Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora


reviewed by Gilbert Caluya

1. When I was asked to review Manalansan’s *Global Divas* I was both excited and hesitant. Excited because, as a Filipino-Australian working in queer theory, the scholars that find Asian sexualities of more than passing interest are few and far between. But I was also hesitant because the work populating the intersections of Queer Studies and Postcolonial Studies has become increasingly formulaic. I’m glad to report that my hesitation was unfounded in this case. Manalansan’s success lies in his anthropological attention to the everyday existence of his informants. *Global Divas* presents to the reader a nuanced account of the lived experience of the Filipino ‘gay’ diaspora in America. Weaving personal stories and anecdotes into a sophisticated theoretical framework, Manalansan makes visible the life-world of *bakla* (a Filipino form of gendered/sexual identity) in the United States through a sustained engagement with their quotidian lives.

2. *Global Divas* is structured into two parts. The first part outlines the theoretical framework of the book as a whole. It maps out the ‘institutions, identities, practices and persons that constitute the material and symbolic borderlands in the lives of Filipino gay men’ (p. 18). Chapter 1 conceptualises diasporic Filipino gay men as liminal identities formed between the permeable cultural boundaries of *bakla* and ‘gay.’ Here Manalansan provides a sophisticated interpretation of the different cultural understandings of sexuality grounded in the lived experience of his informants. The second chapter draws the reader into *swardspeak*, a Filipino transnational ‘queer vernacular/code’ (p. 19). In this chapter he focuses on *biyuti* and *drama*, words which are evidently taken from the English ‘beauty’ and ‘drama,’ but which are deployed in *swardspeak* to deconstruct the relations between bodies, appearances, behaviours and identities. In chapter 3 he draws on cultural geographies of race and sexuality to consider the spatialised politics of American gay cultures. While this chapter lucidly maps out the racialised geography of queer spaces, it doesn’t move much further than previous cultural geographies of that nature, unlike his other chapters, which all make significant original contributions to different fields.

3. I said that there were two parts to *Global Divas*. The next three chapters ‘are the heart of this book’ (p. 19) which employ Geertzian thick descriptions of Filipino gay men’s performative negotiations of cultural identities. Chapter 4 interprets the quotidian lives of his informants through a dramaturgical frame. Focusing on domestic spaces and routines this chapter relies on thick descriptions to make evident the constructive creativity involved in their everyday performances. The next chapter provides a close reading of
cross-dressing at a Santacruzan festival, a re-enactment of Contantine’s wife finding of the cross. Framing the Santacruzan as a ritual, Manalansan reveals cross-dressing in the festival to be more than a sexual/gendered performance: it is also an intercultural, transnational syncretism that fosters a communal sense of nostalgia. In the last chapter, Manalansan focuses on *Tita Aida* (*tita* meaning ‘auntie’ and *Aida* derived from ‘AIDS’) as a *swardspeak* idiom through which he tracks what he calls the ’intimate geography of suffering.’ Here he balances the difficult task of recognising suffering without reinscribing pity onto his informants.

4. Manalansan’s ability to get at, and into, his informant’s worlds is rooted in his eclectic methodology and his theoretical sophistication. Methodologically, *Global Divas* draws on his extensive fieldwork, short and in-depth interviews as well as participant observations in bars, homes, hospitals, and festivals produced between 1990 and 1999 (pp. viii–ix). This wide-ranging inquiry provides Manalansan with an extraordinarily rich archive through which he interprets the identity work of his informants. Manalansan is at his best when he translates and interprets his informant’s speech. Chapter 2, in particular, provides the most informative interpretation of *swardspeak* yet. His grasp of the linguistic variations of Tagalog, enables him to make evident to the reader the creativity and complexity of *swardspeak* as a sexual subculture’s dialect that signifies the cosmopolitanism of its speaker. (For those who are fluent in Tagalog and Taglish code-switching, Chapter 2 is a hilarious read.)

5. What makes *Global Divas* a valuable contribution to research on the intersections of race and sexuality is its conceptualisation of the *bakla* in the United States in terms of ‘diaspora.’ It is precisely this diasporic framework, this juggling between home and host, between Asian (specifically Filipino) and Western (specifically American) cultural understandings that forces Manalansan to formulate such a complex theoretical framework. To my mind, Asian Studies has tended to focus on ‘Asians in Asia,’ only recently taking account of the complex labour effects of global capitalism through variously enforced migrations. Yet when Asian Studies does focus on Asians outside of Asia they are still understood through a direct appeal to cultural ‘origins.’ On the other hand, Asian-American Studies—but also Asian-Australian Studies and Asian-Canadian Studies—by incorporating components of Race and Ethnic Studies and Cultural Studies, has tended to focus on the discursive construction of Asians without, however, much engagement with the cultural background of its subjects. Consequently, ‘Asian’ in Asian-American Studies becomes a falsified signifier from which any cultural signified has been evacuated.

6. Without downplaying the significant contributions both theoretical orientations have made, and I hope will continue to make, to the study of Asians across the world, *Global Divas* nevertheless challenges us to consider the gap between these disciplinary formations. Manalansan’s diasporic focus tries to mediate between these two fields in order to grasp the lived cultural reality of his informants. Its conceptual complexity derives from his constant negotiation between Western understandings and Filipino understandings of sexuality and identity, and between popular conceptualisations and contemporary scholarship. On the one hand, Manalansan moves beyond a postcolonial critique of race and ethnicity to explore the cultural performativity of *bakla* identities. On the other hand, Manalansan is careful to interpret sexuality, and consequently the figure of the *bakla*, within culturally-specific parameters without, however, falling into an absolute cultural relativism. This is enabled by a recognition of the permeability of borders between cultural understandings of sexuality. Simultaneously, he takes a constructivist approach to sexual identity formation, which is conceived dramaturgically as an everyday performance involving symbolic investment and ritual inscription.

7. Consequently, I was surprised to read Peter A. Jackson’s and Stephen O. Murray’s book reviews of *Global Divas*, which I felt were misleading. Murray mistranslates *bakla* into ’effeminacy,’ which places too much emphasis on Western notions of gendered behaviour
and not enough emphasis on sexual subjectivity.[1] Alternatively, Jackson’s translation of bakla seems more open when he interprets it as ‘a Tagalog term that encompasses all the Western notions of homosexuality, hermaphroditism, cross-dressing and effeminacy.’[2] However, he later critiques Manalansan for presenting an ‘essentialist view’ of bakla by relying on an assumed ‘transnational identity between men who claim the label bakla.’[3]

8. I suggest that Jackson misunderstands the enterprise of Manalansan’s entire book, which is a sustained meditation on the life world of bakla in the United States and not bakla in general. Each chapter of Global Divas draws on specific aspects of their diasporic lives. Whether the everyday private spaces of their homes, the racialisation of public bars and restaurants, the intricate performance of cross-dressing in Santacruzan festivals or the linguistic cosmopolitanism of swardspeak, Manalansan grapples with the locational specificity of his informants’ lives as Filipino diasporic sexual subjects in the United States. By focusing solely on bakla as an identity category, Jackson misses the sophisticated reading of their diasporic specificity that Manalansan performs. Although Manalansan draws on Southeast Asian scholars to interpret bakla, ultimately his entire book interrogates any claims to a homogenous interpretation of that identity across geographical and cultural borders. As Manalansan makes evident on multiple occasions, the Filipino gay diaspora in America must be understood between ‘gay’ and ‘bakla.’

9. One of the major contributions that Manalansan makes, and here his background in social anthropology is evident, is the use of ‘performance’ and ‘ritual’ to frame the routine behaviour and speech of his informants. This enables him to get into the everyday worlds of the Filipino gay diaspora. However, I had a minor contention with his larger framework. Global Divas is explicitly framed within the ‘transnational turn’ in Queer Studies (p. 6), of which Manalansan has been a major contributor. Yet, it is not clear to me that ‘nationalism’ let alone ‘transnationalism’ is actually what is at stake. Simultaneously, his notion of ‘cultural citizenship’ appeals to a broader understanding of what constitutes citizenship, but why he uses it is not understood. My concern is that ‘cultural citizenship,’ by drawing on politico-legal terminology, elides the differences and relations between legal, cultural, social and economic spheres that infuses his informants’ sense of belonging. Throughout the book the concerns relating to immigration as a state-regulated practice continuously disrupts their dialogue with Manalansan.

10. There needs to be more work done, and this critique is not limited to Global Divas, to consider the specificities and the interrelations of belongingness in multiple registers. I suggest that Fernando Ortiz’s notion of ‘transculturation’ might have been better employed to grapple with the cultural realities that Manalansan so painstakingly explores, and at the same time would have enabled a more complex reading of the interrelations between legal modes of belonging and cultural strategies of home-building.[4] Of course, this is not to diminish what Manalansan has successfully achieved, but to suggest a way of broadening out its appeal by specifying what I think Global Divas achieves.

11. There is an unusual moment in Manalansan's translation where he interprets sa atin as ‘back home,’ whereas, it means ‘with/for us.’ However, sa atin is specifically an inclusive ‘us’ as opposed to sa amin, which would exclude the one being spoken to, which means the informant was including Manalansan in his comment. I found this intriguing because the ‘we’ suddenly made me question who precisely could be included in sa atin, and in Global Divas in general. Manalansan's focus on a particular part of the Filipino diaspora stands in for the rest by default. When he briefly mentions a Filipino gay body-builder, for example, it reads more like an aside or juxtaposition to the Filipino cross-dressing, which is his main focus in that passage (pp. 144-45). The effect is a selective erasure of the multiple strategies that Filipino gay men have deployed in the diaspora, which aren’t as evidently rooted in Filipino cultures and/or languages.

12. I suggest that Manalansan’s focus on everyday performances as strategies for negotiating cultural citizenship has led him to a specific group of Filipino gay men who daily
negotiate between 'bakla' and 'gay.' However, without reference to other strategies, *Global Divas* misses out on making crucial connections within the Filipino diaspora that often provide the politico-social dynamics for why certain strategies are chosen over others. For example, some Filipino gay men take up 'gay' as an identity category not because it is Western, but because it offers some level of freedom from what are considered strict codes of gendered behaviour and racialised sexuality within the Filipino community. As Manalansan, himself observes, sexuality in the Filipino diaspora still relies heavily on racist representations (against black Americans for example).

13. Nevertheless, these are minor points that do not undermine what is a significant contribution to multiple fields of research. Manalansan’s focus on different cultural sites makes valuable contributions to Postcolonial Studies, Queer Studies, Asian American Studies, Linguistics, Cultural Geography, Globalisation Studies, Anthropology as well as Cultural Studies. *Global Divas* provokes us to reconsider the ambivalent function of 'the cultural' in Stuart Hall’s notion of 'cultural identity,' by forcing us to engage with the multiple cultural legacies that shape any community, diasporic or not. One thing’s for sure, until we learn to move past a Said-inspired model of critique, *Global Divas* will continue to challenge our research with its insistence on the lived cultural reality of its subjects. This is a challenging but inspiring social anthropology.

Endnotes


