Macho Dancing, the Feminization of Labor, and Neoliberalism in the Philippines

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“Macho dancing” is the name of the dance performed by male dancers in gay bars, and it is called “macho” to distinguish it from the vaudeville-like lip-synching and bar performances of transvestites and transsexuals. In other words, macho dancing is performed solely by dancers whose identification is male heterosexual, the primary object of desire in gay bars in the Philippines. It is both sensual, using the male dancer’s body in the performance, and sexual, with the performance itself mimicking overt sexual acts. Recently, dancers have added a form of strip tease: they remove tank tops or vests and the bottom layers covering the crotch area—denim shorts, boxer briefs, bandana, swim wear, and tanga or briefs—to display an erect penis (see for example fig. 1); they gyrate to showcase the male performer’s body; and they mimic

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sexual positions (see fig. 5). Macho dancing has undergone two phases in its development. The first is the feminine style “snake dancing,” a movement that flows from the feet and legs to the stomach, then to the arms and chest, on up to the head and back down. It was prevalent when gay bars first appeared in the Philippines at the height of Ferdinand Marcos’s dictatorship (1972–1986). The second phase of macho dancing, in the post-Marcos economically neoliberal period of the 1990s, involves an edgier, jagged, slower, more protracted, and more sexually male style than snake dancing.

I read macho dancing as a symptom of the discursive cultural politics of the Philippines in transition from the Marcos dictatorship that readily inserted the nation-space and its citizens into multinational capitalism, to the present that both intensifies the legacies of labor-export and foreign capital penetration of the Marcos period and perpetuates neoliberalism as a national developmental strategy. The macho dancer’s body can also be read as representing the actual shifts in these cultural politics of the nation-state.

**Feminization of Male Labor**

Neoliberalism in the Philippines began early on, in the postindependence era that dates from 1946. Many treaties bound the Philippines to the United States. President Diosdado Macapagal pegged the peso to the dollar in 1964, and Marcos’s first term saw the 1960s mass exodus of professionals to the United States. Since then, the Philippines has become the largest supplier of immigrant professionals to the United States, particularly nurses, doctors, and medical technologists (Catalan 1996). In the 1970s, Marcos intensified the labor export, creating what are called OFW (Overseas Filipino Workers) and OCW (Overseas Contract Workers) — new labor identities for Filipinos doing flexible and 3-D (dirty, dangerous, and difficult) jobs overseas. The OCW phenomenon is so huge that the Philippines is now the third largest exporter of labor and the second biggest receiver of remittances in the world. One out of ten Filipinos is an OCW, at least one-half of Filipinos have a family member who is an OCW, and therefore, at least half of the population is supported by OCW remittances. Confronted with perennial political and economic crises, post-Marcos national administrations have increased the reliance on OCWs as reliable foreign currency suppliers.

By declaring martial law in 1972, Marcos wanted to both prolong and strengthen his control of the nation. Relying heavily on foreign borrowing and multinational capital to finance his dictatorship, he mobilized the majority of national bodies—the youthful citizenry—and placed them in the service of multinational capital in the homeland and the debt servicing industry in foreign lands. Marcos created economic and export-processing zones free from unions and strikes to service the subcontractual jobs of multinational companies. He also created the government infrastructures that further embedded the OCW in Philippine culture.

Within the nation, young women became multinational laborers, working specifically in the garment and electronics sectors, and in the proliferating sex and entertainment trade. Outside the nation-space, women workers were preferred over men. In 2002, female overseas employment already comprised 69 percent of the total of newly hired OCWs. Initially, the oil

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1. Taking pictures or videos in gay bars in the Philippines is prohibited. I am thankful to colleague Aristotle Atienza for selecting the images and providing the photo imaging from pirated VCDs. Macho dancing videos are sold through informal channels and ownership credits are not available.

2. For an economic history of the Marcos period, see Tolentino (1996).
boom in the Middle East created jobs for men building desert urbanscapes, but as this situation weakened and other labor-supplying nations joined the field, the demand for Filipino male labor dwindled. These men had to look for jobs elsewhere or take “feminine” jobs. Filipino men did housekeeping in Italy, entertainment work in the hotel and nightclub circuits of Asia, and provided labor for the growing demand in the service sectors. Only in the domain of seafaring did Filipinos continue to dominate, with some 200,000 Filipinos working on international vessels (see Suarez 2001).3

This ongoing feminization of male labor is being represented in the Philippines through the proliferation of newer feminized male labor-based identities that have evolved from the Marcos period to the present—the male underwear model, the male “bold” star (a “bomba” or soft-porn movie actor), the male guest-relations officer, transsexual and transvestite Japayuki (an entertainer working in Japan), the male talent show contestant, the male beauty contestant, the male domestic, the male factory worker in economic zones, and, of course, the macho dancer. The masculine qualifiers—“male,” “macho,” and the Spanish ending “o”—redefine jobs that were early on identified with female labor.

The global trend in economic growth focuses on the service sector, an amalgamation of quasi-industries that include entertainment, medicine, fast food, tourism, education, and other service-oriented endeavors—“quasi” because they do not produce commodities other than the McDonaldized services they provide. These are also “body-positive” because the body of the young worker—the majority of service sector employees are young—should be pleasant looking, have a pleasing personality, and be able to do 3D jobs. Eighty percent of the gross domestic product of the United States is derived from the service sector; Germany, 70 percent; Hong Kong, 85.3 percent; Japan, 72.2 percent; Singapore and Taiwan, 65.6 percent; and the Philippines, 52.9 percent.4 The feminization of male labor in the Philippines had taken root as early as the post-WWII period with the introduction of Keynesian economics. This provided the base for the dominance of neoliberal capitalism in the 1980s and 1990s fostered by Marcos.

The Presidential Body5

Sometime in 1983, soon after the August assassination of opposition leader Benigno Aquino, Marcos convened a press conference in his private office to quell questions about his ill health. A photograph taken by photojournalist Sonny Yabao during the conference (fig. 2) foregrounds the relationship between discourse and the presidential body. The picture shows Marcos—appearing harassed and with a bloated face, visible tension lines on the forehead, and shrunken eyes—pointing to an almost life-size photograph of himself smiling, in swimming trunks, and in robust health with firm torso and arms, his eyes hidden by dark sunglasses.6 The “real” Marcos is covered to the neck by a white barong, his free hand on the table supporting his compact body.

3. Furthermore, according to Alex Pabico: “Because one of every five seafarers onboard international ocean-going vessels today is Filipino, the likelihood is that every major maritime disaster in the world would involve a Filipino. The shipping industry is one of the most dangerous in the world, but despite the risks, hundreds of thousands of Filipino seamen are eager to work abroad, lured by higher wages and the promise of foreign travel […] Filipino seamen today remit $1 billion back home every year […]” (2003).


5. This section is an abridged version, originally published as “Mattering National Bodies and Sexualities: Corporeal Contest in Marcos and Brocka” (Tolentino 2003). I have adapted and reworked the section to stress the presidential body as context for the appreciation of the macho dancer’s and gay client’s bodies.

The picture of Marcos in swimming trunks was taken outside. His body seems to be aglow with the available space, extending from his body like the radiant rays in the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. In this exterior shot, there are no other figures save Marcos. The real Marcos, on the other hand, is surrounded by a cluttered interior space—bodies of supporters on the left; papers, documents, pens, and two pairs of eyeglasses foregrounded on the table; and a pulley probably used to hoist the flag in the center. In choosing to be photographed in his private office, Marcos exposed the interior operations of the presidency in a state of crisis. The interior space presents the notion of reflexivity in the presidency; operations are laid bare and therefore susceptible to interrogation.

Marcos was so fascinated with his youthful prime that he concocted a presidential apotheosis based on the vitality of his youthful body—the alleged guerrilla leader who earned 28 medals during the Japanese Occupation; the exemplar of the all-around athlete in his college days; the “young Turk” in his various political party affiliations; and the young senator who swept the beauty queen off her feet in 11 days of courtship. Though these stories are privately questioned, the wholesale public display Marcos made of his presidential body somehow solidified his hold on national power. This image of a pristine youthful body permitted Marcos to forcefully remain in power, tying a potent political rhetoric to a brute pacification drive in the founding and implementation of the New Society and the New Republic in which people were rendered passive and submissive. In the polemic of modernizing the nation on all fronts, Marcos’s vision of Philippine society was equally represented as youthful and innovative, even as it clutched traditional values and institutions.

Whether garbed in formal or informal wear, the presidential body was always at work. The presidential body’s personal and family activities were translated into official business; a trip to the airport to welcome his children taking their breaks from schools abroad became a media event. The media also played a role in proliferating the presidential body and extending its official bodily life. The presidential body went beyond the statute of the constitution that limited the presidential term and, to a large extent, even defied the natural impediments of aging and sickness. So long as it appeared to be working toward certain national ideals, the presidential body remained centrally positioned. Like its semblance of sustained national prominence, the presidential body’s central positioning created a semblance of national unity.

7. Marcos concocted visions of official nation-building. He declared martial law in 1972, then introduced and promulgated “Bagong Lipunan” (the New Society) as the thematic of his rule. In 1981, upon winning another term, he declared himself president of the “Fourth Republic.”
The kinetic drive to unify and modernized the nation ironically rested on the fragmentation of the presidential body. The body could not possibly be everywhere at all times. Thus the presidential body metonymically functioned through its parts, so as to be in both one place and everywhere. Specifically, it was Marcos's voice and gestures that substituted for his organic body. Media proliferated these body parts—radio disseminated his voice, newspapers his active gestures, and film and television his choate physical and aural presence. Marcos's baritone voice was characterized by its deep enunciation of perfect English, Tagalog, and Ilokano, and his extemporaneous speeches were marked by their forceful delivery. He knew the rhetoric that would get people's attention, and his gestures reiterated authority. Regardless of audience size, Marcos's gestures were wide and animated, similar to actions done in speaking to a huge crowd.

These parts then amounted to a “quasi-corporeal” body, a body whose unity was lost in the efficacy of the parts to represent the entity. On one level, these parts produced “afterimages” of the organic presidential body, resuscitating whatever was left of its unifying substance. On another, their proliferation calls attention to their dispersal and the impossibility of coherence. Thus the organic component of these bodily parts failed the test of time—Marcos began to stutter more frequently, became more incoherent, and his gestures grew frail and even comic. Still widely disseminated today, images of the ailing bodily parts no longer produce the same resonance they had in the past, calling further attention to the breakdown of the entity that was the presidential body.

What is ironic in Marcos's deployment of power through television in 1972 is its disruption through the same media in 1986. While griping to the whole nation about the insurrection led by Juan Ponce Enrile and Fidel V. Ramos, Marcos's image and voice were electronically zapped, replaced by static and TV “snow.” Addressing a national broadcast in the company of his complete family, which included small children running around the makeshift news area in the palace, Marcos's image was obliterated by the insurrectionists, who had taken control of the television station. The televisual display of a cohesive presidential family was not enough to unify the nation. Marcos had tried to use the same forceful voice and gestures that characterized his fiery 1972 televised declaration of martial rule, but failed.

A newer image of the presidential body was developing: a “homemaker's” body that maximized the political mileage of her assassinated husband. Corazon Aquino's (1986–1992) public body would be consistently draped in yellow, her favorite color, which in the snap election campaign Imelda Marcos said reminded her of “jaundice, or a lemon” (in Ellison 1988:235). Aquino's body would also be initially constructed as a maternal body, giving birth to a clean moral national slate after a dark period of the nation's history.

In subsequent years, the public image of the presidential body has changed. Fidel Ramos (1992–1998) surrounded himself with phallic symbols to remasculinize the presidential body. A cigar in his mouth and the thumbs up symbol of his vision of an industrialized Philippines in 2000 were a phallic reinvestment in the nation's body. Joseph Estrada (1998–2001) conjured the image of the macho defender of the masses. Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's (2001–present) periodic apologies for her short-tempered outbursts—usually via public scolding of errant officials—her monotone voice, her unapologetic declaration of a state of emergency early in February 2006, and her strong commitment to maintaining the military status quo all contributed to an aggressive image of presidential readiness. But her rule has been questioned repeatedly and dubbed illegitimate—both in terms of her winning office despite massive electoral fraud, and her highly questionable defense of political appointments, government contracts, and national development.

8. “Quasi-corporeality” is a term used by Brian Massumi and Kenneth Dean to denote Reagan's body “without an image, [which] has social prestige, not for its inherent qualities or the superior symbolizations and ideations but simply because its kinetic geography is more far-reaching” (1994:166–67).
Macho Dancing, the First Generation

The dissemination of the presidential body as ideal affects the subject-formation of the majority of the nation’s citizens. With limited access to political and economic power, citizens mimic and “make do” with negotiating the ideals imposed by the substance and terms of the presidential body. The conditions of abject massive poverty—resulting precisely from the presidential maintenance of national politics through corruption, patronage politics, and elite-centered economics—are the very realities that allow the presidential body to mobilize national bodies for his own geopolitical purpose (“geobodies”). For example, although relatively well-off gays cruising economically disenfranchised heterosexual males was commonplace prior to Marcos’s ascent to power, what Marcos did via his national development program based on the maximization of young laboring bodies was to provide the commercial transaction with a quasi-legitimate venue. The “gay bar” began to operate during the height of Marcos’s political regimentation of laboring geobodies, and gay culture moved onto the public political stage. A further niche enclave of elite gay performance more intimately tied up with national power was harnessed by Imelda Marcos.

Imelda Marcos promoted and consequently privileged and legitimimized willing gay artists who enjoyed basking in their high-profile status as presidential accessories, especially those who celebrated the virtues of fashion and beauty, such as designers Pitoy Moreno and Christian Espiritu. She made gay identity somehow integral to the dispensation of presidential power. Ming Ramos, First Lady to Fidel Ramos, publicly endorsed and promoted the livelihood
training program “Isang Gunting, Isang Suklay” (One Pair of Scissors, One Comb, referring to haircutters and stylists) of Ricky Reyes, a self-made gay “beautician” and owner of the franchise of hair salons and host of a television beauty show bearing his name. And President Arroyo included Ino Sotto’s designs in her power wardrobe.

The gay bar both legitimizes the agency of other economically empowered gays in the nation and reconfigures the commercialization of sex, especially among economically disenfranchised male heterosexuals, the love objects of commercial gay engagements in the Philippines. It is also uncanny that this local modern gay space was formulated at the time of Marcos’s own intensified modernization of the nation. Club 690—now Klub Sais—opened in the 1970s on Retiro Street in Quezon City and was the first gay bar in the country. Presently, there are some 50 gay bars, concentrated mostly in urban centers throughout the Philippines. There are also 20 gay massage parlors in Metro Manila, another example of the permutation of commercialized sex between gay and straight men. What has become dominant in gay identity in the public sphere is the commercialized nature of sexual exchange.

The macho dancer has evolved as an aberrant figure of national and sexual geopolitics. As noted above, the snake dancing of the first generation of macho dancing was a feminine routine of slithery bodily movement starting from the toes, moving up to the legs and midsection, then to arms and hands, and the head. Or it could be the reverse: vertical movement beginning with the bopping of the head, fluidly moving down to the feet. Interspersed in this basic movement could be hand and arm gestures of either a crucified posture or circular movements in front of the dancer’s midsection. The stomach or gut area is central for providing the strength and fluidity of the vertical movements. The crotch area is the focal point of the performer’s display and viewers’ attention. The crotch’s curvature mimics the hardened yet fluid motions of the dancer’s body. The macho dancer, after all, mimics the sexual desire of empowered gays, who in turn mimic the desire on the part of both the nation and the presidential administration for political prestige and cultural legitimacy.

**Macho Dancing, the Second Generation**

With the toppling of Marcos in 1986, Aquino began the political and economic reworking of the nation to better its standing in the globalizing economy of the period. Her government returned the businesses Marcos appropriated for his administration and cronies, sequestered Marcos’s properties, and then sold them to the private sector. She began to develop the laws that would privatize, liberalize, and commercialize the national economy. All these terms remain buzz words of neoliberalism, continuously reiterated by succeeding presidencies.

The political and economic developments honed another variant of macho dancing, a variant that ensured the form’s global reception and acceptance into the marketplace. The second generation of macho dancing involves a slower-paced bodily movement, away from corporeal fluidity to the rhythmic fluidity of the dance music. Music choices usually fall into the slow rock category, and include the ballads of Celine Dion, Mariah Carrey, and even Tracy Chapman, as well as those by local and East Asian singers.

The ideal is to infuse the dance with a masculine personality, initially presented by the dancer’s costume—fitted denim shorts or boxer briefs and sleeveless tops, and what has become standard footwear, cowboy boots—and then in the jagged pacing of the dance steps themselves. The dancer sensually touches his body, from head to knees, while his heels pound the stage floor. Or he uses bars and beams to flaunt his body and tease the audience, or simulates dog-styled anal intercourse or the missionary penetration of an imagined partner. What is produced is a campy rendition—a vulgarity in the masculine play, a gay performance of hypermasculinity—of a gay notion of heterosexual masculinity, represented as underclass, a brutish tease, sexually the “upper,” and performative. The dancer’s role-playing is reinforced by his costume (cowboy, working-class, underwear model-like aesthetic), the movement (macho sex moves),
and the music (heterosexual romantic ballads by female singers and go-go dancers singing slow rock).

What is also in play is the construction of gay identity itself: economically of a higher status, a patron of sorts, yet also working within the patriarchal imperatives of the desired male heterosexual. This means that although the gay patron is financially better off, the real phallic power remains to be negotiated based on the terms of the macho dancer. After his dancing sequences, the macho dancer acts as a guest relations officer of the patron—who may be gay but may also be a young woman, usually a female Japayuki or groupie out for a night on the town, but nonetheless, economically empowered—keeping him or her company. The dancer remains in the service of the patron within the bar space, attending to his (or her) every need: offering information on how the club is run and on fellow dancers; on the power structure and what makes for good company, a conversationalist; and serving as temporary boyfriend. His labor also includes placing ice cubes in the guest’s drink, keeping a napkin under it, ordering food, and motioning the waiter to bring the patron’s bill. This is known as “tabling,” where the dancer—usually still in costume—sits with the guest at his or her table.

The macho dancer can also be requested to service the patron or patrons more privately, within the smaller rooms surrounding the stage area of the gay bar. In this room, the macho dancer dances for the patron for some three songs. During each song, he takes off a piece of clothing until he dances naked. This routine is negotiable, and patrons may request more sexual acts. The “private show,” as well as the “table,” are performed on a per hour rate; the number of hours is based on the discretion and wallet of the patron, while the quality is at the discretion and skills of the dancer. The dancer is now a privatized laborer within the gay bar. In the first generation of macho dancers, there were no “VIP rooms” for “private shows” by dancers. Thus, services within the bar space were already covertly sexual. This next generation of dancers is
housed in bars with private VIP rooms, which can provide for more explicit yet publicly concealed sexual acts within the space.

From the open playing field of the stage and audience sections of the first generation of macho dancers, today’s dancers can be summoned to perform for the private needs of the more economically empowered gays within the social hierarchy of gays and women in a gay bar, and within the more privatized social spaces of the gay bar. From an economic perspective, macho dancers prefer gay patrons to female patrons because the former tend to be more aggressive in engaging the dancers onstage, and more often solicit the dancers for private show services. Because of its steeper price, the private show is a badge of honor for both patron and dancer, flaunted as they both enter and exit this more exclusive space. The bar takes a cut from all of the dancers’ operations within the gay bar space and gets the majority share of profits from drinks in tabled and VIP-room services. It also charges customers a hefty “bar fine” for “take out”—the privilege of leaving with boys for the rest of the night.

What this act does is to create within the gay bar a hierarchy of patrons and dancers, providing for more available services based on a greater capacity to pay and the more open commercialization of sex. This newer practice, together with the requisite details of cowboy boots and dance movements, is evidence of the state’s orchestration in the service sector under neoliberalism. Services and rates are standardized. There is not much discrepancy in gay bars in Metro Manila between tabling a macho dancer and engaging him for a private show. Over time, production and consumption within the gay bar has become standardized, making it more profitable for owners and dancers and creating uniform expectations within the bar, and for commercialized sex in general. What the macho dancer has in common with other, newer masculine identities in the service sector—transvestite entertainer, underwear model, bikini contestant, etc.—is the use of masculinity as a commodity for achieving social mobility. In the

Figure 5. On all fours, the macho dancer moves throughout the stage area, simulating either the missionary or dog-style penetration of an imagined partner. Clockwise, images from Private Show 2003, Macho King 2003, Erotic Dudes 2004, Macho Valentine 2005. (Courtesy of Rolando B. Tolentino)
bars, the youthful body of the heterosexual male becomes the bearer of capital. The service sector environment as engaged in national development then hones the male body to perform in various sexual ways, to develop a pleasing personality, to maintain and uplift national social ideals in their commercialized sex engagement. The standardization of commercialized desire, sex, social relations, and engagements ensures the efficient and reliable transactions in neoliberalism’s service economy, allowing bodies as goods and capital itself to flow more fluidly. By linking heterosexual and gay men, the elite gay patron and the disenfranchised male dancer’s relationship becomes the paradigm in the production of desire, as well as its materialization.

After all, elite gays have become a major force in the service sector—as talent managers, trainers, stylists, designers, academics, cosmetic surgeons and dermatologists, media managers, young entrepreneurs, and advertising specialists, among others. Like the burgeoning excess of bodies in the labor force—including the perennial presence of young bodies—youthful male heterosexuals seeking better opportunities for their families (“the sacrificial lamb” mode shared by him and his female counterparts with their OCW geobodies) will always be in steady if not increasing supply, given the limited mobility possible for service sector workers. Within the confines of service sector menial work, the seduction for social mobility is ever-present as an ideal in a nation in perennial crisis.

### Body Capital as New Social Mobility

This steady supply of bodies ensures some vertical opening in the usual lateral movement within the service sector. What is appreciated in the disenfranchised male body, as with women, is a colonial and elitist appearance: young, white or fair-skinned, tall or statuesque, nice-looking, with a “pleasing” personality and a willingness to learn. With the advent of commercial products and services, this look can be modified further to meet the standards and prevailing tastes. The underclass disenfranchised male body has become the new passport for social mobility in the neoliberal age in the Philippines.

“Body capital,” or the social privileging of colonial and elite corporeality and sexuality, is the new guarantor of social mobility. During the Spanish colonial period, land ownership was the
only means of upward mobility. The American colonial period overtly introduced intellectual capital through the public education system, which made a larger number of colonial subjects eligible for wages and thus mobile. Covertly, the American colonial period, through the same educational apparatus, also introduced the young healthy body, mobilized in physical education classes, and allowed for the display of modern bodies, including women, in exercise, and men, more particularly through body building. Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos introduced the elite gay figure as cultural capital and afforded him legitimacy. Youthful men and women were mobilized into the workforce, including the entertainment and sex industries. Young male heterosexuals gained access to financial capital and found a space to grapple with and navigate the crisis of the nation in the birth and rise of the gay bar under the Marcos dictatorship. In the hierarchization of power in the gay bar, the macho dancer is equal to the waiters and male domestic help as lowly employees in a structure where the owner—usually a member of the police force or an army man—is the absent landlord, with an OIC (officer-in-charge, a retired or daytime cop) as his surrogate. Under the OIC are the feminine gays of the bar, operating as floor or program managers. But unlike other male employees of the bar, the macho dancer is able to greater utilize his body for extra income and agency.

Philippine neoliberalism introduced, regimented, disseminated, and standardized body capital through beauty pageants, modeling and bikini searches, talent and game shows, and reality television. These have shown the possibility of moving socially upwards using bodily traits that meet the standards of the service sector industries. This body capital is regarded as a desirable resource, uplifting individuals and their impoverished families. It is primarily geared for the underclass and a middle class, who are thereby materially linked with the underclass. The men of the elite class who utilize their bodies for similar acts within the service sector industries do so with a degree of choice that differentiates them from the men of the underclass.

However, given the pervasive conditions of poverty and the overwhelming numbers of the poor, not too many men will have the chance to use their body capital. But the very nature of material bodies, being plastic, malleable, and organic, makes each individual, at least in fantasy, ready to attain middle-class status. Many men will choose to make the attempt in a progressive manner—from working in fast food outlets and malls, to becoming macho dancers and sex workers, to beauty pageant and modeling search contestants with the ultimate goal of making it big in show business. Show business, after all, is also based on the simulation of service sector postindustrial images, of which the dominant strain is the elite, gay, male, macho dancer paradigm.

Philippine poverty is feminized through the disenfranchisement of male labor, but what also needs to be foregrounded is the direct effect of poverty on women, especially from the underclass. The stampede tragedy that killed 74 people in the Wowowee lunchtime game show in February 2006 illustrates how business is mobilizing underclass bodies in the service sector industries. The underclass becomes part of the production of the service. By becoming contestants on a trivia game show based on what is perceived as underclass knowledge, the underclass itself is enjoined in the production and consumption of the game.
show. Tens of thousands lined up days in advance at the venue, waiting for the chance to become a contestant on the show that promised to double its cash pot for the first anniversary presentation. When not everyone could be accommodated in the huge venue, a stampede broke out. Of the 74 people who died, only three were men, highlighting the very feminized face of poverty (see Contreras 2006). The desire for social mobility rests on the very women and men who are made to consume the products for collective progress: the winner of the Pinoy Big Brother television series—which, like its US counterpart, is based on underclass cell-phone voting (“pinoy” is colloquial for “Filipino”)—was Keanna Reeves, an ex-prostitute who turned a new leaf—the most underclass of the reality show finalists. What’s more, among the voters are the scavengers of the garbage mountains of Payatas, Quezon City, who spend the few pesos they earn on text messaging that costs one peso per text.

Similar to the middle-class ethos of movie viewing—watching a simulation of romance, action, or horror, and paying to see love, feel loved, or be terrorized—desire is individualized. For viewers of the Keanna Reeves story and the victims and survivors of the Payatas tragedy, the desire is internalized individually, and furthermore, gentrified. In young male heterosexual niches, the desire for economic and social empowerment is sexualized, feeding on a fantasized ideal. On the one hand, the gay elite is the source of the pink peso (a reference to the economic power of gay consumers in the Philippines), especially in the ongoing intensification of the nation’s economic and political crises. On the other, the heterosexual male performer is the beneficiary in the pink economy. Both desires are privatized in the imagined agency of individual mobility through each person’s use of the other’s body, a symbiotic relationship that becomes the modality of the ego-ideal’s production of newer body capital: a commercialized masculinity for the male performer, and a viable gay sexuality that can afford to pay for entertainment. The simulated body of empowerment is proliferated among the masses of poor. How can one resist the oasis in the desert, even if it is just a creation of one’s own and the desert’s delusion? The simulation becomes real, allowing the disenfranchised body to move inch by inch, second by second, at least at a certain disjointed tempo, within the quagmire and vicissitudes of infinite poverty and crisis that is the Philippine nation.

As he performs his nightly grind, the macho dancer becomes both a real and a simulated image of a body desiring and performing social mobility. He realizes his potential, and exercises his individual empowerment, only to return the following night. Desire and performance of social mobility, after all, are only posed in simulation. In gay bars, as in the Philippine nation, real mobility is evasive, restricted, and temporary. Yet every night, the desire and the performance of social mobility are reenacted.

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9. The economically disenfranchised underclass represents some 80 percent of the Philippine population.
References


