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"Out There":
The Topography of Race and Desire in the Global City

New York permits homosexuals an unparalleled chance to assemble a mix-and-match life. — EDMUND WHITE, States of Desire


[Shall I sing “New York, New York”? I feel like I am in the center of the world. When I was growing up in Manila, America for me was Manhattan, the Empire State Building, and the Statue of Liberty. Isn’t that tacky of me as if I were a tourist fresh off the boat?] — ARTURO HOMO XTRA or HX, a weekly gay guide to New York City, includes a section called “Out There.” In contrast to the other parts of the guide, which enumerate the gay offerings of various Manhattan neighborhoods or districts (e.g., the Upper East Side, Chelsea, and the West Village), this section lumps together all the various gay bars and events outside Manhattan. The “Out There” section exemplifies a typical and popular topographical rendition of New York City with Manhattan as the cosmopolitan center and the surrounding areas as the less sophisticated peripheries. Most of Manhattan below Harlem is popularly seen as the modern gay “white” metropolis with Chelsea, the East Village, and more recently Hell’s Kitchen as the prime gay neighborhoods. In contrast, the other boroughs are more often than not seen as peripheral, decrepit immigrant enclaves as well as premodern and anachronous queer sites. These two spaces are separated not only by bridges and tunnels but more importantly by racial, class, and ethnic cleavages. The “B and T” or “bridge and tunnel,” which is a disparaging term used for the general population living outside Manhattan, is also deployed for queers of color from the “outer” boroughs who are seen to frequent the venues in and inhabit the spaces of the “out there.”

To further illustrate the ways this imagined geography operates in daily life in the city consider this particular vignette. I was walking with my friend Ernesto down Christopher Street one cold winter day in 1995 when a gay white man coming out of a bar wobbled toward us. Visibly drunk, he accosted us with the question, “Are you two Orientals?”

We were too shocked to answer immediately. He proceeded to declare, “Well, I have never seen two Oriental homos before.” My friend

The city, the contemporary metropolis, is for many the chosen metaphor for the existence of the modern world. In its everyday details, its mixed histories, languages and cultures, its elaborate evidence of global tendencies, and local distinctions, the figure of the city, as both a real and an imaginary place, apparently provides a ready map for reading, interpretation and comprehension. Yet the very idea of a map, with its implicit dependence upon the survey of a stable terrain, fixed referents and measurement, seems to contradict the palpable flux and fluidity of metropolitan life and cosmopolitan movement. . . . Beyond the edges of the map we enter the localities of the vibrant everyday world and the disturbance of complexity. Here we find ourselves in the gendered city, the city of ethnicities, the territories of different groups, shifting centers and peripheries — that city that is a fixed object of design (architecture, commerce, urban planning, state administration) and yet simultaneously plastic and mutable: the site of transitory events, movements, memories.

— IAIN CHAMBERS, Migrancy, Culture, Identity
Ernesto, who was in fact Chicano, had a sharp tongue. Facing the drunken man, he blurted, “Excuse me, but we prefer the word ornamental.” Ernesto and I looked at each other and started laughing, and we left the man speechless.

This vignette and the “Out There” section demonstrate the fissures around race and other forms of differences that shape the contours of gay spaces in New York City. Both point to the kinds of “grids of difference” (Pratt 1998) that crisscross the urban terrain. To understand these grids, it is necessary to think of them not as serendipitous but rather as products of the structural processes of a global city. Saskia Sassen (1994, 2001) was among the first proponents of the global city as a “contested terrain” (1996: 151) and as a highly differentiated space. Mollenkopf and Castells (1991) suggested and critically analyzed a useful model of the global city as an uneven landscape on the one hand and a structured duality on the other. This structured duality is made up of a superstructure consisting of modern technological and financial industries that are buttressed by a service sector made up mostly of immigrants, people of color, and women. In other words, the gleaming modernity of New York City’s financial, commercial, and cultural centers with highly educated, mostly white personnel is supported by a gendered, ethnicized, and racialized substratum. This model is useful in enabling us to understand the myth of a monolithic gay community but also to see the divergent racialized spaces as overlapping realities (Parker 1999: 54; Chauncey 1994: 2-4) that transgress and/or intersect with each other. Therefore, despite its reputation as a gay mecca and the persistence of queers of color strive to map out the gay city as they stake out their own spaces. What follows is less of a systematic cartographic exercise and more of a series of loosely interconnected stories and events that produce a partial and highly specific topography. Therefore, the mapping of gay New York City is not only about the physical layout of the queer landscape but is also about hierarchical and uneven spatialized imaginings where particular queers are socially and symbolically located.

Gay New York: Beyond/In Black and White

For immigrants and other mobile people, the city represents the coming together of “worlds” and “nations” into one geographic area (Hannerz 1996). For many queers, urban space is the site for constituting selves and communities (Bech 1997; D’Emilio 1983).1 Many people, my informants included, perceive these interlocking worlds of New York City as a unique milieu in which to create a gay sense of self.

Filipino gay men marveled at the infinite variety of activities, events, and places marked as gay or queer in the city. One informant said that this variety is emblematic of everything “American,” in which everything is always seen as bigger, more plentiful, and wider ranging. Many of my informants described this variety in terms of products to be bought and consumed.2 As one informant put it, “Gay life in New York was like a big vending machine.” Indeed, by the late twentieth century, New York City gay life had mushroomed into a plethora of groups and events that catered to almost every possible political, cultural, economic, physical, and social need. The pages of gay travel and entertainment guides, directories, and other gay-oriented publications show how gay men in the city are able to join and access groups that
have a variety of agendas, including those that focus on the political (e.g., Gay Republicans), ethnicity (e.g., Irish Lesbian and Gay Association), religion (e.g., Dignity or "Gay Catholics"), occupations (e.g., Firefighters Lesbian and Gay of New York, Inc.), self-help (e.g., Gay Alcoholics Anonymous), support (e.g., Gay Circles), and law (e.g., Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund).

This enumeration of places, groups, and people is necessary to provide the backdrop for how Filipino gay men talk about gay life in the city to their friends back in the Philippines. At the same time, many of my informants would talk about race, as would most people in America, in terms of black and white. However, this bifurcation more often coincided with Filipino gay men’s stereotypical views of race and of gay spaces. I would ask various informants to sketch verbally the locations of an array of gay venues in the city. Most of them would talk of places in terms of the racial composition of the bars and neighborhoods.

The mappings of racialized queer spaces come in many genres. Notable among these are two ethnographic studies that highlight the stark racial and cultural boundaries between black and white gay men in New York City. The ethnographies of two Manhattan-based groups of gay men by Martin Levine (1990, 1992, 1998) and William Hawkeswood (1996) represent critical forays into the divergent reactions to the emergence of a gay culture. These two geographically bounded groups are not only culturally distinct but are also racially differentiated. Therefore, to modify my earlier statements about Manhattan, this borough-island is not in itself a monolithic gay enclave. In fact, these studies show that people living in Harlem or upper Manhattan have created a gay niche that is quite different and separate from the world renowned gay neighborhoods located downtown.

Levine’s (1990) ethnographic study of the gay macho “clone” examined a loose group of predominantly Caucasian men who dominated and set the tone for the post-Stonewall New York City gay scene in the 1970s and early 1980s. Levine studied the culture, social organization, and behavior of a cohort of men that was among the first to be affected by the AIDS pandemic; it was, in fact, the generation to be devastated and, in a way, decimated by the disease.

Gay clones rejected the effeminate stereotypes prevalent during the pre-Stonewall era and went to the opposite extreme. This generation of men presented a hypermasculine series of images in their manner of dressing, in the sites where they gathered, and in the symbols they utilized. For example, the clone usually donned working-class outfits, particularly those worn by lumberjacks, construction workers, the military, and police. These outfits also provided other coded messages to other clones. The colors of handkerchiefs and their placement in either the left or the right back pocket sent a message about the wearer’s favored sexual act and the position (top or bottom) that he assumed in that act. Other coded clothing styles included key chains, leather chokers, and ropes. Most men sported mustaches and had muscular, buffed bodies.

The organization of clone social life centered on the “clique” (Levine 1990: 80–90). The clique included men whose lives were dominated primarily by the fast life of parties, dances, drugs, and easy sex. These men participated in a routinized and ritualized series of events, parties, and other seasonal gatherings called the “circuit” (ibid.: 92). The circuit events were highlights in the gay clone’s social calendar and were important cultural events.

Clones also maintained clear boundaries in their representation of family and other “straight” institutions. Most of these clones were from other states and had migrated to New York for economic as well as sexual opportunities. Levine noted that gay clones generally anticipated reproach and chastisement from heterosexual kin, friends, and colleagues and attempted to escape this by living in gay enclaves and substituting the clique for these other social relationships as their main social network (ibid.: 98). Levine suggested that the clone socially isolated himself and created a social world mostly populated by others like him (ibid.: 80). This was made possible because of the relative privilege enjoyed by these mostly Caucasian men and, more importantly, by a rhetoric of individualism that pervades mainstream gay identity politics, which I discussed in the previous chapter.

In contrast, Hawkeswood (1996) focused on a specific group of African American gay men who lived and socialized in Harlem, and preferred other African American men for sexual partners during the late 1980s. This group of men had little significant contact with the mainstream gay enclave in downtown Manhattan. Within this relatively self-contained group of gay men, cultural practices, codes, and folklore differed from most of what is largely considered to be the New York City gay lifestyle.

These men did not live separately from their non-gay African Amer-
ican neighbors. Rather, they participated fully in Harlem community life and were accepted as full members. Religion and family were important components of their lives unlike most of the men from the clone culture, which veered toward secular issues. Religion, particularly in largely black congregations and denominations, is an arena for gay socializing and the formation of what is called the “church girl” network (ibid.: 111).

While the gay clone projected the ultra-masculine look, Hawkeswood’s informants continued to present themselves as ordinary men without special clothing styles in everyday life. Drag, however, was very popular as an annual drag ball was an important event in the social calendar for this group of men. In fact, voguing or house culture, a particular drag/cross-dressing cultural practice among African American and Latino gay men, is an integral part of many of these men’s lives (ibid.: 85–87, 188–89). The voguing ball, which I describe in detail below, is not only a statement about a different engagement with images of gender, homosexuality, and gay identity, but is actually a performance of class and the racial components of the class hierarchy. In these balls, black and Latino men and women dress up as Wall Street executives and as gangsters, or banjee (street) men, as private school coeds and as runway models, as street prostitutes and welfare queens.

Caucasian gay clones have an ambivalent relationship with discourses on class. The fetishization of working-class clothes comes together with images of opulence. Mainstream gay events are almost always imbued with glamour and images of what is seen as upper-class taste (which may vary according to each person). Many of the gay men I have met from various ethnic and racial groups would admit that they have “good taste.” Gay men, according to popular, stereotypical lore, are bearers of “good taste,” but the specifics of what constitutes “good taste” and who are its arbiters vary widely despite its heavy class underpinnings. Good taste, therefore, despite its material manifestations from furniture and art to houses and clothes, is naturalized in many ways as an intrinsic part of being gay. I would suggest that class is always sublimated in most gay discourses and subsumed not only under the cloak of good taste but also under a rhetoric of same-sex desire and the image of the valorized (white) gym-buffed body. Moreover, as the discussion in chapter 4 will show, Filipino informants report that Americans in general seem to be totally ill at ease with the question of class.

Most importantly, the irony behind white gay clones’ dis-ease with class is the fact that mainstream gay cultural events and lifestyles are suffused with class demarcations, which, in turn, hide racial boundaries. Consider the following entry from Circuit Noize, which was a bible/guide for gay men who wanted to become part of the circuit in the 1990s.

The circuit is a series of queer parties that are held around the world. A circuit party gives us the chance to escape the pressures of our day-to-day existence and to enter the altered world where man-to-man sex is not only accepted, but is celebrated. . . From gay ski weekends to an escape to South Beach [Florida] in the middle of winter. From a party at the Olympic Stadium in Montreal to a spring celebration in the middle of the desert. (Circuit Boyz Productions 1996: 6)

Major American, Australian, and European cities become the venues for this series of parties. The circuit party, among other queer events, has caused the notion of homogenizing queer culture. But what is left unsaid is that many men are excluded from such events despite a desire to be part of the scene; many are unable to travel either because of money problems or lack of documents. The circuit, more than anything, showcases the tension of class and mainstream (white) gay identity. With class comes the concomitant racial question in the face of the economic and culturally marginalized positions of gay men of color. Who among gay men of color may be viable members of the circuit even if they were welcomed into it? Certainly not Hawkeswood’s informants from Harlem nor many Filipino gay immigrants.

Most importantly, while gay clones largely decentered racial or ethnic identity in relation to gay identity, the African American men Hawkeswood studied were concerned about black identity and black expressive styles. These men’s preference for residence and social life within a black environment “further serves to explain the perception they hold of themselves as being primarily black men” (124).

The tension between urban queer spaces and race is more vividly explored in sites where various racial and ethnic groups meet. A recent work on the racialized and sexualized spaces of Times Square by the celebrated gay writer Samuel Delaney (1999) examined a section of the city that is known as a racial and ethnic crossroad and goes beyond the racially circumscribed sexual spaces of the city. In Times Square Red,
Times Square Blue, Delaney described in both biographical and ethnographic terms the various sexual emporia, theaters, street corners, bars, and other places in the midtown Manhattan district where queer men met for sexual and social purposes. He chronicled the changes in which hustlers and clients of various racial, class, and ethnic backgrounds converged in the area while seeking sexual pleasures and entertainment. He lamented the intrusion of giant corporations and stores and the eventual “cleaning up” of the district under the auspices of Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. While he unflinchingly exposed the gritty side of the pre-Giuliani years, including the harsh realities of queer public sex, he is equally unflinching with the horrors and violence of gentrification and normalization of Forty-second Street and its environs.

“Where’s the Gay Bar?”: Shifting Sites and Selves

Having mapped out the broader range of gay spaces in the city, I shift attention to what is considered to be the quintessential gay space—the gay bar. It is the most prominent space for socialization and, for many, authentic belonging to the community. Going clubbing or bar hopping is one of the typical preoccupations of many gay men. In fact, one way to differentiate oneself from the rest of the gay population is to declare that one is not into the bar scene. The New York City gay bar is epitomized in works of fiction, cinema, poetry, and other cultural forms. However, this section is an exploration of the more mercurial if not elusive aspects of queers of color spaces that defy the usual and popular renditions of the gay bar.

There are particular types of gay bars. According to my informants’ informal taxonomy of gay bars, there is a diversity of bars that cater to particular sexual tastes and more often are demarcated by ethnicity and race. There are leather bars for people who like leather and slapping (mahilig sa balat at sampal). Then there are Western/cowboy bars, which focus on country music and cowboy attire. Then there are sports bars, which possess a more casual atmosphere with a lot of athletic decor and without a rigid dress code. This type of bar was described by one informant as “totally pa-min” [ultra-masculine or masculine appearing]. Then, there are piano bars, which many of my informants would describe as places where gay men can participate in sing-alongs. There are TV bars, which cater to cross-dressers, transvestites, transsexuals, and other transgendered individuals and their admirers. Here, many of my cross-dressing informants found a veritable home especially since these are places where they can, as one informant quipped, “go all the way with kabakalaan” [being bakla]. Finally, there are the racially delineated bars, such as Latino or cha-cha bars, black or dinge or madilim [dark] bars, and Asian or rice bars (which are discussed further below).

Gay bars are assumed to be unambiguous spaces in terms of marking its target clientele and sensibility. More specifically, New York City gay bars are seen to be stable sites in terms of maintaining the sensibility of a “gay space” at least over a particular period of time. Gay travel guides feature maps where gay bars are indicated as points within various grids. However, this kind of mapping is too simplistic and does not take into account the various ways in which public spaces, particularly those “out there” can be inflected by other identities. Two bars in the Queens immigrant neighborhoods of Woodside and Jackson Heights reveal the prevalence of ambiguity and malleability of queers of color spaces.

In one bar, located in the Latino neighborhood of Jackson Heights and a block away from the elevated tracks of the no. 7 train, the clientele, staff, and music are primarily straight until 7 P.M., after which everything changes; from the people drinking to the ones serving the drinks to the music being played, it becomes a gay bar. When I visited the place with two other Filipino gay men, I was skeptical about what I had been told about the bar. Before 7 P.M., the bar, which was a one-room affair, had fifteen clients. Several male and female couples sat around drinking to a tear-jerking ballad in Spanish. Sure enough, it was indeed like clockwork. The bartender started counting his money. The couples and other single people in the bar started putting on their coats. And at 7:01 P.M., the new bartender stepped in, placed a tape in the stereo system, and started playing a dance song by Madonna. Soon, several men arrived; some, at least to us three Filipino observers, seemed gay or as one of my companions said, “queenly.”

Dodi, one of my companions, said that he had gone to several gay bars in the area, and he complained that he needed to have a visa in order to enjoy being in these places. He admitted that the people in the bars, including the bartender, were very friendly, but Dodi was frustrated at his lack of Spanish language skills. In fact, he said that being in these bars reminded him of his much dreaded Spanish classes when
he was in college in the Philippines. Dodi regretted not having been serious with his language studies. As he lamented, "Who knew that those irritating Spanish classes were going to be useful in my later life? At least, I can still remember basic things like 'Me llamo Dodi' and 'Voulez vous couchez avec moi.'" When I reminded him that his second phrase was in fact French, he exclaimed, "See, it is so hard to socialize in this neighborhood, especially if you are not Latino."

At the New Manila (a fictitious name), which was a Filipino restaurant in Woodside, there was a big Friday night event every week. Woodside is a large immigrant enclave with a significant number of Filipino residents and Filipino-owned business establishments. The pageant was organized by Miss Saudi, one of my informants who once worked in the Middle East. He said that Miss Java, one of my other informants and a famous figure among Filipino gay men, was judging the contest. I arrived at 7:30 P.M., and I was expecting to be confronted by a nightclub or pub-like atmosphere. Instead, I was surprised to see a family-style restaurant with big round tables and various families seated and eating Filipino food. Except for one or two Caucasians, most of the people in the place were Filipinos. In the middle of the din of people talking, eating, and walking around, I heard someone singing at one end of the stage. A middle-aged man was crooning quite convincingly to the karaoke machine's rendition of Frank Sinatra's ballad, "My Way." I thought I had come on the wrong night when Miss Saudi called my name. He rushed to me saying, "The pageant is a bit delayed. Tonight is karaoke night, also." I asked if the pageant would be held after the non-queer-looking clientele had left. He said that the pageant was part of the night's entertainment. "It is like the Philippines. Somebody lip-synching and then you have a drag beauty contest. Somewhat like the karnabal [carnival]." [Bodies, bodies, and more bodies...you cannot escape the drama of the body.] Many informants shared this opinion. Indeed, one need only read any gay-oriented magazine or attend any gay function to know that being gay is to live what one informant termed the "drama of the body." This drama involves diverse cultural practices that construct the body according to various groups. For example, a group of gay men (mostly Caucasians) are called bears because they are mostly husky, hirsute, and bearded. However, despite this diversity, Filipino gay men acknowledge that the most valorized corporeal image among gays is almost always a young muscular Caucasian body.

In gay-oriented magazines, most of which are based in New York City (e.g., Homo Xtra, Next), the cover images are usually naked or half-naked white men. Advertisements directed to a gay audience include pictures of naked men. In fact, ads for services such as dermatology, podiatry, chiropractic medicine, and other auxiliary medical services primarily serving gay men often feature the image of the valorized somatic type.

Gay videos and magazines are a veritable smorgasbord of racialized bodies. While the buffed male body is still the central focus of most of these magazines, there have also been specialized magazines catering to people who desire other corporeal types. Still other magazines focus on different ethnic and racial types such as Latinos, Asians, and African Americans. However, most of these magazines and videos that depart from the norm of the gym-buffed white body are "ghettoized." The merchandise on magazine racks and in porn video shops is often organized according to a racial and corporeal typology. For example, in one Greenwich Village video porn shop located on the main gay thoroughfare, Christopher Street, the main shelves feature videos with a mostly Caucasian cast, while videos with an obviously Latino (e.g.,
'Rican Meat, Latino Hunks), African American (e.g., Black Stallion), or Asian (e.g., Oriental Boy) cast are displayed and grouped separately. Another illustrative set of porn taxonomy included “Heterosexual,” “Gay,” “s&m,” and “Oriental,” which points to the combined racialization and sexualization of Asians (both male and female).

The gym, alongside the bars and discos, has become a quintessential gay space. There are several gyms, particularly in the Chelsea and Greenwich Village neighborhoods in Manhattan, that are overtly directed at gay male clients. A significant number of gay men that I have met often talk about the gym as an intrinsic part of their everyday routines. For many gay men, the gym is as important as three square meals a day. One Caucasian gay man told me, “There isn’t enough time in the day to really squeeze in a good workout. It needs careful planning of your life and strict discipline.” In addition to transforming bodies, the gym facilitates social contacts. “Oh yes, he goes to my gym,” was a frequent statement made by gay men about others to assert some kind of mutual links. According to several informants, the gym parallels the church in mainstream society as a social institution for the creation of affinity and comradeship. As Exotica wisely put it, “Dito iba ang iglesia ng mga bading—sumsamba sila sa katawan.” [Here the gays have a different church—they worship the body.] This statement is less an informative one and more that of an outsider looking into a distant culture. While several of my informants do go to the gym, bodybuilding practices nevertheless provided another node of difference between themselves and the mainstream. This is not to say that Filipino gay men are hypocritical but that they have a vexed relationship to this and other mainstream institutions of gay sociality.

Apart from the gym, there are other social organizations and institutions that cater to the communal obsession with the body. If one were to peruse the monthly events calendar of the Lesbian and Gay Community Center, one could glean examples of such organizations as the New York Physique Team, Knights Wrestling Club, and other sports-oriented clubs. Homo Xtra and Next, two of the leading weekly guides to events in the New York City gay scene, include not only personal ads but also ads for groups that focus on tactile experiences (not limited to massage), meditation, and alternative health philosophies (e.g., Reiki).

The baths and sex clubs are important if not ubiquitous institutions in the mainstream gay community. The late 1990s have seen the resurgence of these institutions after several years of dormancy owing to the AIDS epidemic. During the late 1980s concerns expressed by some AIDS activists and city health officials focused on how these institutions promote unsafe sex and the transmission of HIV. Other activists argue that these places celebrate gay liberation, particularly from the dominant codes of conduct. Despite these conflicts, these institutions and the “culture” of anonymous sexual encounters still persist. In all of these places, one pays an admission, or “cover charge.” Most if not all are dimly lit, and encounters are conducted either in small cubicles/booths or in public “orgy” rooms. One informant said, “There is a proper way to behave in these places. One can touch, but not too aggressively. The slightest disinterest should make one aware and act accordingly.” The blatant public display of bodies leads to anxiety for some of my informants. One of them said, “There [the baths and sex clubs] there is no way one can hide the fact that one has bilbil [love handles]; the minimal lighting helps, pero [but] once the hombre [man] touches you—bingo—luz valdez ka [you lose].”

Like the gay clones of the 1970s, the new clones of the 1990s—the Chelsea clones—believe that wearing proper attire is a good way of asserting one’s identity. Clothes, for many gay men, are not meant to cover the body but to accentuate it or call attention to it. According to my informants, the ultra-masculine style favored by mainstream Caucasian gay men has specific sets of rules for presenting their dressed selves. Like the 1970s clone attire, there is an emphasis on working-class wardrobes of tight-fitting white (plain) T-shirts, work boots, and jeans for the new clone. Tattoos, earrings, and/or pierced nipples are additional accoutrements. However, most of my informants were wary of the uniforms and clothing styles of the clones. According to Romuel, clothing cannot totally remake the person, there is still a body—a racialized one that is “carrying the clothes.” Exotica, one of my wise main informants, commented on one of the fashion trends of the early 1990s—the “grunge” style where the look was disheveled and unkempt. He said, “You know that is fine for the white folks, but if one of us [Filipinos] started wearing that style we would not look stylish—just dirty and poor!” Thus, to walk the streets of the city in these styles of the moment does not guarantee membership in the community; rather, as many of my informants confided, these styles of dressing actually heighten the differences between themselves and other gays.
The Tale of Two Parties

To exemplify further the different kinds of drama and cultures of the gay body and to propose starkly the divergent constructions of gay identity and culture, I juxtapose two events. One is an annual circuit dance that is a mainstream Caucasian production and the other is a sporadically scheduled affair that is attended mostly by Latinos and African Americans. The descriptions that follow, as I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, are based on my observations and on the experiences of Filipino gay men. My purpose in providing descriptions of these two cultural events is to locate gay Asians not in terms of an abstract gay community, but in terms of one that is fraught with racial and class cleavages.

THE BLACK PARTY

In the mainstream gay circuit there are annual events that are seen as cultural high points. Apart from the Gay Pride Parade, which usually takes place on the last Sunday in June to commemorate Stonewall, there are major parties that punctuate the year in the city's gay life. One of these is the Black Party. Despite the name, the party is not for African American gay men only. As a matter of fact, only a handful of African American men attend this event. The party's revelers are mostly gay white men who come not only from the New York City area but also from different parts of the country and the world, including Europe, Canada, and Australia. The party's name tackles the color black and its concomitant symbols as its theme. There are other counterparts such as the White, Red, and Black and Blue parties, which are sometimes held in other new gay meccas outside New York such as Atlanta, South Beach/Miami, and Philadelphia. The Black Party is one of the more expensive gay affairs with tickets running from forty dollars before the event to sixty dollars at the door. Posters advertising the event can be seen in many of the gay-oriented magazines, shops, restaurants, and bars in Manhattan.

The 1995 celebration was held at a cavernous ballroom in midtown Manhattan. I was told that the "right" time to get to the party was around 2 A.M. As my informant told me, "One cannot be caught dead standing there when the gates open. We don't want to appear too overeager." The party continued nonstop until late the next evening.

The proper attire was black leather — leather biker jacket, chaps, thongs, arm bands, wristbands, caps, and boots. An occasional black or white T-shirt and denim could be spotted, but the appareil de rigueur was either black leather or exposed flesh.

For the few Filipinos in attendance, the milieu suggested something forbidding and dangerous yet at the same time pleasurable and alluring. The black leather motif and the overall sinister masculine aura of the event lead one of the Filipino gay men in my group to exclaim gleefully, “O hindi va, parang nasa impyerno tayo?” [Don’t you think it is like being in hell?]

My informants and I arrived around 2:30 A.M. and went down to the coat-check booth. Many attendees were stripping out of their coats, jogging pants, and jackets to reveal bare chests, leather shorts, and other vestments that were totally unseasonable given the wintry weather outside. Some people changed while they were in line. Others went to the men's room to accomplish the task. On the main floor where the dancing took place, there was a huge throng of people gyrating to the music.

Informants who attended the event reported a very strong sexual tension in the whole place. Many participants would casually touch and/or fondle other people's bodies, even people they did not know. On the dance floor, several men sidled up to other men they did not know and gyrated to the music. Others removed articles of clothing while dancing. There were several instances when some people danced fully naked. An informant and I observed a group of people huddled around a couple of men, one of whom was whipping the other. My informant looked at me and said, “Kakaiba talaga ang mundo ito. Paalala na nang paalala — anything goes!” [This world is really different. The body is always on display and whatever you want to do — anything goes.]

I left around 9:30 in the morning. The place was still packed and jumping. Another Filipino informant who was present said, “Kailangan talaga, ilan-tan ang katawan na mayang lalaki mo. Look ka na nang look at baka maka-buy kang bigla.” [One really needs to display one's body — like you were selling it. You may look and look, and maybe you might buy.] The main purpose of the party was not to find a lovemate, but rather to see and be seen. As one Caucasian gay man told me, “The Black Party is what most of gay entertainment is all about — flesh and voyeurism.” The party, therefore, is really a public celebration of the gay body, a carnival devoted to corporeal images and pleasures.
THE VOGUEING BALL

Culture or vogueing houses are groups consisting predominantly of Latino and African American gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. Most of these houses are named after famous fashion designers or cosmetic brands (e.g., Revlon, Fields, Miyake-Mugler). The organization of a house is patterned after the familial structure, with a mother, father, and children. These roles do not follow any generational or gender hierarchy. Therefore, one housemother may be male and the father female. The social life of the houses revolves around the preparation, management, and competition in balls. The balls are the central activity of houses and essentially are fashion runway competitions. Usually one house holds a ball and different houses from around the city as well as from other cities in the Northeast come to compete. They are usually held in big halls in different parts of Manhattan.

I attended four balls sponsored by different houses. My first experience with balls was in 1991. For my initial foray into this world, I went to a huge hall off Union Square at 6 P.M. I paid twenty dollars and was frisked for hidden weapons. According to the program, the competition was supposed to start at exactly 6 P.M. I waited for a while because the activities did not start until 8:30 P.M. I later found out that this was a usual occurrence. In most balls, regulars come in with food and drinks since most of the venues do not have any refreshments for sale. I was advised by regulars that another way to survive the ball's erratic schedule was to arrive at least two to three hours late.

The typical ball starts with the "grand march" where the members of the organizing house are presented. Each member walks down the runway to the cheers and chants of the crowd. Usually the nimble, spectacularly acrobatic, or physically beautiful are the ones given the most applause. Then the competition begins.

The competitions I attended were divided into two main categories, which were themselves sharply divided into two main parts, "femme queen" and "butch queen." Femme queens were those who presented a more feminine image while butch queens were those who presented a masculine image. However, these categories were frequently crossed and transgressed with butch queens coming out in female clothing. For example, in one particular ball I attended the specific categories under butch queen included BQ Body (muscular bodies), Butch Queen in Drag, and Butch Queen Transformation (where participants were required to model Wall Street executive clothes and then change or transform into the sexy secretary).

More than anything, while some of the categories focus on the body or the face ("Face" is an actual category where the winner is oftentimes subjected to a tactile screening by judges to test for skin roughness and beard growth), many of the categories are about the social aspirations of the mostly working or lower middle-class Latino and black participants. For example, in one ball program, the Femme Schoolgirl category is described in this way: "You just got kicked out of boarding school for lack of payments. Now what do you do in your school uniform to get back in?" Then there are categories such as Wall Street Executive and Socialite Queen. Labels, Labels, Labels subjects competitors to a close inspection by judges to see whether their clothes are authentic couture outfits.

The essence of the ball's symbolic structure is glamour as exemplified by high or couture fashion, the trappings of wealth, and media conceptions of beauty. The tension between the material realities of the participants and the excessive glamour and opulence of the categories and the whole ball itself creates an arena where a mostly gay-identified group of Latinos and blacks attempts to present their dreams and aspirations visually. Moreover, these balls are in fact encapsulations of the ironies and displacements these men and women (women and transsexuals also attend these balls) experience in the outside world and are often about race and class more than sexuality and gender.

Apart from the obvious difference in the racial makeup of "personnel" or performers in these two events, I believe these two events exemplify different twists and turns in the drama of the body. The Black Party and other mainstream events deflect class and race while the vogueing ball celebrates it. The white buffed body clad in leather may in fact have some physical similarities with the Butch Queen Transformation competitor but this is also where the similarities end. The Butch Queen competitor may suddenly appear in an Armani suit to simulate a social type he may never become because of his racial and class background. While vogueing balls do celebrate the body, I suggest that they are really less about a gay body than a Latino or black body in its various social transformations on stage. Many of my informants talked about the affinity they felt with vogueing culture, particularly cross-dressing, but more important to them were the ways in
which Latino and African American queers' notions of transformation and gender performance resonated with their own cultural ideas. In chapter 5, I discuss this issue further in relation to public cross-dressing performances.

Desire in the Street, Danger under the Sheets

Walking the streets of New York City is an undertaking full of perils and possibilities. Many of my informants told me that cruising in the streets can be quite fascinating because one is never really sure of what will happen. The busy, noisy, and dirty streets of New York City are sources of nostalgic moments for some of my informants. One of them said that if one were to take out the people and the stores, the chaos of New York street life roughly approximates that of Manila's. While some other informants may disagree, this attitude uncovers the deep contradictory mix of anxiety and excitement regarding the possibilities of desire in public spaces.

Vaseline Alley is not a real alley. It is a regular street located a block away from Roosevelt Avenue in the Jackson Heights section of Queens. This is an immigrant neighborhood filled with Koreans, South Asians, and Latinos. The “alley” is actually a stretch of several blocks right around a string of gay bars on Roosevelt Avenue and is known to be a major area for queer cruising and public sex.

A couple of my informants admitted going to this area on a regular basis in the 1980s and early 1990s. One of them said, “Mahirap makipag-do dito sa kalyeng ‘to, hindi mo makabisa ang tao.” [It is hard to have sex here in this street; you can never be sure about other people.] When queried further, he mentioned the fact that most of his encounters were with either Latino or South Asian men who mostly spoke little or no English. He later admitted that speaking while having public sex is not important, but he was nevertheless bothered by his inability to speak to his sex partners. At the same time, Filipino gay men who frequent this area have reported violent incidents involving bashings and robbery, but as many of them admitted, the danger comes with the allure.

With these violent incidents comes fear of the police. One of my informants was arrested once, and he spent two nights in jail. He said he was a victim of entrapment; the policeman who arrested him kept talking about the INS and deportation rather than jail. My informant was terrified because he was here on a working visa and could easily be sent back to the Philippines.

Vaseline Alley, according to many of my informants, differs from the queer cruising places in Manhattan, such as the piers near Christopher Street. Most of these areas are located in gentrifying sections of the city and are now mostly inhabited by white yuppies. For many of them, Vaseline Alley, while not any safer, is in fact an area where they can blend in instead of standing out.

Many of my informants compared the public cruising areas in the city with what they knew in Manila. Romuel said that he used to frequent the area called “Chocolate Hills,” which was a field near the old Congress building in Manila. He said, “When you look for sex in the dark, it does not matter where you are.” Other informants disagreed with him. For many of them, the major difference was the variety of bodies available in New York and the fact that the public areas at least seemed somehow to be a democratic space. As one of them said, “Sa dilim, akala mo kahit ano puwede pero kapag diyutay goodbye!” [In the dark, you might think that anything goes, but if you are not amply endowed — goodbye.] More often than not, the public cruising areas are met with some kind of hesitation; this was particularly true around the time the New York City police conducted a series of arrests in Vaseline Alley and the Manhattan piers. For many of my informants, being a person of color added to the danger of being arrested.

A queer of color cannot walk with impunity in any area of the city. Even in immigrant neighborhoods, the idea of public cruising as a democratic practice is unraveled in the face of racist sexual practices. In fact, the dangers for immigrant queers of color multiplied as intense policing of the areas occurred with great regularity in the 1990s. As much as the Stonewall slogan was in part about the claiming of public space, immigrant queers of color such as Filipino gay men view the streets with trepidation and anxiety.

Rice Bars and the Space of Gay Asian Americans

The two disparate parties discussed above are in fact illustrations of racialized and class-laden cultural expressions in New York City gay life. However, far from being a white-black issue, New York City gay life also includes practices, histories, and places for Latinos and Asians.
To delineate the spaces as well as the kind of visibility Asian gay men, specifically Filipinos, confront in New York City, I consider several texts and discourses as well as observations that provide both the background and elaboration of such spaces. In this consideration, we inevitably meet with racializing discourses of Orientalism. Orientalism, as I use the term in this book, extends both the theoretical and geographic context suggested by Said (1978) to the realm of American gay spaces. How are Asian gay men raced/racialized? How are Asian gay men classed?

Rice bars are among the most overtly Asian and Orientalized gay spaces in New York. In 1996, there were two located in the Upper East Side section of Manhattan. While Asian gay men frequent other bars, rice bars, as the derisive term suggests, are gay spaces where a sizable number or a clear majority of the patrons would likely be Asian. Rice bars, according to gay lore, were popularly or stereotypically seen to be unsophisticated institutions with outdated music that catered to a clientele made up of older homely (mostly white) men and naive immigrant Asian men. In the past, efforts have been made to transform these bars into imitations of the mainstream ones. In addition to providing new sleek interiors, these bars have also made efforts to change their image from an Asian/rice one to a more international and sophisticated reputation.

Exotica, my guide, brought me to my first rice bar in the mid-1980s. It was located on the Upper East Side. The decor was rather non-descript, but the music took me back in terms of time and space. The song “Rock the Boat” was playing and a few people were dancing on a small raised platform. Here was music that was at least a decade old and which for many of the Asian men in the bar brought to mind a time when they were still in their homelands. In addition to the dated music, most of the clientele did not mirror the younger crowd of men in the downtown bars. Exotica again explained, “Mahirap talaga dito sa rice bowl, hindi mo maintindihan, kakaiba kasi Asiatika ang customer.” [It is really hard here in the rice bowl (bar), you cannot really understand it. It is different because Asians are the customers.] Many Filipino gay men perceive the rice bar as intrinsically different and atypical because it is an Asian queer space. Despite the camaraderie, fun, and pleasure that can be found in these spaces, many informants also intimated to me that these same spaces were sites of alienation and exclusion.

Informants told me that in one of the two existing rice bars in the 1980s, one of the Caucasian owners would survey the crowd and would single out people — mostly Asians — who did not have a drink in hand and scold and shame them into buying one. Exotica told me that he and his friend would make a point of picking up some stray bottle to make it seem as though they were drinking something. As Tito, one of Exotica’s friends, would say, “Too bad, they are trying to sell liquor to the Asiatikas (Asians) but they will not succeed.” Believing in the stereotype that Asians do not drink, Tito was also trying to make a point that the rice bar did not seem to be a good and welcoming space for Asian gay men despite the fact that this was one place where they were in the majority.

Informants told me that until the early 1980s, the presence of other Asian men in most bars and at other gay activities was very rare. They further noted that interesting configurations form in bars that cater to predominantly Caucasian clientele. For example, in one trendy Greenwich Village gay bar in the 1980s, gay men of color occupied a section of the bar off to the right of the entrance, which many informants called the “Third World” section, while the white majority occupied all the different levels and sections.

Informants noted a shift in the visibility of Asian men from the 1970s to the 1980s. An informant said: “Noong mga 1970s at early 1980s, kung pupunta ka sa isang affair ng kabadingan noon, tiyak, ikaw lang ang natatanging Miss Asia. Wala kang kakumpetisyon. Ngayon, ang daming mga contenders.” [During the 1970s and early 1980s if you went to any gay affair, you would be the only Miss Asia. You did not have any competition. Now there are so many contenders.]

Like other gay personal ads in other magazines, the ads in magazines oriented toward Asian gay males (e.g., Passport and Oriental Gentleman) abd those written by or for Asian gay men in other kinds of magazines (Village Voice and Homo Xtra) illustrate a myriad of textual strategies. The ads can be grouped into two: Caucasians (there have been very few nonwhites who advertise) looking for Asians and Asians looking for Caucasians. Caucasians’ ads often are in these forms: “Gay Oriental Male (GOM)/Gay Asian Male (GAM) wanted: slim, boyish, small, cute, young or younger-looking, and hairless.” Asians, in contrast, usually construct their ads in this way: “Gay White Male (GWM) wanted: daddy, older, hairy, husky, hunk, muscular, and masculine.” Most Caucasians looking for Asians are usually older, in their forties or fifties, while the Asians are considerably younger.
GAM [Gay Asian Male], 25, 5'8", slim and professional looking for GWM [Gay White Male], hairy, muscular a plus.

Gay Filipino 30s' combines Eastern mysticism with Western pragmatism looking for G W/H/A male, professional and into relationships.

Not just another Asian, I am muscular, hairy, and aggressive, looking for same or white/Hispanic hunk.

GWM looking for boyish, young Asian. Slim and not into bars.

At first glance, a majority of these texts shows how Orientalized images that tread the lines of masculine-feminine and dominant-submissive are overtly displayed. The overt physical and generational disparities exemplified in these texts are part of what is seen as the "rice queen" syndrome. In gay lexicon, rice queens are Caucasians who are older, usually economically well-off men who are attracted to Asians. Moreover, such attraction is popularly seen to come with racist and patronizing attitudes and beliefs on the part of the Caucasian, who projects Orientalized images to his object of desire. In fact, the common belief is that the rice queen preys on young Asian boys.

In a 1993 presentation to the Gay Asian Pacific Islander Men of New York (GAPIMNY), a gay Asian group in New York, Gene Chang, a student at Columbia University, transported the rice queen phenomenon into the realm of the psychopathological (Ogasawara 1993: n). He suggested that the rice queen's desire for Asian (young and young-looking) men is really a mask for pedophilic tendencies. He supported his contention by graphing the "incompatibility of physical attributes" (height, age, penis size, and so on) between Asians and Caucasians in personal ads. Chang further explored the exploitative and "imperialist" possibilities of encounters between an older Caucasian and a young Asian by examining mainstream gay porn films. He contended that the Asian gay man is relegated to passive sexual (as insertee) and social roles (i.e., masseur, houseboy, and so on). What is interesting in this presentation is Chang's leap from his "findings" of corporeal asymmetry mapped out in personal ads to the contention of a rice queen's real pedophile identity. Using statistical techniques and graphs, Chang charted the differences between Caucasian and Asian gay men in personal ads in terms of average height (two inches), weight (thirty to forty pounds), and age (fifteen to twenty years). He directly equated such difference with actual power inequality in gay Caucasian-Asian sexual politics.

Chang's views, though faulty, are the prevalent views among the growing number of politicized Asian gay men. Although I do not deny the existence of exploitative and racist interactions between gay Asian and Caucasian men, such prevalent views as those held by Chang adhere to the same dichotomous stereotypes on which Orientalist images are constituted. Furthermore, these same "radical" views construct the Asian gay man as devoid of agency.

The other texts I consider are gay travelogues and travel guides. These texts not only provide glimpses of people and places for touristic delectation, they also raise deep insights about the authors and the social milieu in which such genres are produced. In fact, the narrative I will closely examine is a gay travel guide to the Philippines. The narrative in question is *Philippine Diary: A Gay Guide to the Philippines* by Joseph Itiel. This is not so much an actual diary but a catalogue of cruising places and people for men who like Asian men as sex partners. For these kinds of men, Itiel offers connoisseur's tips in establishing, maintaining, and controlling encounters or relationships with Filipino gay men. He offers interesting insights about Filipino gay men based on his "relationships" with several of them, which he chronicles hazily in the book. Among such gems is his observation that Filipino gay men have unstable personalities. "Filipinos may be very patient," he writes, "but if they are pushed far enough, they snap completely and are capable of extreme violence" (1989: 15). His other observations about Filipino gay male traits include a childish fascination with telephones, an inability to manage sums of money, noisiness, a penchant for gossip, intellectual shallowness, and a disdain for any intellectual conversations. Among his other interesting assertions is the claim that behind smiling Filipino faces "lurks a deep melancholy, an unresolved sorrow that is almost always associated with their family relationships" (ibid.: 23).

Despite being a guide for rice queens going to the Philippines, Itiel extends his analysis to include Filipino gay men everywhere, including those in the United States. He maintains that there are particular immutable traits of Filipino gay men that do not change regardless of place of birth and socialization. The transplanted Filipino gay man in the United States displays the same child-like qualities he observed among his "companions" in the Philippines. Although Itiel says that
the Filipino gay male may actually change some of his habits, he will only do so for survival and individual gain.

Itiel emphasizes that a Filipino gay man's family and class background do not matter. He asserts that whether a Filipino gay man is from the slums of Manila or has been educated at Harvard, he possesses specific immutable characteristics. Despite the global mobility of Filipinos, Itiel incarcerates the Filipino gay male into an essentialized and exoticized island of cultural primitiveness and pre-adult developmental limbo. Itiel's narrative connectes itself to the dominant Orientalized stereotypes by asserting that any Filipino belongs and is rooted to that locale of imagined exotic alterities—the Orient.

It would be too easy to provide an ad hominem diatribe against this text. However, such is not the intention here. I take this text as a springboard for Filipino gay men's narratives about race in the succeeding chapters. Itiel's text may be an overt form of the rice queen syndrome, but the images constructed in the texts are the same ones that confront Filipino gay men when they enter the shores of the American gay community.

Itiel's text reconstructs the Orientalized notions of the Filipino and Asian male body. These Orientalized notions dichotomize East and West in female and male terms. The Oriental body is always and already female or feminized. This construction is then extended to the passive and active axes in sexual terms before turning to Asian corporeal characteristics that involve feminized, androgynous, and pedophilic dimensions. For example, popular Orientalized signifiers include hairlessness, boyish/feminine qualities, slimness, and a gentle mien. It is this fixed and static notion of the body that will be disputed by the narratives of Filipino gay men in the succeeding chapters.

Class, however, is particularly problematic in the case of Asian gay men. However, it is not so much the kinds of attitudes that Asian gay men have about the class hierarchy (from field experiences, they are more conscious and reverential of class differences) but the imputation of erroneous class assignations to Asian Americans in general. As the so-called model minority group, Asians in the United States are seen as upwardly mobile and occupy a tier just below Caucasians in economic resources and mobility.

As a mostly immigrant group, Asians in New York City face particular challenges. While they are generally portrayed as economically prosperous, their immigrant status is often interpreted as lacking or as being deficient in cultural capital such as fluency in English. Informants often told me that Asians are regularly perceived to be naive and innocent of the trappings of gay and Western attitudes and guile. These images tie into the kind of pseudo-pedophilic view of the Asian body as both feminine and childlike. In addition to being perceived as "fresh off the boat," Asians are also seen as imbued with a natural grace and exotic poise. This mix of contradictory yet connected images and discourses about class, body, and race are what Asian gay men in general and Filipino gay men in particular confront in their daily lives. In the next chapters, I will demonstrate how these spaces, ideas, and images are manipulated by these men to create new forms of belonging and selfhood.

Whose Community? Whose City?

When a senior scholar of queer studies read an earlier version of this chapter, he was so incensed at what he considered to be my voyeuristic tour of the gay (white) mainstream community that he accused me of writing like a *New York Times* journalist out to expose the evils of the community. He ended his tirade by comparing me to gay conservatives such as Michelangelo Signorile and Andrew Sullivan and with great flourish declared, "The white gay community is my community. I love this community."

While I would admit to the rather terse mode of some of the descriptions in the earlier version, I was surprised at the virulence of his accusations. Was I indeed the prototypical voyeur with an eye for grand exposes and scandal? Why couldn't a critical examination of the gay community be done without being accused of voyeurism or backwardness? More importantly, what was wrong with my kind of voyeurism? In other words, why could I not lay claim to this community through my own gaze and my informants' gazes?

Unlike Benjamin's flaneur—the paradigmatic figure of modernity who walks through all avenues and alleyways of the city with impunity—my gaze and physical presence as well as those of the informants in certain queer spaces were being questioned. The very idea of a critical eye being cast upon mainstream gay places and events was interpreted as being a malevolent if not an unsuitable preoccupation for a queer scholar. As someone who has been situated "out there," I began to realize that in many ways, the senior scholar saw me as an upstart and troublemaker who did not know his proper place.
In a city marked by overlapping and contradictory sites, New York City queers of color spaces are oftentimes circumscribed by larger forces such as federal, city, and state laws. During my fieldwork from the early to late 1990s, the New York City police were accused of harassment and cruelty against people of color. At the same time, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani promulgated a “quality of life” campaign that virtually wiped out public queer spaces in many areas of the city. What is particularly instructive is that people of color were more afraid of the risk of being arrested and/or harassed in various areas of the city. In addition, the ambivalent and mercurial quality of several queers of color spaces point to the abject and marginal status of these sites in relation to the mainstream gay topography.

For diasporic queers, spaces in the city intersect with other spaces from other times and places. In particular, Filipino gay men’s memories are enmeshed with their experiences of the various queer spaces, which in turn shape their experiences of new sites. As participants in and observers of the various sites and places in the city, Filipino gay men are keenly aware of their location and acknowledge both the opportunities in and barriers to staking a claim to any of these places. From cruising the streets to entering the portals of the gay bar to trying to access gay cultural events, Filipino gay men are witnesses to and participants in the ongoing drama of racialized corporeal politics and hierarchical social arrangements. These men continually struggle to navigate their way through the contradictory landscape of the gay global city of New York.

Physical distance between queer spaces in the city may be connected by bridges and tunnels of modern urban public transportation, but social distance marked by race and class, for example, are gulls oftentimes left open. In a gay global city marked by the “here” and the “out there,” queers of color, such as Filipino gay men, find themselves continually negotiating their proper place and laying claims to spaces from which they are often excluded.

The everyday tells us a story of modernity in which major historical cataclysms are superseded by ordinary chores, the arts of working and making things. In a way, the everyday is anticatastrophic, an antidote to the historical narrative of death, disaster and apocalypse. The everyday does not seem to have a beginning or an end. In everyday life we do not write novels but notes or diary entries that are always frustratingly or euphorically anticlimactic. In diaries, the dramas of our lives never end—as in the innumerable TV soap operas in which one denouement only leads to another narrative possibility and puts off the ending. Or diaries are full of incidents and lack accidents; they have narrative potential and few completed stories. The everyday is a kind of labyrinth of common places without monsters, without a hero, and without an artist-maker trapped in his own creation.—SVETLANA BOYM, Common Places

I was sitting in a cramped apartment in Queens, New York in the spring of 1992. I had been talking for more than an hour with Roberto,