessary to locate the practice within a larger Filipino cultural context. The performative dynamics of Filipino cross-dressing practices have connections with the kinds of transformations and mimicry valued in healing, Catholic religious processions, and beauty pageants. As I have mentioned earlier in this book, mimicry plays a major part in Filipino Catholic culture. This is evident not only in the valued practice of imitating the lives of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and the saints, but also in the performance of the Santacruzan and other religious processions and pageants. One unique form of supreme imitation and transformation is in the Penitensiya. During Holy Week, adult males in different parts of the Philippines reenact the sufferings of Jesus Christ from the flogging and scourging to the crucifixion. Such reenactment involves “real” whips and in some cases actual nailing to the cross. This kind of imitation of Christ’s suffering is perceived to be a kind of penance for the forgiveness of sins, and as such is a way of negotiating with the Supreme Other.

Such transformations are part of postcolonial culture and are symptomatic of the “damage” (to use a word from minority discourse) wrought by political, economic, and cultural imperialism (Lloyd 1996). Cannell (1991, 1999) suggested that imitation in lowland Filipino Catholic culture is a way of negotiating and engaging with various real and imagined others. In many of the beauty pageants (both gay and straight) and singing contests in the Bicol town where she conducted ethnographic fieldwork, the appreciation and valorization of any performance are not merely about taking on the dress of another gender or singing a popular English song, but putting on the trappings of another place, an Other culture—the America of Filipinos dreams. For the Filipino bakla who has indeed crossed the borders, living in New York City—the iconic place for America—mimicry is transformed from a longing for an America whose physical space he now occupies into a struggle for a symbolic place in the U.S. social imaginary.
bivalence on which it is founded. Cross-dressing for these Filipinos, as exemplified by the Manhattan Santacruzan, articulated an aesthetics that engaged other forms of “distance” with the white hegemonic world and realigned their relationships to other groups such as the home country and Latino and black gay men. Unlike “femme realness,” which does not take into consideration the subjectivity and historicity of the performer, Filipino gay performers, while adhering to ideal “realness,” also possess the baggage of history and culture. That is, they hail from the only former U.S. colony and the only predominantly Catholic country in Asia.

Such “baggage” as exemplified in the Santacruzan performance produces the excess that transforms mimicry from mere simulacrum to a strategy that questions colonial and postcolonial power. The idiom of “playing with the world,” usually uttered by Filipino cross-dressers, wrests the feminine ideal as object of scrutiny and spectacle into a vital medium in negotiating the interplay of difference, borders, and hierarchies. Though not an annual event, the 1992 Santacruzan should not be seen as an idiosyncratic act, nor merely as an amusing entertainment fortuitously stumbled upon by an eager ethnographer. Rather, the ritual performance was a complex bundle of meanings, a “moment” of critical conjunctions that suggested the critical dimensions of the Filipino gay diasporic experience.

Wearing Your Body: The Spectacle of Orientalism

This pageant, this reprocessed procession, provided the space in which differences were confronted, refigured, and juxtaposed. Many of the Filipino gay men present were able to recognize the division or borders between these two kinds of cross-dressing practices. It raised the very notion of racialized spaces in the gay community in New York City, as I have described in chapter 2. This ritual provided Filipino gay men symbolic access to spaces where they were not visible or even allowed to enter. This was made more explicit by the use of icons from different American gay traditions: the muscular Constantino as a paean to white mainstream gay culture’s hypermasculine images; the paraphernalia of the gay leather set; the use of linguistic devices and cross-dressing practices from black and Latino vougiers; and the use of shocking acts such as pulling off the wig from American camp modes.

placement, dislocation, and discrimination felt by some Filipino gay informants. As I have described in the previous chapters, these informants are silenced by oppressive regimes and practices expressed in Orientalist terms even within the gay community. Informants have reported being seen as passive, exotic, and/or sexless creatures by other gay men. Many informants told me that they felt awkward or uncomfortable in gay sites and occasions that celebrate muscular bodies or traditions such as the leather culture. In many gay bars in New York City, race and ethnicity are clearly demarcated. As one informant said, “You just can’t go anywhere. You have to know whether you will be the odd man out in bars. You have to know your place.”

In the one-man show Cinema Verite, the Filipino gay performance artist Ralph Peña (n.d.: 16–17) played the lead character, Gerry. As he traipsed along the stage he mouthed these words: “Now, do I look Filipino to you? Do I? I mean, most times, I’m taken for any nationality but ‘Filipine,’ as some of them say. I myself am not sure if I am. I used to be. Oh I admit, I tried to hide my roots — literally. I dyed my hair red. I was going for pale blond, but with blue contact lenses I looked like a Siamese cat.” These same words evoke memories of similar experiences among Filipino gay men. “How does one look?” The question highlights the corporeal aspect of race discourse. Many informants offered their own experiences regarding the way they “wore” their bodies. In other words, far from recognizing the immutability of their physical characteristics, Filipino gay men knew that an invasive surgical procedure is the not the only means by which to alter, revise, and configure their bodies. As one informant said, “You can live with what you’ve got. You just need to know how to project it to your admiring viewers.”

Filipino gay men’s corporeal strategies are shaped by many tensions, including prevailing Orientalist notions. Some instances of racialized and racist encounters such as those below may be perceived as merely irritating and vexing. Many informants would say either you learn to forget them, deal with them, or go nuts. However, there were many instances when some informants thought that particular encounters went beyond the benign and the irritating.

One informant who immigrated to the United States five years ago told me about the disquieting remarks made by some of his coworkers (a mixture of Caucasians, Latinos, and African Americans), all of
accent and his unfamiliarity with particular idioms and icons. When several of them were talking about their childhood idols, one of them mentioned the name Bette Davis. He asked who that was, and they all looked at him. One African American said, “And what part of the jungle did you come from, East Mars? Darling, are you gay or are you E. T. Junior?”

Another informant told me how no one would talk to him in gay bars in upstate New York. He related how the gay cliques that formed in Albany never opened up to accept him, much less include him in any informal conversation. Rene, another informant who grew up in New York, talked about the time when a gang of young guys in Minnesota, where he lived for ten years before migrating to New York, just picked him on. I asked him whether he thought it was because he was gay or because he was Asian. He answered, “What’s the difference?”

All of my informants were aware of the Oriental stereotype, but some did not think it a major problem. They felt that the Oriental stereotype fit their physical image, but they were insistent on not being passive or subordinate in their relationships and encounters with Caucasians. The kind of “native” body valorized by many Caucasian gay men who desire Asian men is characterized by having a short stature, dark complexion (light/yellow skin for those who have East Asian/Japanese/Chinese features), and a slim build. One informant called these highly desired features “the rice queen’s delight.” Interestingly, this valorization contrasts sharply with prevailing notions of skin color hierarchy in the Philippines. In the Philippines, the mestizo, or the white hybrid, is the valorized body. For many informants, this is not the case, at least in the interracial gay scene in New York City. Mario, a self-professed mestizo, or tisoy, bemoaned his predicament in a racially as well as class-laden monologue:


|Oh mother, I am not marketable in the rice bars. They (Caucasians) don’t prefer my mestizaness. They like those who look native.

not grow)—you know the short ones. Excuse me, this one bakla (the previous night in a rice bar) who looked like our houseboy, he looked like he sold newspapers in Manila, he hooked a blond guy. Their (American gay men) standards are so crazy here.

In the performance piece Cinema Verite, corporeal images were used by Gerry, the protagonist, to illustrate how race and desire construct the body within the space of the rice bar. “I go to this Asian bar in the Village, appropriately called: the paddy. Not to drink really. I’m not much for alcohol, you know, the svelte, starving, Third World look. Sometimes I meet some very interesting men here. I remember this guy coming up to me and asking me where I was from. ‘The Philippines,’ I said. He went on to ask, why is it that Asians all look alike?’” (Peña n.d.: 16).

To designate a bar as a rice bar, as with dinge bars for black gay men or cha-cha bars for Latinos, reifies and fetishizes the corporeality of Asian men. The question, “Why is it that Asians look alike?” logically follows the structures of racist sentiments and attitudes that have given rise to such an institution. This is made more dramatic by the fact that Gerry is a gay man who immigrated to America only to find these effacing institutions, persons, and practices. Indeed, Gerry’s question, “Do I look Filipino?” is a product of the erosion that has plagued him since he started imagining and desiring America.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Asian gay men were becoming politicized, particularly around racial politics in the gay community. There were strong separatist sentiments then around interracial gay relationships and cross-dressing. One of the popular beliefs at this time was the ideal of dating other Asian men only. This of course has been dealt with in the previous chapter, but apart from the metaphor of incest, there were a lot of anxieties among Filipino men who were active in Asian queer organizations. Another belief was not to cross-dress so as not to validate Orientalist ideas about Asian gay men. However, Filipino gay men have formed varied strategies in addressing and confronting Orientalist sentiments, ideas, and images in various ways in daily life. For example, Miss Java (the alias of a Filipino drag queen) may seem at first glance to be the quintessential Oriental “male.” Miss Java (he has a long list of “exotic” names) came to the United States from the Philippines ten years ago. He is now thirty-five.
always used the feminine form when he talked about himself. “Well, my husband always wanted a very good geisha... well, he thought he got one... was he surprised!”

Miss Java and her lover played up the dichotomy mentioned in the various discursive forms (i.e., they went out as male and female even to straight public places; Miss Java was the wife and was called Nancy in their house; their conversations always pointed to the imagined gender difference between the two of them). Miss Java, however, provided a counterpoint to the beliefs about stereotypical Oriental queens. While he revelled in the physical difference between him and his tall (6’4”) lover, he emphasized that the roles and the physical disparity hid the total reversal of roles possible in particular instances. He said that while he played the bottom or passive partner in the sexual act, he was not the passive or demure partner in everyday life. In fact, he said, when he and his lover got into fights, his big lover was usually the one in tears afterward. He said that even though he cross-dressed, acted in an effeminate manner, and even seemed to be the “gorgeous housewife,” he could still “kick ass.” Miss Java reveals that the iconic or the visual image that he presents does not always directly index the complexity of the roles he and his partner take on in everyday life. He emphasizes the fact that this external hell is of his own choosing and completely volitional. Miss Java perceived his cross-dressing as a way of manipulating the world, of making himself desirable and making the world desire him. He used the words “to play with the world” (paglaran ang mundo), to describe his drag persona, which in various contexts is meant to confuse, distract, and fool the public. The “deal” for Miss Java meant the struggle of everyday life. It was in this space where the oftentimes unnoticed and unwriting acts of resistance occurred.

Other informants who were not cross-dressers like Miss Java utilized other strategies such as bodybuilding. Unlike the stereotype, many of my informants participated in what is seen to be the typical gay pastime, going to the gym. Art, a gay Filipino in his thirties, emphasized the fact that he was “different from other Filipinos and other Asians” because he “looks” different. His body is bigger than that of other Asians. He said, “I go to the gym because I try not to look like the other Asian queens.” Art thought that most Asian and American gay men were very effeminate or were perceived as such. He said his activities such as joining sports organizations in the gay community were a form of “Playing with the World.” Moreover, he felt very strongly against cross-dressing, which he thought to be too demeaning and low class. In his relationships with other men, Art maintained that there were no gender-marked roles. He said that he had no “illusions” about being a woman trapped inside a man’s body. He felt that his lifestyle was just like that of any straight guy except for the sexual part. Despite Art’s view about the bakla, he still considered it an important image that continually influenced his view of himself.

Most Filipino gay men are neither cross-dressers nor body builders. However, all of them know about and acknowledge such Orientalized images and some even use them in maintaining some fantasy. Ricardo, a Filipino informant, observed, “Sometimes, a white guy comes over and he thinks I am fresh off the boat and in need of all the assistance he can provide. He will then buy me drinks, tell me how beautiful I am, and ask me out. Well, do I do it? Of course. I play the little innocent. So maybe I get dinner and some other perks—it is not so bad.”

Race and racial difference, which are not popular discourses in the Philippines, acquire important dimensions for many of my informants. While only a few of them reported direct racial discrimination, they recognized that not all gay spaces were open to them. Some informants have told me of how they were ostracized by several gay establishments that catered to particular racial and class groupings. One informant said, “I may be a doctor and wear expensive clothes, but when I go to [a predominantly white upper-class bar in the Upper East Side of Manhattan], I feel left out. Like I do not belong.” Some have reported being hounded out of predominantly white or black gay bars. Others have complained about how the gay media does not consistently have many images of “people who look like them.” The crucial markers of difference among bakla in the Philippines do not readily cross the borders to the United States.

Amid the realization of racial tensions and differences, there have been attempts by Filipino gay men to create ties and establish affinities with other groups of gay men. While racial stereotypes about the Chinese and Japanese and some aversion to being called “Asian” still exist among a few Filipino gay men, the situation in the gay community that lumps them into “Orientals” and ghettoizes them into rice bars has encouraged the creation of Asian gay men only groups. Hector, another informant, said:

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Islanders], but we're always placed in situations where we are together, and in fact whether we like it or not are oppressed together. Remember we are the gooks, chinks, and brown-skinned fags—even other fags can't seem to stand us. So, I think that if we are to survive in the gay world, we need to connect with other Asians. I used to think, what for? Now, I realize there are a lot of things we can do if we band together.

In many of these political activities and despite the initial political imbroglio about its political incorrectness, cross-dressing has provided a kind of anchor for the creation of affinities with other Asian men, Latinos, and African Americans. One informant suggested that cross-dressing among minorities or people of color contrasts sharply with white notions of drag. Voguing or culture houses, as discussed in chapter 2, which are composed predominantly of Latino and African American gays and lesbians and are notorious for excluding or being particularly unfriendly toward Caucasians, have in many cases, been welcoming of Asians, specifically Filipinos. I witnessed a ball, or competition, where a Caucasian was dissed and booed while he was on the runway, while in the same category, a Filipino gay man who was a member of a house was wildly applauded. This Filipino vogue, or house member, rationalized the disparate reactions in this way:

We know all too well that there are very few places where people like us can really feel at home. I know that some of my Filipino friends think that associating with Latinos and African Americans is kind of tacky, but tell me where can you find better cross-dressers than these guys? And where else can our skills as bakla be better appreciated than in those fabulous balls? White men are not really skilled. They are too big and too "unreal."

Orientalized stereotypes have the semblance of fixity. They exist in "eternal time" and are composed of essential elements that are seemingly unchanging (Bhabha 1992: 316). However, the image of the Orientalized male is not a monolithic and stable construction (Kondo 1990). Most importantly, Lisa Lowe (1991: x), in her theoretical exposition of Orientalism in French and British literature, notes that while Orientalism presents its objects as fixed, the contradictions and disjunctures within Orientalist discursive situations actually reveal the

Asian American queers are not always and already Orientalized. Filipino gay men's rituals, images, and everyday practices of cross-dressing, such as the Santacruzan, reveal the instability of Orientalist practices and demonstrate how these racist practices are less totalizing than what most activists' polemics assert. The situations revealed by many of the informants exemplify such moments of instability that allow for these Filipinos' particular dramas of engaging and contesting these practices in everyday life.

A Performer's Point of View: R. E. and Immigrant Imaginings

To understand further the dynamics of the Santacruzan event, it is beneficial to understand the ritual from the point of view of the performers. The following is a fragment of an interview with one of the ritual's performers. This fragment aims to provide biographical and personal anchors to the abstract analysis of the ritual that follows this section.

R. E. was twenty-three years old when I interviewed him in 1991. He was a student in an art school in Manhattan. The youngest in a large family of ten siblings, he came to the United States when he was eighteen. He was very excited to participate in the Santacruzan, particularly as he had been designated as the Reyna Elena, the central figure in the ritual. To be chosen as the Reyna Elena was an honor for anyone (man or woman). He said that as a child he used to watch annual Santacruzan pageants in his hometown in the southern Philippines, and that one of his dreams, apart from eventually living in America, was to be Reyna Elena. He said, "Ever since I was a small kid, I used to watch those spectacular parades and all I always dreamed was that one day I would be wearing a spectacular gown. Not just any ordinary sagala, for I wanted to be the center of attention—be the most stunning Reyna Elena of all time. When I came to the United States, I thought I would never be able to fulfill that dream. I thought that I would need to visit the Philippines to realize this dream."

R. E. had a dressmaker in the Philippines make a maria clara, a traditional Filipino costume, and borrowed his family's antique cross for the Santacruzan procession in Manhattan. These were then flown to New York a month before the event. After the Santacruzan at the Gay and Lesbian Community Center, I asked him whether he thought
things in the Philippines. And to top it all, I have been called a chink in, of all places, a dance club in Manhattan. But anyway, I guess it is the price one has to pay to live here.

R. E.’s narrative may seem to be a distinct one, yet his views and dreams parallel other Filipino gay men’s experiences. The tensions between memories of the Philippines and the realities of living in the United States underscore R. E.’s narrative and, to a large extent, the narratives of other Filipino gay men living in the diaspora. The disjunction between notions of home and nation, particularly between the land of birth and the land of settlement, forms part of the diasporic rhetoric. The practice of drag, or cross-dressing, specifically in the ritual of Santacruzan, is a crucial point for reviewing and critically analyzing both R. E.’s story and many Filipino diasporic gay men’s lives.

Rosemary George has suggested that it is the “search for a location where one can feel at home, in spite of the obvious foreignness of the space, that propels the discourses engendered by the experience of immigration” (George 1992: 79). R. E.’s words, his life trajectories, and his dreams present a rich source of insights on specific issues of immigration, specifically on the notion of home. The seemingly ironic juxtaposition of dreams and home in R. E.’s words marks the contingency of these concepts’ provenance and existence. Using the invisible baggage or gunnysack of dreams and cultural practices, R. E. and other immigrants refigure their lives and selves within existing constraints.

R. E. points out that it is possible for a dream first hatched amid the restrictions of a Philippine town and the (dis)comforts of family life to be realized in a foreign space. The realization of R. E.’s dream in America, the land of dreams for many Filipinos, unwittingly exposes the complexity of “the process of making oneself at home” (ibid.). This process continues in several successive generations as part of the struggle to create some coherence among spaces, dreams, and bodies. Yet such a coherence will never be complete. R. E.’s flight from the potential shame and loss of family honor through cross-dressing back in the Philippines to freedom in America is tempered by the secularization of the ritual in New York City’s gay mecca and the difficulties of living in a foreign land. As R. E. pointed out, one must “make do.” I construe
engage with the contradictions of his transnational existence. Indeed, despite the physical absence of his townpeople and other familiar scenes of his childhood, R. E. gracefully tramped down the runway in his gown in a rundown former school building in Manhattan and felt at home.

The Pageant of the Nation and the Performance of Diaspora

The significance of this particular performance speaks to the larger issues of immigration and queer diaspora as well as the cultural struggle of the formerly colonized. In addition, it unwittingly disrupts various national narratives. The performance also demonstrates how immigrants negotiate between the hegemonic imperative of assimilation and the subaltern option of total defiance.

In this ritual, American and Filipino social idioms, icons, and symbols fuse in order to provide a structure to an implicit narrative of a gay diasporic community. Performers in the Santacruzan, and R. E. specifically, are actively fabricating selves from strands of competing national traditions. In a sense, this “syncretic dynamic” appropriates elements from hegemonic cultural forms and in the process “creolizes” them by “disarticulating given signs and re-articulating their symbolic meaning” (Mercer 1988: 57). By fusing and infusing ritual religious components with the mundane and the taboo, Filipino gay men are in a sense “translating” their dreams, visions, and practices in creating and representing their lives in their land of settlement. Stuart Hall (1990: 235) notes that experiences in the diaspora are neither essential nor pure but heterogeneous and diverse. He argues further that identity within the diasporic context is marked by its transformative nature and emphasis on difference.

Nowhere are Stuart Hall’s ideas more profoundly evident than in the words of R. E., who with a pragmatic tone narrated how his own dreams were transported and configured according to the exigencies of immigration. In many ways the elements involved in the fruition of his dreams have changed them. The transportation technology that allowed his costume to be flown from the Philippines and the existing racial and sexual politics in the gay community are but a few of the transformative elements that reconfigured his dream. Furthermore, the simultaneous presence/absence of people, places, and events in his the enactment of the ritual.

Individual identities are not the only ones implicated in this process. The rescripted Santacruzan can be seen as “a style of imagining” a community. In other words, the performance can be seen as an attempt by Filipino gay men to negotiate and represent their collectivity to themselves and to (sometimes more powerful) others. Such a ritual showcases the complex alliances as well as the fluid and multiple fields of social relations and identities of this group of gay immigrants. In particular, the ritual coalesces the agency of this group of men as they reinvent, resist, and refigure hierarchies and hegemonic ideas and practices in various locations (Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1992: 11).

Immigration, George argues, “unwrites the nation and national projects because it flagrantly displays a rejection of one national space for another more desirable location, albeit with some luggage carried over” (George 1992: 83). In this ritual, transplanted individuals reinvented meanings that interrogate the divergences and continuity of experiences and images between the nation of origin and the nation of settlement. As such, it is important to note that in the performance, the very idea of the nation is brought into question. Indeed, as the ritual and its performers, like Reyna Banderada, have unwittingly asked: Which nation? Whose nation?

This ritual space enabled Filipino gay men to “return the gaze,” that is, to reinvent themselves according to their own terms. Cross-dressing is a cultural practice that is both tolerated and ridiculed in the Philippines and the United States (Levine 1990). This ambivalence is manifested in New York City’s mainstream gay community’s belated avowal of cross-dressing gay men not as anachronistic relics of the past, but as vibrant and significant members of that community. Deteriorated moments and sites such as the Santacruzan (an ancient rite handed by Spain to the colonies and now re-presented in metropolitan America) allow us to derive insights into how Filipino gay men and other diasporic deviants author themselves, make sense of their immigrant experiences, and indeed, “play with the world.”

To Play with the World