The Queer Afterlife of the Postcolonial City: (Trans)gender Performance and the War of Beautification

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Abstract: This paper examines how queer practices of transformation enable the preservation and perversion of the logics, aspirations, and violences that animated Imelda Marcos's "war of urban beautification". It traces conceptual overlaps between the notions of truth and beauty that underpinned Imelda's faith in architectural modernism and which operate in the sex/gender tradition of *kabaklaan*. Using the case study of the Manila Film Center, a formerly abandoned and famously haunted Marcos-era building that has been transformed into the host site of a "transgender" revue, the paper demonstrates how queerness, necropower, architecture, and dreams of urban and global modernity come together through the spatial effects of authoritarian power.

Keywords: Imelda Marcos, modern architecture, postcolonial cities, queer performance, transgender, *bakla*

> Not a single one among us can afford to beg off and just watch the metropolis decay and die ... We are all aware of the sacrifices we must all make, and my heart goes out to those who must bear the burden of restoration, reforms, and reconstruction ... (R)enaissance has a high price to pay (Imelda Marcos 1975, "Civilization Has a Price").

The labor of dreaming is the obligation of the architect. Imelda Marcos knew this; as First Lady (1965–1986), Minister of Human Settlements (1978–1986), and Governor of Metropolitan Manila (1975–1986), she spoke of architecture as the "most basic" of arts and as the bearer of the "spirit of each age" (Marcos 1970). For Imelda, architects and urban planners had a greater role than priests, doctors, and statesmen in shaping the life of man (Marcos 1978). She spoke to and of them hyperbolically, as "citizens of the world" par excellence, as having the purpose—more than any other artist—of fashioning the ideals of a time, of recording and inaugurating social aspirations "in brick, stone, and mortar, in iron, steel, and glass" (Marcos 1970).

In "Civilization Has a Price", the acceptance speech she delivered upon appointment as governor of the capital region in 1975, Imelda spoke of the burden of restoration—of staving off the death of the city—as a general task. It would have been clear to those who heard her then, however, that her vision of transforming Manila into

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the "City of Man" required, firstly, a radical re-imagineering of the city's built environment. Indeed, from the mid-1960s until the early 1980s, Imelda initiated and oversaw the construction of landscape-changing modernist structures, including the Manila International Airport, various medical and technological centers scattered throughout the city, and most notably, the Brutalist buildings of the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP), a 62 hectare complex built on land reclaimed from the South China Sea.[1] These structures, all unmistakably influenced by the prevailing international aesthetic interest in basic geometric forms and in the plasticity of concrete, were and remain the primary symbols of Imelda's "edifice complex" (Lico 2003). They stand testament to the faith she placed in urban transformation as a way of entering global modernity, a means of making Manila legible to the world and of bringing the world into the city.

The construction of what are now known as the Marcos buildings, along with her various appointments and invitations to address assemblies of architects, engineers, and development and tourism professionals, provided numerous occasions for Imelda to deliver speeches on the present and future of Metropolitan Manila (see Maramag 1978; Marcos 1981, 1982). Throughout all of them, however, Imelda remained silent about the nature of the gravest sacrifices that had to be made in order to bring to life her vision of a revitalized city. She did not speak of adding to the burden of debt that would become a critical part of the dictatorship's legacy; of the shantytowns leveled by bulldozers; of the immiseration hidden behind whitewashed walls, away from the view of the dignitaries who flocked to the city during the height of the Marcos regime; and of the displacements, disappearances, and deaths that met those who opposed authoritarian rule and the culture of excess it enabled and for which Imelda and her buildings have become lasting avatars. These violences—the open secrets that accompanied the revivification of Manila—demonstrate the foundational contradiction at the heart of the city's transformation during the Marcos years; they take apart the image of Manila as a showcase for modernization and reveal a complementary picture of the postcolonial city as an object of state terror, a "theater of cruelty" (Tadiar 2009:155). More broadly, the scenes of abjection that emerged alongside Imelda's so-called "war of beautification" can be understood as the "high price" of the dictatorship's attempt to realize dreams of urban and global modernity. They are the aftereffects of the logic of parasitism that animated the modernist drive of the Marcoses—that is, its dependence on the production of bare forms of living and, ultimately, on the subjugation of life to the power of death (necropower) (Mbembe 2003). As Neferti Tadiar argued, the "delirium of modernity" made real through the work of beautification was a force of enervation. It was brought into being paradoxically, by "squeezing the life" out of the city's inhabitants or by emptying them of their "vital force" (Tadiar 2009:155).

In this essay, I sketch out some of the logics that underpin the urban exercise of necropower in the name of modernization. More specifically, I examine the vague yet generative connections between the beautification of the city and ineffable figures such as ghosts and spirits that are situated between life and death. These connections, I suggest, can be illuminated by drawing attention to the ideas and pronouncements of Imelda, whose own indisputably gendered performance of

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sovereign power (see Balance 2010; Rafael 2000:122–161), demonstrated for instance by her empathetic call for sacrifice, enabled the violent movement of a city towards an always elusive global modernity. Here, however, I argue that any discussion of Imelda's interest in beauty and transformation requires a consideration, not only of her role as a sovereign agent (that is, her control over mortality), but of her association with forms of queer subjectivity and the relationship of queerness itself to the dream of actualizing modernity in the postcolonial city.

Indeed, while Imelda's rule over Manila was legitimated in large part by her performance of an archetypal femininity—the dictator's dutiful wife, the mother of nation whose primary task was to "turn his house into a home"—her unwavering commitment to notions of beauty was also always attached to queer visions of appearance and spectacle. In fact, during her reign, she developed such a reputation for surrounding herself with gay artists, including hairdressers, dressmakers, interior designers, and figures in the visual and performing arts, that she became known as the "ultimate fag hag" (Tan 2001:123) and as the "queen of Philippine faggots" (Capino 2003:272). Here I want to suggest, if somewhat speculatively, that this reputation, apart from pointing to her direct personal ties to urban queer worlds and to the stereotypical image of queer attachment to female figures of excess, gestures towards deeper conceptual overlaps between Imelda's modernism and the logic of self-transformation that animates local queer formations. In particular it points to the ties that bind the ideological foundations of Imelda's "war of beautification" to the tradition of the *bakla*, the sex/gender formation which is often associated with beauty industries, translated (albeit problematically) as a variant of "drag" and "trans" femininity, and, crucially, read as invested in the possibility of recapturing power through mimetic transformation (Cannell 1999). In tracing the continuities (and discontinuities) between Imelda and *kabaklaan* (*bakla*-ness), my aim in this essay is not to establish clear-cut points of conceptual homogeny or difference. Rather, I hope to further illuminate the gendered logic of urban modernization in the postcolony and, more critically, show how a logic of queer transformation buttresses the fantasy of a modernity to come, even as queer formations tied to the *bakla* emerge as part of the degraded lifeways produced by impoverishment and are rendered spectral by contemporary, classed notions of "gay modernity" that cast "trans" subjectivity as anterior (Benedicto 2008). In this way, this essay complicates understandings of queerness during Marcos rule and its aftermath as either conscripted into or set against the dictatorship's vision of development; it foregrounds the ambivalent relations of attachment and detachment that simultaneously bind and exclude gender and sexual non-normativity to the trajectories laid bare by the dream of becoming modern.

In the final section of this essay, I examine how queerness, necropower, architecture, and dreams of global modernity come together in one key site: the Manila Film Center, a long-abandoned and famously haunted structure that now hosts the "Amazing Show", a Korean-owned tourism-driven production that was first introduced to me in 2010 as "the largest transvestite show in Asia" (www.amazing-show.com). Located at the edge of the CCP and best described as a modernized version of the Parthenon, the Film Center was constructed to host the 1982 Manila International Film Festival, an event Imelda believed would turn

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Manila into the "Cannes of Asia".[2] What the building is best known for, however, is not the event for which it was made, but the accident that took place during its rushed construction, when part of the scaffolding collapsed, killing some 160 workers (Romulo 1987:167–168). According to urban legend, the bodies of the workers were not exhumed and were, instead, paved over by the orders of Imelda, who insisted on the building's timely completion. After the accident, the Film Center earned, perhaps unsurprisingly, a reputation as a cursed and haunted site, one that would grow exponentially after 1990, when the structure was damaged by an earthquake and finally abandoned. Left unoccupied for over 10 years, the Film Center began to function in the urban imagination as a "modern ruin" (Hell and Schönle 2010)—a site of neglect and decay that triggered public memories of a time when modernity appeared to be taking form in the city and of a future that never came to be (Boym 2010). During this period, the Film Center acquired a nightmarish valence; it became known as a giant mausoleum, a stately reminder of the fatal price of urban transformation and of the erstwhile death of Imelda's dream of keeping the city from dying.

In drawing attention to a place of death as a site of queer performance, my aim is not to hold up the possibility of turning the leavings of modernization into something else, nor to simply demonstrate how the grand visions of a modernity to come have been reduced to diminishing stakes. Rather, by offering a brief reading of the "Amazing Show" and setting it against the backdrop of the Film Center's early failure, I hope to further illustrate how queer practices of transformation enable the preservation (and perversion) of the logics, aspirations, and violences that animated Imelda's work of beautification. In this reading, the architectural remains of the dream of modernization function both chronotopically and allegorically. They point to the ways in which life and death—the dream of modernity and the nightmare of its failure—come together through the spatial effects of authoritarian power, and demonstrate the endurance of Imelda's modernist drive, its survival in the form of figures such as the "trans" performer, who, like the ghosts of dead laborers, are simultaneously exorcised from visions of global modernity and folded into the project of giving life to a decaying city.

A Third World City in First World Drag

In present-day Manila, as in many de-centered places around the world, the forces of creation and destruction continue to co-exist, though without the sense of triumph Imelda relayed in 1980, when she spoke of having prevented the "slow death of the metropolis" and of being able to "gaze proudly" at the achievement of "a vibrant, dynamic, and progressive Metro Manila" (Marcos 1980). "We must look forward to the future with optimism strengthened by the gains of the last five years", she said, pointing to the improvements in areas such as public health and the distribution of water and energy, but mainly to the work of beautification: the clearing up of "clogged and filthy esteros", the disappearance of slums rife with crime and disease, the ejection of squatters from waterways "for their own safety and in the interest of the rule of law". "The problems lie ahead", she admitted. "But with the concerted efforts of Metro Manila leaders and citizenry we will not

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fail. We cannot fail" (Marcos 1980). Today, the sense of progress Imelda conveyed is largely absent from the city. In its place, there is the longstanding reputation of Manila as the "sick man of Asia", as a hellish "putripolis" defined by excessive disorder, poverty, and pollution (Tadiar 2009:144–150). Even the anthropologist-philosopher Alphonso Lingis, no stranger to the discordant city-worlds of the global South, described it as "the ugliest of the sprawling cities of Third World countries". "The climate is sticky and hot", he wrote, "and the air is poisonous in the streets choked with jeepneys hacking out black fumes. If you go out you get a headache in a half hour and will have to change your clothes and scrub the oily grime off your skin with soap. It is enough to defeat any quixotic idea of exploring the city one might have" (Lingis 1994:148).

Amid Manila's landscape of disorder, the supposed "successes" of Imelda's vision of urban modernity survive only as traces. There are the memories and images of clear roads and waterways, the parks that have become havens for the homeless, the faded glamour of Marcos-era buildings that have browned with age. For Tadiar (2009:145–146), the deterioration of Manila and the proliferation of forms of urban excess, including squatters, scavengers, garbage, noise, and other free-floating artifacts of unregulated activity, become unbearable for privileged transnational and aspiring transnational subjects because Manila's failure as a representation of a city constitutes an assault on the modern self, an assault exemplified by Lingis's own inability to "take" Manila, which inhibits his desire to see, explore, and, thus, represent the city. Similarly, Imelda might describe the assault presented by the past and present "ugliness" of Manila as an impediment to the "total development" of man which is made possible by the aesthetic transformation of the metropolitan environment and the "truths" it makes available (Marcos 1981).

Though Imelda never fully articulates the logic behind her repeated invocation of the "true, good, and beautiful" as foundational concepts for urban transformation, part of it can be extrapolated from the very nature of her development projects. On one hand, Imelda's buildings, oft characterized by the use of bare concrete, floating slabs, and cantilevered ledges, cite in no uncertain terms the base principles of modernist architecture, including the commitment to rectilinear geometry, the rejection of adornment, and "truth to materials". Speaking directly to Filipino architects, she called for an openness to the "genius" of Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, and Frank Lloyd Wright and drew a connection between their work and the "honesty and simplicity" of Grecian architecture, its realization that "the universe is governed by definite comprehensible laws" and its "intuition of the natural organic structure of reality" (Marcos 1970).[3] On the other hand, Imelda was strongly opposed to practices of pure imitation and to the use of borrowed forms. Her commitment to architectural modernism was matched by a belief in the palingenetic recovery of the past, exemplified, for instance, by the use of native materials or the extraction of abstract forms from "indigenous" structures such as the nipa hut (Lico 2003:17). Caught between the desire for international recognition and postcolonial investments in the production of a regime-legitimating national identity, Imelda deployed models of inside and outside that cast Filipino/a-ness as a form of interiority, a "spirit" that could be reclaimed from a lost past and brought back into circulation (Marcos 1969), either as material from an archive

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from which architectural concepts could be drawn or as performances that could be set against the stark modernity of public structures. Put simply, for Imelda, the beauty of bare architectural forms that were in tune with an international aesthetic lay, not only in their ability to access the universal truths of modernism, but to bring back to life a "spirit peculiarly our own" by giving it a place in the modern city or by functioning as a "shrine", "monument", or "sanctuary for the Filipino soul" (Marcos 1969, 1970, 1976).[4]

The beauty of this lost spirit was, perhaps predictably, depicted by Imelda using expressly gendered metaphors. During the formal dedication of the CCP in 1969, for instance, she spoke of it in mythic terms:

> For thousands of years, at evening time, as the sun goes down in Manila Bay you can see the dark velvet slopes and peaks of Mariveles take shape of a woman at rest. We call her the Sleeping Goddess, born of earth and stone, fused in the elemental creative fire. Through all these years, she has lain there, a silent witness to the rise and ebb of the tides of history ... She alone has endured, her beauty fresh and undimmed, while around her lie the ruins and scars of history, the fallen monuments of brass and stone and the sunken argosies of those who sought to possess this land and who were overwhelmed by time. We like to think that today is a golden day for her, the First Filipina; that a smile plays on her sleeping lips, as here, on land reclaimed from the past, as primordial and as untouched as our origins, we dedicate not only this new building, but more importantly ourselves to the fondest hope that she will find a home (Marcos 1969).

In this account, the undimmed beauty of a primordial Filipina-ness appears to have been cast out of the city. It could witness the ruin of Manila, but find no place in it. In order for "her" to find a home in the landscape, something new had to be built: not just a new structure, but a land dreamt and fashioned out of nothingness (the sea), untouched by the ravages of history, that is, by the ugliness that had overcome Manila by the second half of the twentieth century. Still, it would not be enough to cast Imelda's aversion to "ugliness" as part of an instrumentalist appropriation of prevailing urban forms for nationalist purposes. Indeed, Imelda's desire to recover the feminized spirit of cultural identity as part of the life of the city was always directed outwards, towards the globe. The "metropolis is not space alone", she wrote. "(I)t is a dimension of the mind, a surge of the spirit ... she reaches out to the rest of the world" (Marcos 1969). For her, the very seas that surrounded the "new metropolis" were reminders "that we are not isolated, that we reach out to the wide world, a cadence in the rhythm of mankind". "Why do we create a city, a metropolis that is to be the crown of civilization?" she asked. "We do not create it for ourselves alone nor for the city dwellers. We create it for an entire people. As with all the great cities of the world—New York, Moscow, Peking, Paris, London, Rome, or Tokyo—Metro Manila is for everyone, for every human being of whatever nationality who craves for that community ... (T)o be metropolitan is, in reality, to be cosmopolitan" (Marcos 1977a).

In Imelda's imagination, in other words, the transformation of Manila would provide "room ... for dreams and their realization", particularly those that were shaped by nostalgia for a cultural identity believed to have been lost and a putatively universal, futural desire for "identification with all mankind" (Marcos 1977a).[5]

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Perversely, Imelda's interest in national and universal "truths", in creating a city that belonged among the great cities of the world, required not only the veiling or outright eradication of the abject material realities of the city—the very truth of "modernity's castaways" (Tadiar 2009:177)—but their actual production. In the interest, for instance, of ridding the city of the urban slums that had become one of the defining features of its botched development, she simply ordered their abolition and built in their place modern housing projects. The projects, however, turned out to be unaffordable for those who had been displaced, and thus led, ironically, to an increase in the population of the homeless (Pinches 1994; Shatkin 2004). More broadly, the non-stop construction and the lavish events that accompanied them pushed the city into bankruptcy, a deep immiseration that had to be further obfuscated by continuous displays of progress and economic health. In effect, the process of beautification operated as a movement towards extremes, the making of deeper contrasts between edifices of modernity and the disordered landscape into which they were placed. Manila emerged out of this process as what might be described as a third world city in "first world drag" (Tadiar 2004:2): a metropolis that induced a kind of double vision—a site that drew one eye to the hypervisible spectacles of progress where the "beauty" of the Filipino/a spirit could be set on display, while the other eye caught a glimpse of an other truth, of the shadowy world of destitution and resentment that Imelda's vision of modernity simultaneously created and tried to eradicate.

In a way, the contradiction between what is apparent and unapparent in the city—what is set on display and what is veiled—makes such use of a language of "drag" almost intuitive, particularly given the gendered nature of Imelda's understanding of beauty. Still, to talk of urban transformation in Manila in terms of drag would be to ignore drag's metaphorical limits. Indeed, while Imelda's attempt to give Manila a "total facelift" relied on a distinction between an "inside" and an "outside", this distinction, unlike the distinction between the sexed body and gender performance in drag, did not produce a contradiction in which no "truth" could prevail. Rather, the surface appearance of modernity operated in a convoluted way: it suggested that what was veiled, the material conditions of the city, did not constitute a "truth", but a deviation from the truth of cultural particularity and origin (the Filipino/a spirit) and of a universalist identification with "all mankind" (a transnational, cosmopolitan spirit). In this way, one could say, in fact, that in order to understand Imelda's beautification program and its genuine desire to obliterate what it concealed, it is necessary to reverse the conventional logic of drag, since the contradictions produced by urban transformation in Manila did not emerge out of an ironic practice, but as the ironic condition brought on by an attempt to materialize the dream of becoming modern.[6]

Urban Modernity, Gay Modernity

StarTalk	Why does it seem as if you've become the queen of faggots? So many gay hairdressers and fashion designers look up to you as their idol.
Imelda Marcos	[Embarrassed, but still flashing a grin] Oh, maybe it's because, like me, they're also allergic to ugliness. Everyone knows of my longtime commitment

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	to the true, good, and the beautiful ... When we see ugliness, we [gays and myself] cringe.
StarTalk	You're awesome, madam. And so ... gay!
Imelda Marcos	[Her face registers shock but quickly feigns delight]
StarTalk	Your daughter, Imee, is also that way. Both of you have a soft spot for faggots.
Imelda Marcos	Well, as the saying goes, like mother, like daughter (quoted in Capino 2003:272).

This interview took place in 1999, eight years after Imelda's return to Manila and a full decade after the death of her husband in exile. It was conducted by Rosanna Roces, an actress who was known for her roles in racy, R-rated films and who used her trademark vulgarity to become a popular television personality. Why Imelda, who had spent her years in power in the company of world leaders, international jet-setters, and Hollywood celebrities, would agree to appear on a gossip show and be interviewed by a former adult film star remains something of a mystery.[7] In a way, however, her appearance with Roces on national television was very much appropriate, since it was Imelda herself who reignited interest in so-called "bomba" films when she relaxed the regulation of sexual images on screen in 1982 in the hopes of increasing revenue for the financially troubled Manila International Film Festival.[8] Moreoever, Roces's candor and popularity—at once the absolute negative of the refined femininity that Imelda projected and an effect of her policies on representations of female (hyper)sexuality in the city—brought to the fore another aspect of Imelda's complicated relationship with normative genders and sexualities, namely her affinity for the forms of queer sexuality that thrived under the violence of her reign and which have endured through her departure and return.

Indeed, in Manila, Imelda serves as the primary figure through which the relationship of queers to the ideology of the Philippine state is dramatized. On one hand, she was one half of the so-called "conjugal dictatorship", a marital rule legitimated through heterosexist iconography and myth-making, most notably through the portrayal of Ferdinand and Imelda in stories and artworks as Malakas (Strong) and Maganda (Beautiful), figures akin to Adam and Eve who are represented as the original Filipinos and who serve as the foundation of the cultural reproduction of the nation. As the archetypal figure of womanliness, Imelda was made to appear as the timeless overseer of the nation; her heterosexual romance with and deference to the dictator was, in turn, portrayed as a 'natural' model of desire and depicted as a necessary part of the nation's passage through time (see Rafael 2000). On the other hand, while Imelda endorsed and performed a nationalist narrative that necessarily excluded queerness, she was, as I have already suggested, also well known for maintaining a coterie of "gay" hairdressers, make-up artists, and fashion and interior designers, all of whom "legitimized Imelda's appearance, being and use of beauty" and validated the "apotheoses of the conjugal dictatorship" (Capino 2003:272; Tolentino 2000:327). Queers, in other words, were placed by Imelda directly in the service of national power; they functioned as agents in her war of beautification and as part of the regime's seductive vision of excess.

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Queer participation in the work of beautification, however, also speaks to connections between power, beauty, and modernity that extend beyond Imelda's direct association with "gay" men. It is important to note, firstly, that the references above to "gays" and "faggots" are inflected by emplaced notions of gender and sexual non-normativity, particularly those pertaining to the *bakla* or *kabaklaan* (bakla-ness), the sex/gender tradition most often associated with sites such as the beauty salon, the fashion atelier, and other places tied to the beauty industry. Sometimes translated as "gay", other times as "transvestite", "transsexual", or "transgender", and still other times as "drag", the bakla is not a monolithic identity or subculture, but a loose formation that is often tied to a folkloric belief in homosexuality as having "a male body with a female heart" (Garcia 2000:272; Manalansan 2003:25). Understood as a kind of "glamorized celebration of inversion", the bakla has been cast as conceptually dependent on a distinction between inside (*loob*) and outside (*labas*) (Garcia 2000:273). Alternatively, her performance of femininity has been taken as a form of mastery over transformation, particularly in relation to events such as beauty pageants, in which *bakla* are routinely and famously engaged (Cannell 1999; Johnson 1997). The transformations she undergoes or effects, however, are not understood in terms of the production of artifice, but as the practice of "exposing one's beauty", the self which is not readily apparent and which is always embedded in a field of social relations (Cannell 1999:216; Johnson 1997:100; Manalansan 2003:42).

While the reference to "loob" points to popular beliefs in the "truth" of an "inner" self, this "truth", as in Imelda's conceptions of truth and beauty, operates in a more complicated fashion. For instance, instead of "coming out", the bakla refers to the "unfurling of one's cape"—an idiom that replaces the idea of a hidden or secret identity that must be declared with that of an "unapprehended presence" which must be "worn" (Manalansan 2003:28) or a "form of femininity lived in earnest" (Garcia 2000:273). Further, this processual practice of exposure can often take the form of mimesis; in the bakla beauty pageants, for instance, contestants often adopt the image of female celebrities, either from Hollywood or from national cinema, the primary way through which the world outside enters the nation and the city. More than base imitation, such mimetic practices turn the body of the bakla into a "lodging place" for a "potency ... felt to originate from somewhere outside" (Cannell 1999:222–223). As Cannell (1999:223) puts it, "the bakla epitomize (the) recapturings of power, not literally through possession, but through a wrapping of the body in symbols of protective status, and a transformation of the person by proximity to the power it imitates". In this way, the work of beautification the bakla perform on themselves is not unlike Imelda's transformation of the city. Neither can be described as pure repetition or held up as an ironic or wholly ironic (and thus subversive) practice. Rather, both are invested in visions of elsewhere, in the possibility of pushing against the limits of place; they take the material reality at hand—the city, the "trans" body—and turn them into sites that are animated by a desire to reconcile, if not eradicate, the contradictions between "here" and "there" by bringing what is thought to be "inside" out, into the realm of spectacular visibility.[9]

While queerness was folded into Imelda's war of beautification, however, the Marcos regime also, paradoxically, created the conditions for its attempted erasure.

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Indeed, while queers had unprecedented presence in the corridors of power during the Marcos years, those same years were also known for the rise of queer underworlds in the destitute districts that emerged as a direct effect of the radically uneven development engendered by modernization. Under Marcos rule, for instance, the now largely rundown district of Cubao became, at once, the site for attempts to materialize dreams of global modernity and the locus of its failure. On one hand, its once empty landscape became the site of key urban structures, including: Fiesta Carnival, the country's first all-year indoor amusement center; Araneta Coliseum, which was, at the time, the largest covered coliseum in the world; and Ali-Mall, a multi-level commercial mall named after Muhammad Ali, following his victory over Joe Frazier in "Thrilla in Manila", one of the main "global events" that took place in the capital during the Marcos years. On the other hand, while Cubao was being reinvented as a proto-global city, it also became known for rundown go-go bars with broken neon signs, for brothels masquerading as massage parlors, and for giving rise to the term "*bakal* (metal) boys", a reference to the hustlers who used to stand by the steel railings around Araneta Coliseum and who were immortalized in Tony Perez's famous novella, *Cubao 1980*, about the life of hustlers and their tragic dealings with queers in the city.

In the novella, Perez presents the transformation as the city as a descent into a sexualized ugliness: parlors become the sites of backrooms where beauticians take their tricks; public toilets become the haunts of bakla who sneak peeks at boys standing at the urinals; the malls and the carnival become dangerous cruising grounds; married men hang around bookshops in search of hustlers; and rape takes place in parking lots. Cubao appears as the polar opposite of the image of the metropolis Imelda wanted to bring into being. It is all grit, shadows and dark corners, garbage and debris: the underside of the dream of global-ness that finds its erstwhile fulfillment in the modern city. In turn, queers appear in *Cubao 1980* as tragic and predatory figures. Their movements are described in terms of "hunting" and "being hunted" and are marked by the sense of secret danger that constituted the heart of metropolitan development. The recurring metaphor of the "hunt" in Perez's writing portrays queers as part of the ugly environment, the urban jungle, "the metropolitan apparatus of capture" into which hustlers disappear and which they struggle try to rise above (Tadiar 2003).

If *Cubao 1980* paints a picture of gay life in Manila as miserable, vindictive, and predatory, it is because Perez himself dreamt of an *other* gay life, of "liberation" from homosexual abjection, understood in terms of the acquisition of modern rights and a movement out of the strictures of kabaklaan. In his more overtly political writings, Perez spoke from a self-consciously "gay liberationist" perspective and reveals dreams of eradicating the queer life that he describes in *Cubao 1980*, that is, of effacing the dominant image of the Filipino homosexual as a tragic queen, of the need to abandon the bakla desire for "real" men, of acquiring "equal employment opportunities", and of recognizing gay men as honorable laborers, soldiers, priests, professors, businessmen and athletes (see Manalansan 2003:36). *Cubao 1980* was, in fact, but the title piece in a collection subtitled "*Unang Sigaw ng Gay Liberation Movement* [First Cry of the Gay Liberation Movement]", a cry which he clarifies takes place "only in one's dreams [*sigaw sa pangarap lamang*]."

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The movement towards liberation only happens in a dream because the "third world" urban condition—place—is its limit condition. Perez's depiction of queer life as part of the disordered landscape of the city points to a connection between the gay liberationist dream of being something else and the dream of being some*place* else that marks metropolitan aspirations. It is this connection that in fact continues to shape urban queer life in Manila. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, contemporary urban gay culture in Manila remains animated by a desire, not unlike Perez's liberationist celebration of "modern" gay subjectivity, to wedge a material and conceptual gap between homosexuality and the form of "trans" subjectivity embodied by the bakla (Benedicto 2008). Throughout the twenty-first century, for instance, homosexual desire has been increasingly framed within a pink economy populated by hypermasculine bodies and has been distanced from the "taint" of femininity and from occupations in the beauty industry. In the popular, upmarket gay dance clubs and bars that now stand as the most visible queer spaces in the city and which cater primarily to middle and upper-middle class men, there is little room for the form of queerness embodied by the likes of the contestants who participate in the bakla beauty pageants. On occasion, they, or figures like them, might appear in dance clubs to entertain the crowds with their powers of transformation, now made manifest through "drag" performances of club anthems or of recent hits from the pop divas that have been embraced by the "gay community". These classed spaces are the sites that are held up as emblems of global gay modernity and metropolitan beauty.[10] In glossy magazines, websites, and casual conversations, they have been likened, in a manner not unlike Imelda's invocation of a network of "great cities", to similar sites in places such as New York, Los Angeles, Paris, London, Sydney, and other cities imagined as centers of a gay globe. In these neoliberal sites, where non-normative sexuality appears as an incorporated part of metropolitan life, the "trans" figure of the bakla appears as a ghost, a specter that represents a "pre-modern" sexual order and which must be exorcised in order to sustain nascent, exclusionary claims to newness and globalness (Benedicto 2008). This process of exorcism—the move towards the erasure of forms of queer life through the celebration of the livability of others (see Haritaworn *et al*. 2014:5) is, however, never-ending, not only because the *bakla* remains a vital part of the city, but because it must be recalled in order for it to be chased away.[11] It must serve as a reminder of what queerness once was, a sign of the past that legitimates faith in the possibility of becoming "modern".

A Doubly Haunted Place

If the past can appear to have been left behind, it is because it can be placed in an other elsewhere, to a part of the city where the failure to realize the dream of modernity can be confined. The Manila Film Center's location makes it an ideal place for traces of the past that have to be cast aside. Built at the back of the CCP, it cannot be stumbled upon or even seen from a distance. It must be journeyed to, sought out as a destination by those who are willing to confront the failures of the past. Ironically, or perhaps all too fittingly, Perez became one of those who were drawn to the Film Center during the period of its abandonment in the

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1990s, when he reinvented himself as a "spirit questor", a ghost hunter determined to speak to the spirits of the laborers who died in the building and to find a way to help them move on. While the spirit questors attempts to exorcise the ghosts from the Film Center proved to be fruitless, even by their accounts (de Vera 1997), their forays into the haunted structure did spark the public imagination, demonstrating what might be seen as a general interest in putting to rest memories of the violences that took place under Imelda's watch and, paradoxically, in allowing what remains of her vision of the city to once again perform the dream-work of modernity (see Pile 2005:41–49).

However, even if the Film Center was, somehow, cleansed of the presence of the dead, it would remain populated by ghosts, by imprints of the past that form a mnemonic picture of abandonment and neglect. During my own visits to the Film Center between 2010 and 2012, some 10 years after it was quietly reopened to host the "Amazing Show", my eyes were drawn instinctively to the physical traces of time passing that become apparent only at close range: the grass growing out of the cracks on concrete steps, the exterior walls browned with soot, the columns marred by graffiti, the recognizable patina of age.[12] At the lobby, there were the objects and sensations that drew out involuntary memories that were not my own but which spoke to the classed sense of loss that I, like others who have come of age in a Manila already beaten down, have come to intimately know. There was the dim orange glow of capiz chandeliers that recalled the arrival of celebrities such as Jeremy Irons, Robert Duvall, and Brooke Shields; the arched staircases that brought to life images of the commotion during the opening night; the broken escalators that stood unguarded and which might have led to the very spot from where the workers fell to what would become their shared grave. All around the Film Center, there were vestigial traces of scenes long past, arising out of the remnants of a time when the beauty of the structure was still intact. Hazy and lacking detail, these "ghost texts" (Armstrong 2010) did not suggest a perfect reenactment of what had taken place decades ago, but they evoked unrealized possibilities and served as allegorical representations of remembered desires and the tragedies they produce. In this way, the ruins of modern architecture, of Imelda's attempt to revivify the city, seemed to function as an imperative. They allowed the spirit of her attachment to the possibility of global modernity to linger, even as the ghosts of entombed workers sounded a warning against the ostensibly progressive vision of the state.

Since the opening of the "Amazing Show" in 2001, however, the ghosts of the Film Center have not been alone. The building has become the object once again of will to transform and the work of beautification has undeniably been revitalized, albeit in a manner that Imelda would likely not approve. The tall, majestic entrance of the building has been crowned with the large, technicolor logo of the "Amazing Show". Cheap cardboard stands have been set near the entrance to welcome guests with the frozen smiles of *bakla* performers in "native" Filipino/a attire and in the national costumes of foreign cultures. The room that may have once served as the Film Center's main bar, has been converted to the Amazing Café, an establishment resembling a dilapidated airport lounge and which is decorated with plastic tables and chairs and a shelf stocked with Korean books and magazines. The

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restroom mirrors have been adorned with kitsch stickers of butterflies, all placed strategically to hide nicks and stains that have set over time. On one hand, these new additions to the Film Center mark a radical discontinuity, a departure from, if not the perversion and failure of Imelda's vision of modernity. They have been set in place in order to create a place for the middle-income tourists who have taken over the void left by the celebrities, socialites, and dignitaries who no longer venture to Manila and, more crucially, to found a "home" for the specter of the bakla that has been exteriorized from the "modern" world of gay life in the city. On the other hand, however, the transformation of the Film Center into the "Amazing Philippines Theater" conveys the same message communicated by the signs of glamour that initially defined the building. They remind the Manileños who might catch sight of them that the spectacles performed at the Film Center, like the very building that houses them, are not meant for their eyes alone, but for those of the outsiders who can confer a transnational spirit upon the city.

The work of this spirit cannot be missed in the "Amazing Show", a production designed primarily for a tourist audience and which was, in fact, first introduced to me as a "drag" show. Watching the production, however, it became clear that "drag" was an inaccurate descriptor and that the show was animated by an earnest investment in the power of transformation. Indeed, the "Amazing Show" did not resemble "drag" shows as they are popularly known, or at least as I had come to know them. It had no sense of humor, no self-aware sense of irony and parody, no exaggerated play of femininity against a putatively male body.[13] At the "Amazing Show", sex and gender could be forgotten, if temporarily, not only because the show's performers seemed dedicated to the "truth" of feminine beauty, but because the performance of gender appeared less as a main attraction than a lure—a hook employed to draw viewers to the performance of national cultures. The numbers proceeded like a trip around the world and a journey through time. There was a Korean fan dance, Hawaiian hula, a can-can chorus line, a Japanese ballad, cabaret, scenes inspired by The Phantom of the Opera, a Muslim marriage ritual, and several traditional Filipino/a folkdances, among others. Absent any narrative or sequential logics, the performances were linked only by the performers themselves, the *bakla* bodies that appeared and reappeared in different guises, often paired with male-bodied dancers in sanitized displays of heterosexual desire. Like Imelda, the womanliness—the beauty—of the performers seemed archetypal, a *terrain vague* onto which cosmopolitanism and tradition could be alternately projected and through which what is putatively local—Filipino/a-ness—could be made to take its place in a pantheon of iconic cultural displays.

Indeed, the ability of the performers of the Amazing Show to make audiences forget about the "truth" of gender and sex by moving through time and place seemed to echo Imelda's own mastery over truth, beauty, and memory. Watching the crowd of tourists applaud what I found to be dragging, mediocre performances, I thought of how Imelda's own ability to elicit applause was made possible by the clouding of her own past in mystery, by the proliferation of multiple biographies that point in different, at times conflicting, ways to her humble origin, to a girl born on the wrong side of an otherwise prominent family and whose beauty would be her ticket out of the fate of anonymity (Ellison 1988; Francia 1988; Pedrosa

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1987). In part, Imelda's vague, rags-to-riches personal history legitimated her role in reshaping the city by turning her into an embodiment of possibility and transformation, of overcoming or rewriting the past. It has also made her, like the buildings she brought into being (and like the *bakla*), a figure that elicits contradictory sentiments and feelings, an object of both derision and admiration. Indeed, while she is largely reviled in the public imagination, in many quarters, she also remains held in high esteem. In society events and television programs, she is often treated as an honored guest; in malls and streets, she is hounded for photographs, her appearance, at times, greeted with actual cheers. For many critics, the continued veneration of Imelda is nothing more than a symptom of national amnesia, of a willful forgetting of the atrocities that followed in the wake of her fantasies of modernity. Perhaps, however, the perseverance of Imelda might also be seen as an effect of a perverse appreciation for how her origins have been rendered palimpsestic by her successful transition and made irrelevant by the recognition bestowed upon her by the foreign gaze of kings and queens, celebrities and heads of state. Indeed, like the queerness of the performers of the "Amazing Show", the truth of Imelda's past seems to vanish under spotlights; in front of adoring crowds, it appears as nothing more than a trace, a point in history that has been transcended and which marks her—and thus our—transformation, progress, and arrival in the world.

Conclusion

I began this essay by suggesting that attempts to realize urban and global modernity take form through the work of beautification and the production of death. At the Manila Film Center, the links between beauty, death, and modernity become readily apparent, not only because its construction required the ultimate sacrifice from the workers who performed the labor of materializing Imelda's modern dreams, but because it has become a sanctuary for figures attached to Imelda's war of beautification and who have been cast as part of the city's past. In this way, one could say that the performers of the "Amazing Show" are responding to what might be called, following Derrida, the work of "inheritance". "Inheritance", he says, "is never a given, it is always a task"; it is always the task of borrowing from the "spirits of the past", from the ghosts that will not go away and which weight, intensify, and condense "within the very inside of life" (Derrida 1994:54, 109). If nothing else, the Manila Film Center stands as an appropriate setting for the performance of this never-to-be-completed task. After all, as an enduring reminder of Imelda's "City of Man", it stands as the site of "historical wounds risen to the present" (Tadiar 2009:261), an architectural metaphor for the impossibility of death and the endurance of Imelda's desire for "truth" and her promise of a modernity to come.

Indeed, the ghosts of the Film Center point, not only to the violence of the Marcos regime, but to the beauty of the city as "a distant memory"; they speak with "a taunting voice that whispers in the ear in a refrain of 'failure, failure, failure'" (Stewart 2000:243). The "Amazing Show" seems, in fact, to recognize this voice, to see the role the *bakla* performers play in the afterlife of the dream of modernity, that is, in the disavowal of failure in the face of failure. In the closing number, the

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performers return dressed in all the various costumes used in the preceding numbers and dance to the show's theme, a triumphant song that repeats the line "It's amazing/It's amazing". In the middle of this number, a large image of the Film Center's darkened, stained, graying façade is projected onto the backdrop of the stage. In that moment, the "Amazing Show" becomes a living snapshot of the cultures of the world, but its transnational spirit is linked, directly, to the image of the lost future of the past. This projection of one of Imelda's architectural "achievements", the juxtaposition of old glamour of a modern Manila with the kitsch aesthetics of the "Amazing Show", demonstrates how queerness might function as a means of recuperation. It dramatizes, in spectacular fashion, the continuity between the modern urban forms that Imelda championed and a mode of queer performance easily cast, if not celebrated, as a way of putting notions of truth into question.

Endnotes

[1] For a discussion of the Manila International Airport (now named the Ninoy Aquino International Airport), see Benedicto (2014).

[2] For a fuller account of the aspirations of the Film Festival and the Philippine film industry under Marcos rule, see Espiritu (2007).

[3] The role of "truth" in modern architecture requires its own discussion. For my purposes here, it is simply worth noting that the Marcos buildings largely conform to modernist beliefs in mathematical exactitude, the frivolity of decoration, and the exposure of structure—principles that can be traced to Le Corbusier (among others), who believed that "surface was the foundation for a new purified interior that blurred distinctions between surface and essence, appearance and truth" (see McLeod 2002:319). In fact, Le Corbusier famously heralded the Parthenon as an icon for modern architecture; he lauded it as a "living work" that effected a feeling of "deep harmony" and thus a sense of awe through both its austerity and subtle precision (Le Corbusier 1986:144). It is also worth noting, however, that Imelda's architect of choice, Leandro V. Locsin, was more directly influenced by the descendants of Le Corbusier's modernism, most notably by the structural curves of Eero Saarinen and the Brutalism of Paul Rudolph (see Polites 1977). While Brutalism conforms and extends many of the principles of Le Corbusier and the International Style, it was also marked by debates about truth. As Peter Collins (2003 [1965]:252) puts it: "In brutal detailing we see most clearly the confusion which can exist between the notion of sincerity and the notion of truth; for whereas those who believe that good architecture implies structural truth may well consider Brutalism as simply the emphatic expression of structure, those who deny nineteenth century Rationalist ideals, and consider the expression of structure immaterial, will hold ...that truth, in this sense, is non-existent." For a broad discussion of truth in architecture (including "structural truth"), see Forty (2000) and Levine (2010).

[4] For the purposes of this article, I have neglected to discuss "the good". It is worth noting, however, that Imelda's reference to the "the true, the good, and the beautiful" has expressly religious connotations. In Christian thought (particularly in Augustine), these three descriptors are used to refer to God; truth, beauty, and goodness are, in this sense, active elements that must be received. This may be related to the emergence of the "City of Man" as a kind of feminine form. Tadiar (2009:177) argues, for instance, that it "has been treated as a female body that the state (Man) beautifies in order to sell to foreign investors". Not unrelatedly, one might say that the City of Man has been treated as a receptacle, designed to receive the transnational spirit epitomized by modernist thought. In addition, it should be noted Imelda herself routinely makes the connection between beautification and God. She claimed that "the City of Man is founded on the City of God" (Marcos 1977b) and that "beauty is God made real" (Wayne 2007).

[5] On universalism in modern architecture, see Kurokawa (1991:31–32).

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[6] While this Butlerian account of the subversive potential of drag has become almost commonsensical, there are certainly alternative accounts that further complicate this reading. See, for instance, Muñoz (1999). On the difference between "being ironic" and "being in an ironic condition," see Tadiar (2004:2).

[7] Rumors about Imelda's possible senility have proliferated since her return to Manila, in large part due to her odd publicity choices. In 2011, for instance, she was interviewed by Al Jazeera correspondent Veronica Pedrosa, the daughter of a journalist who was exiled to the United Kingdom after publishing a biography of Imelda claiming that the former first lady lied about her family background. After being denied an interview by Imelda's office, she then simply ambushed Imelda at the House of Representatives (Imelda continues to serve as a Congresswoman). Not expecting Imelda to speak to her, Pedrosa found herself in Imelda's office for over an hour, during which Imelda denied the Marcos regime's history of violence, showed Pedrosa images of her dealings with foreign dignitaries, and explained her convoluted new age philosophy using diagrams. More famously, Imelda spent an unprecedented amount of time with filmmaker Ramona S. Diaz for her 2003 documentary, *Imelda*: *Power*, *Myth*, *Illusion*, a film that also highlights her esoteric beliefs about love, beauty, nature, and God and which suggests that she has a warped view of history. See also Mydans (2006).

[8] On *bomba* cinema, see Rafael (2000) and Espiritu (2007).

[9] I set "trans" in quotes here and indeed use the term "transgender" (as well as "drag") cautiously or with modifications throughout this essay in recognition of the particular logics and conditions involved in the performance of *kabaklaan*. As others have noted, the tendency to adopt "transgender" as a universal name for non-normative genders across geographical, historical, and post/colonial contexts effaces the specifically Anglo-American meanings attached to the term. See Bhanji (2012) and Namaste (2000). Moreover, as I have noted above, the *bakla* itself is not a homogenous formation and can be read in multiple, at times contradictory ways.

[10] For an extended discussion of these spaces and their relationship to the aesthetic transformation of the city, see Benedicto (2014).

[11] To suggest that the *bakla* is being rendered spectral is not to say that the *bakla* is, in fact, dead or dying. Indeed, *kabaklaan* remains highly visible both in representational forms such as film and television, but also on the streets and other public sites such as bars, salons, malls, etc. The ubiquity of the *bakla* in fact makes its invisibility in upmarket, gay-identified spaces especially notable.

[12] For an extended version of this ethnographic account of the Amazing Show, see Benedicto (2013); for an alternative reading, see Peterson (2011).

[13] This is not to say that *bakla* performances cannot, in any circumstance, be humorous and ironic. In fact, *bakla* almost always play comedic roles in cinema, television, and theater (see Baytan 2008; Rafael 2000:185–189). The near total absence of humor in the "Amazing Show" actually makes it peculiar. On one hand, it can be explained by the marketing of the show as a "family-friendly program" and the fact that *bakla* humor often involves a certain amount of vulgarity and sexual innuendo. On the other hand, one might suggest that it is part of a desire to be taken seriously, an attempt to "live up" to the grandiosity of its location at the Manila Film Center.

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