

# Transgressions and Transformations: Queer(ed) Spaces in Metro Manila as Rendered in Philippine Gay Poetry *from English and in Filipino*

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**A**ccording to Aaron Betsky in his seminal book, *Queer Space: Architecture and Same Sex Desire*, two qualities that characterize queer space is its transgressive and transformative nature. This essay examines the subversive and protean aspects of queer spaces in Metro Manila as they are rendered in Philippine poetry *from English and in Filipino*. The queer spaces that are explored in this paper include places traditionally identified as homosexual havens/heavens, like the gay bar, the bathhouse and the backroom, as well as heteronormative places that have been queered by the presence of gay men, like the cinema and the fitness gym.

In theoretical and pragmatic explorations of queer identity and politics, spatiality is a major area of concern, in the sense that coming out is construed for the most part as a process that involves an expansion of one's personal space. The act of coming out, especially for male and female homosexuals belonging to conservative heteropatriarchal families, is usually depicted in gay and lesbian literature and film as the queer subject's emancipation from the stifling confines of the proverbial closet, and his/her eventual flourishing in the more welcoming and less claustrophobic enclave or ghetto (depending on one's perception) of the gay bar in its various manifestations.

The gay bar as the quintessential queer space, therefore, becomes the focal point in the formation and development of all sorts of queer identities, for it is the one place where gay, bisexual and transgendered individuals

affirm their various subjectivities as psychosexual beings. (One must never forget that Stonewall Inn, where the politicized gay liberation movement in America began, is actually a gay bar—a combination of gay tavern and recreational bar—located on 53 Christopher Street in Greenwich Village, New York, New York.) Queer citizenship with its concomitant political awareness is often acquired in the gay bar, as Filipino-American gay anthropologist Martin F. Manalansan IV correctly observes: “For many lesbians and gays, this space evokes a sense of community and solidarity.” And indeed, prior to the establishment of such LGBT advocacy groups, such as the Gay Liberation Front and Queer Nation, the gay bar served as the hub of gay culture and identity, one of the few tolerant, if not indulgent, spaces where people with same-sex orientations and gender-variant identities could openly socialize.

### **Queer Theory and Queerness**

Queer Theory as a poststructuralist and postmodern mode of inquiry begins with the notion that the hegemonic heterosexual dichotomy of male and female, and its concomitant gendered qualities of masculine/feminine, must be dismantled to free individuals from the shackles of sexual determinism. Assailing the homophobic and patriarchal foundations of heterosexuality and heterosexism, “it aims beyond lesbian and gay rights philosophies to study other so-called perverse, deviant, and alternative sexualities,” and its objects/subjects of study primarily focus on “transgressive phenomena such as drag, camp, cross-dressing, and transsexuality, all of which highlight the nonbiological, performative aspects of gender construction” (Leitch 25).

Originally a pejorative term implying that homosexuals are strange, odd, or curious, “queer” has been recuperated by the LGBT to proclaim their collective pride in their lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered identities. The advent of the word’s resignification can be traced back to the establishment of the American LGBT advocacy group Queer Nation in March 1990. British gay activist and oral historian Ian Lucas gives an account of the organization’s political agenda:

Queer Nation built activism based on sexual identity—  
not just lesbian, gay or bisexual, but queer. Queer was used

as an in-your-face catch-all designer label. Its shocking tone caught some of the violence shown against lesbian and gay communities in America, and threw it right back. It was also a call to queer nationalism—a community that confronted homophobia and had collective responsibility for dismantling the power of ‘the closet’ (14).

Due to the extensive media exposure of *Queer Nation* in the 1990s, queer has since become the umbrella term under which gay, lesbian, transgendered, bisexual, and all other alternative forms of gender categories can flourish. Morally flexible, queer even embraces “‘perverse’ sexual identities, communities, and practices” (Oswell 163), including male, female and transsexual prostitutes, sadomasochists, and body piercers.

### **Defining Queer Spaces**

Since the centrality of the gay bar in queer identity and politics is of utmost importance, an investigation of queer spaces must begin logically with a definition of this heterotopia of “sexual” deviation, a heterotopia of deviation being a site where, according to Michel Foucault, “individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed.” From the Western perspective, a gay bar by definition refers to any “drinking establishment that caters to an exclusively or predominantly lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) clientele, the term “gay” being used as an all-encompassing adjective to describe the diversity of the LGBT and queer communities. As such the term “gay bar” covers a wide variety of watering holes: boy bar, drag bar, leather bar, lesbian bar, dyke bar, etc.

### **The Philippine Gay Bar**

In the Philippine context, a gay bar has a more specific signification; it refers to a queer space whose main attraction are the macho dancers—gyrating “straight” men clad in the skimpiest of denim shorts or the sheerest of bikinis. The Philippine gay bar, therefore, is more similar to the Western notion of a go-go bar or a strip joint which feature muscle men as performers instead of sexy women, though in the US and in Europe the habitués of such places are straight women and not gay men.

But the Philippine gay bar is also characterized by the fact that these macho dancers also double as callboys—sex workers whose body parts can be fondled or whose entire bodies can be hired for a sexual encounter by a customer for the right price. It is therefore implicit that the Philippine gay bar does not only offer titillating entertainment; such a queer space is also involved in the thriving flesh trade of the Third World.

In my unpublished essay, "Homosexuality and Religious Subversion in the Poetry of J. Neil C. Garcia," I took note of the aforementioned writer's penchant for using Roman Catholic imagery and Biblical narratives to articulate the Filipino homosexual's predicaments and predilections. "A-12" from Garcia's first poetry collection, *Closet Quivers* deploys the cosmogony myth of Adam and Eve to depict the spectacle of a "big night" in a now-defunct notoriously seedy gay bar called Adams Twelve, which was located right across Isetann Department Store along Claro M. Recto Avenue.

In "this revisionist/ show," the traditional roles of the key players in the cosmic drama that unfolded in the Garden of Eden are subverted. The first woman gets transformed into a cross-dressing man ("Eve is a transvestite lipsynching floozy/ with heavy ball earrings and torch singing neck,/Adam's apple lodged telling in her throat./"); the Devil is reduced to a circus freak ("Satan is a she-devil eating fire from a spit/on which roasts the fat of lost boys./"); the mighty cherubim guarding the gate of the paradisiacal garden become gay men wearing office attire (Angels in tie are queer in their ministering/ to every clap and whistle and screech./); and Adam, aside from being replicated in the beginning of the show ("Adams, twelve, bikinied, in a row;"), turns ambiguous at closing time as "Eden's sweet landscape renews/ a pact apocryphal in a dance/of Adams, twelve, naked, in a row—/ like serpents charming the first Paradise."

Garcia alludes to another Biblical garden scene in "From Gethsemane," a poem from his second book of verses religiously titled *Our Lady of the Carnival*. In contradistinction to "A-12," "From Gethsemane" portrays the "Softsell, hardsell, in that order" that occurs on a slow night in an unnamed gay bar during the Lenten Season: "Maundy Thursday and you go to a gay bar alone." The pimp (euphemistically referred to in gay bars as "the floor manager") whose name is Fernan proffers his stable of human studs, highlighting each callboy's best attribute—be it exceptional

physical endowment or consummate sexual prowess—by pointing it out to the poem’s persona (who strangely refers to himself in the second person singular form, due perhaps to his built-in Catholic guilt). Fernan also informs the “you” persona of the rates of exchange: “Bar fine is a hundred. Upstairs room ditto./ Service is two-fifty, fixed. Ante ups with/ one’s kinks.”

Since the persona appears to be not interested with his initial offerings, Fernan “threatens” to present his top male prostitute whom he describes as “the best ever,/ mildly exciting, but beautiful like the movie star/ who plays Christ in the season’s passion films./” Garcia thus casts the call-boy as Jesus Christ, the “floor manager” as the treacherous disciple Judas Iscariot, and the seemingly guilt-ridden “you” as a homosexual Roman soldier in a queer form of mystery-cum-morality play:

Embraced by some kind of scriptedness  
you enact a role strangely familiar. In the garden.  
Love betrayed in a kiss. He seems to know  
he too belongs in this passion’s play for warmth  
on a night black as pain. As you lead him out to die,  
Fernan, unrepentant till it is too late,  
bites his earring. Caught between the lips of redemption  
it glints still more brightly  
than any thirty pieces of silver can.

### **The Gay Bathhouse**

The gay bathhouse, whose genealogy can be traced back to the Roman baths, contains amenities ranging from shower rooms and swimming pools to fitness gyms and locker rooms; sauna rooms (both wet and dry) to video and karaoke rooms; restaurants and wet bars to discotheques and performance spaces; individual cubicles and communal darkrooms to dungeon rooms (replete with whips and harnesses) and other spaces catering to all kinds of homosexual fetishes.

In Metro Manila, the most popular bathhouses are Club Bath (the oldest existing gay establishment of this sort) in F.B. Harrison corner Valhalla Streets, Pasay City, and Club Fahrenheit (the best equipped) in E. Rodriguez corner Hemady Streets, Quezon City.

But despite the plethora of visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory and tactile stimuli these homosexual sensoria have to bestow on its members, the persona in Ronald Baytan's "Bathhouse Blues" from his first book of poems *Queen Sings the Blues* does not experience sensual/sexual bliss during his nocturnal visit to such a place. For although the bathhouse promises a moveable feast for the gay man's delectation ("All around me,/ Men strut naked/ Save for white briefs,/ Neon trunks,/ Torn green towels/ About their waists./"), this offering of virile pulchritude is not for everyone, certainly not for the aging homosexual in some neglected spot:

He wears his woes  
On his wrinkled face.  
Though he smiles his best,  
Love or lust will not find him  
On this island where  
Youth and beauty conspire.

Using iconography from Oriental religion and mythology, he delineates the desirables ("the Ramas in our midst,/ Celestial creatures ignorant/ Of despair") from the undesirables ("The chest only Siddharta/ Buddha should possess,/ The body of Ganesh/ The glass ruthlessly mirrors./") among whom he belongs, and never the twain shall meet. Thus, out of hunger and desperation, they devour one another's misshapen bodies, with this realization:

Dark cannot right  
Our cursed bodies.  
In the end, the only thrill,  
And real dread, is swallowing  
Our grief in horror,  
In silence.

Another perspective of this homosexual sensorium is Carlomar Arcangel Daoana's unpublished poem "To the Bathhouse" and its obvious parodic allusion to Virginia Woolf's experimental novel *To the Lighthouse*, which depicts in the stream-of-consciousness style this site of sensual and sexual gratification as an impressionistic queer space:

rooms ordered in rows, steam,  
the flickering sign of exit,

I enter you like a spy feigning  
unfamiliarity with the sharp turns

and the small maze, the stairs  
ushering me to more cells,

plunged in red light.

But even as the persona overcomes his initial qualms by making eye contact with a potential partner (“I/ assess the gaze of the chosen one, //”), he is also very much aware that despite his salacious satisfaction (“what else/ can I feed on that equally fulfills? //”) the encounter can be nothing more than a one-night-stand in a prurient place: “the hive is alive with fevers,/ wilds oats, the animal need. //”

### **The Gay Backroom**

Based on a dictionary definition, a darkroom or dark room is a dim or pitch-black chamber, sometimes located in a nightclub, gay bathhouse or sex club, where sexual activity can take place in the lascivious shadows. When located in a bar, a dark room is also known as a backroom (because of its location) or a blackroom (because it is bereft of light).

Cine Café typifies a Filipino queer space in the heart of Quezon City that has undergone not a few transformations due to its former clientele’s lack of loyalty, and the fact that high culture is difficult to market while casual sexual encounters (often performed in the anonymous dark) sell like hotcakes, or should I say beefcakes. Originally conceptualized by bar owner Rune Layumas, an “indie” filmmaker (even before the term was actually coined), as a venue for the screening of art films, as well as an alternative setting for poetry readings and photo exhibits, Cine Café has degenerated or developed (again, depending on one’s perspective) into a popular sex joint replete with a blue room (a viewing area featuring pornographic movies) and a stickily shadowy backroom, where anything and everything promiscuous could happen in its perpetual dusk.

Dedicated to gay poet and very close friend Ronald Baytan, my own poem “Backroom Love” from my first chapbook of verses titled *The Southern Cross and Other Poems* subverts the notion that gay men in Metro Manila are only preoccupied with mindless sex. Using metaphors and images associated with Romantic and Victorian poetry, like the lighthouse and the sea, the moonstruck persona of the poem actually seeks among the “shapes and shifting silhouettes” inside the backroom of Cine Café the possibility of a true encounter with the beloved. After foraging “inside its seemingly seam-/ less ocean of darkness,” in the end, “very late at night,/ just before the inevitable// coming of the light,” the besotted persona will “copulate with shadows/ and call it love.”

### **Queered Public Spaces**

As a noun, the term “queer” has come to mean any movement promised by acting in reference to something outside of itself. It has become a name (noun—nominal) whose referent is the thing-ness of dissonant sexual identity. In this sense, “queer” functions as a sign which, while it could be open to the play of signification, nonetheless arrests that play in the service of a given category.

As a verb (to queer), however, the term can signify an action of putting “out of joint,” unsettling, destabilizing the very terms by which something comes to be something in the first place. As a verb, queer retains a sense of time which keeps it in motion conceptually and at least in principle prevents it from any form of grounding in a moment of its own ‘now.’

Public spaces, mostly heteronormative places in a patriarchal society like the Philippines, have been transgressed, transformed, and appropriated by Filipino gay men, for their specific sexual purposes, into queer spaces. Two of these spaces are the cinema and the fitness gym.

### **The Cinema**

Movie houses per se are not necessarily queer spaces, but legitimate places of audiovisual entertainment, whether the film being shown is for general patronage or for adults only. But even the most posh of theaters can be transformed into a queer space by the presence of a single gay man who tries to fulfill his homosexual desire (by design or because of desperation,

it does not really matter which) inside the cinema's protean and tolerant darkness. However, derelict movie houses in depressed but accessible downtown areas in Metro Manila, like Cubao or Recto, are notorious for being havens/heavens for promiscuous gay sex.

In Eric Gamalinda's "Slow Cruise," a phallus-shaped poem from his second poetry collection titled *Lyrics from a Dead Language*, Filipino homosexuals are described as "desperadoes" in the double sense of their being renegades (albeit sexual) as well as desperate:

Roaming the third-run theaters  
these lonely men  
run into each other,  
seek their broken sex  
in the apex of importunities,  
and in their loneliness renew  
the vampire in them,  
the one rebuffed by dust,

Gamalinda's portrayal of Filipino gay men in the first stanza alone is anything but flattering: they are plagued by solitude and incapable of solidarity ("these lonely men"); homosexuality as the "broken sex"; utterly deplorable in their search for a quickie in the cavernous dark of the rundown cinemas ("the apex of importunities"); and monstrous ("the vampire in them"). In the second stanza he continues to enumerate other negative qualities. In the end, he concludes that "love is a raw wound,/ some kind of stigmata:/ hard time for saints," thus reducing Filipino homosexuals into martyred subjects incapable of improving their psychosexual subaltern position in heteropatriarchal society.

In contrast to Gamalinda's depressing poem, Nestor de Guzman's "Sa Paglugar" from his first book of verses *Mula sa Cine Café* provides the third-rate theater-going gay persona of his poem with some form of agency by making him inquisitive about the goings-on inside the ramshackle movie houses of Cubao, Quezon City to avoid all sorts of danger. Before he indulges in his sexcapades, the persona first asks pertinent questions from those who are more experienced and knowledgeable what to expect from a cinema he is visiting for the first time:

Unang punta ko sa lumang sinehang ito.  
 Bagaman di bago sa akin ang kuwento  
 at gawain sa katulad na lugar,  
 minabuti kong magtanong-tanong muna.  
 Puwede kayang gumawa rito?  
 Baka may manghuhuli?  
 May umiikot bang guwardiya?  
 Baka sa kalagitnaan, may lalapit,  
 maninita, mangingikil?  
 Nagpapabayad ba ang mga lalaki,  
 o sila-sila, pagandahan lang?

The persona then provides a series of vignettes of the usual episodes between the law and the homosexual denizens inside these sleazy theaters: New Frontier (“*sinisita ng guwardiya/ ang mga tumatayo sa likod,/ ... ‘Bakla o callboy lang ang tumatayo diyan.’*”); Quezon 2 (“*nasa kalapit akong upuan,/ malapit sa screen, nang sitahin ng guwardiya/ ang dalawang lalaking naghahalikan.*”); Star (“*isang lalaki/ ang nangulit sa isang bakla/ para sa karagdagan bayad./ Mula sa ituktok ng balcony,/ halos tumakbo ang bakla pababa,/ pinalalayo ang nakasunod sa kanya.*”). In the end, the persona affirms his position as a witness, a homosexual voyeur or some new form of *flâneur*—a botanist of the queer fauna inside these rundown cinemas: “*Sa loob ko noon, nasa lugar ako,/ sa tamang lugar./*”

### **The Fitness Gym**

The fitness gym is another heterosexual locale—generally the habitat of serious bodybuilders and fitness buffs—appropriated by certain gay men, gym bunnies and their admirers, as yet another queer space.

In Nicolas Pichay’s “Karnehan” from his first poetry collection *Ang Lunes na Mahirap Bunuin*, the fitness gym is depicted as a typical meat market for the gay persona, like most queered straight spaces, since “The purpose of queer space is again ultimately sex: the making of a space either for that peculiar definition of the self as an engine of sexuality or for the act of sex itself.”

The poem begins with some observations on the routine sights and sounds inside a typical gym: a man's reaction after weighing himself (*"Magtitimbang. Ihahambing ang katotohanan./ Nakangiti o papadyak depende/ sa layo o lapit sa/ anyong ninanais."*); pseudo-macho bantering (*"Pareng George—' babati sa/ halos araw-araw na kasabay sa malayong biyahe ng/ pagpapaganda ng katawan."/*); riding a stationary bike (*"Sabay sakay sa bisikletang/ walang pinatutunguhan."/*); and other strenuous activities usually associated with physical fitness. The persona admits that the gym is his favorite place because of the visual pleasure he derives from secretly ogling the muscular men who are working out in his midst (*"Dito ko nasisipat ang/ sanlaksang kalalakihang nagbabanat/ ng buto."/*), whose body parts he devours with his eyes (*"mga umbok ng dibdib;" "tabas ng likod;" "mapintog na pandesal/ na ani ng kaniyang tiyan"*).

In between exercises, while the persona catches his breath, his head engorged with blood (*"malaking tarugo ang ulo kong/ puno ng dugo."/*), he glimpses the object of his desire lifting weights while sprawled on the bench press, the guy's pubic hair visible where the thighs meet the crotch, the guys legs being spread apart like the letter V. But this is not what excites the persona, since he is more interested with the bead of sweat about to drip from the guy's armpit: *"Bubulong itong parang bubuyog habang/ namumuo, nanginginig mula sa kanyang kilikili."/* The persona wants to scream "Wait!" for he wants to catch it with his parched tongue as if it were a drop of rain being received by cracked hands (*"Upang idaop ang aking dila/na parang bitak-bitak na mga palad/ na sumasalo sa unang ambon/ ng Mayo."*).

After their eyes meet in a mutual glance, his potential catch approaches the persona, gives him a provocative smile, and makes a loaded comment: *"Ang sarap ng pawis mo, a."* With the gasping guy's slim waist level with his line of vision, the persona cannot help but notice the sweat stains on the guy's sleeveless shirt, the rippling in the guy's abdominal muscles. Swallowing his saliva, mouth tangy with desire, the persona returns the guy's friendly greeting with a burgeoning smile (*"Manunukli ako ng/ nangangamatis na ngiti."/*), and that is when their conversation truly begins.

## By Way of a Conclusion

As rendered in Philippine gay poetry *from* English and in Filipino, queer spaces (like the gay bar, the bathhouse and the backroom) and queered straight spaces (like the cinema and the fitness gym) appear to be excitingly liberal and liberating places, for they allow homosexuals to explore and express their psychosexual selves. Through transgressions and transformations, the gay personae of the poems have subverted the dominant heteropatriarchal space by carving out, sometimes under the very noses of straight people, various heterotopias of deviance. The gay personae have also freed themselves from the shackles of the debilitating limits imposed on them and their desires by heteropatriarchal society, through the performance and performativity of their multifarious forms of alternative sexualities and sexual practices. From the stifling confines of the proverbial closet to the more commodious gay bar and other expansive queer spaces, Filipino gay men indeed have traveled far and wide.

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