

book review

Bright Lights, Big Dreams
Global Gayness and Privilege in Manila

JAMES WELKER

KANAGAWA UNIVERSITY

Bobby Benedicto

Under Bright Lights: Gay Manila and the Global Scene

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Bobby Benedicto's *Under Bright Lights: Gay Manila and the Global Scene* is poetically, evocatively impressionistic in the very best way. In this work Benedicto offers a complex, often contradictory rendering of what he calls 'the bright lights scene' or 'the scene'—the amorphous, glamorous world imagined through and constituted of

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privileged gay male life in the 'third-world city' of Manila. Although consciously autoethnographic, (21) Benedicto's writing is not self-absorbed but, rather, puts his singular experience to service as a lens through which to view and interrogate life both in the city and within the scene. Specifically, Benedicto narrates the scene into being from his perspective as someone who was for several years wholly a part of this world—at trendy gay nightclubs, in posh private residences and in air-conditioned cars wending, sometimes crawling through Manila's clamorous and overcrowded streets from one 'privileged site' to another. As a result, the book is as much a (self-)reflexive ethnography as it is a memoir lightly tinged with critical nostalgia and thoroughly infused with theoretical insight. And Benedicto does not shy away from repeatedly implicating himself in the capitalist hierarchies of privilege and exclusion in this postcolonial metropolis. (22) Benedicto's choice to use the past tense rather than the ethnographic present, (22) moreover, further enables a reading of *Under Bright Lights* as a memoir of sorts—not a personal memoir so much as a memoir of privilege for certain young gay men in Manila in the first decade of the twentieth century. The past tense also strengthens the sense that Benedicto is offering up merely fleeting glimpses of an ephemeral world, a world quickly passing by, perhaps in the shape of a car sheltering ever fitter, ever younger, more fashionable, more global affluent gay Filipinos speaking perfect American English *en route* to a club that will all too soon lose its radiance and cachet.

The chapters in *Under Bright Lights* each focus on 'a particular form of mobility' (6): cars shuttling affluent gay young men from one location to another within the 'gay cityscape'; sites whose names and other trappings attempt to evoke an 'elsewhere' tantalisingly out of reach; the 'relocation' of *bakla*-ness, a not quite traditional queer male identity often juxtaposed against wilfully modern gayness; gay tourism out of the city and into the global gay world; and, finally, national belonging and racial (im)mobility and the ability of race and nationality to instantly upset seemingly stable class hierarchies and in the process temporarily scrape off some of the glittering veneer of the global gay scene.

Chapter 1 highlights ways the scene Benedicto describes was about 'movement rather than districts' (25) and how that movement was often impeded by the sheer weight of the city—snarled traffic, panhandling vagrants, road-weary bus drivers pissing in the street while they wait for the cars and trucks spewing noxious fumes

to begin moving again. Privilege keeps these elite gay men out of gaudily painted jeepneys and inside privately owned cars with tinted windows but it doesn't elevate them completely above the fray. It doesn't always keep them from being decried as '*Bakla!* [Fags!]' by a ten-year-old whose outstretched palm the men have just ignored. (43) The flyovers are short and the men are separated from the ground-level, grimy third-world streets outside by just a thin pane of glass while they transit from somewhere to 'elsewhere'. The next chapter offers a closer look at some of the nodes linked by those upward-reaching flyovers and underlit narrow alleyways, with particular attention to the 'signs that evoke elsewheres ... woven into the built environment of the city'. (46) Benedicto contrasts the upscale development Global City—encompassing wide streets lined with the local headquarters of overseas corporations, high-end housing, and shopping centres and restaurants whose names borrow imperfectly from glamorous elsewheres such as the Hamptons, Palm Springs, Fifth Avenue and High Street—with a gay club in a lower-class part of Quezon City—a club whose name, Palawan, evokes a local paradise rather than 'spectacular growth, empire, and ... modern gay life'. (59) In so doing, he unsettles the purportedly clear distinction between the 'dreams of mobility' (44) of the privileged bright lights scene and the aspirations of those who the scene ridicules and tries to exclude.

Further excluded from the bright lights scene and notions of modern gayness is 'The Specter of *Kabaklaan*' (Chapter 3) or *bakla*-ness, which is abjected and 'relocat[ed] ... to a different space-time, to an elsewhere and an "elsewhen" that lies outside the ambit of the scene' (75) in an effort to construct locally a 'gay globality'. (74) In this chapter—which functions in the book as a purposefully unwieldy pivot between the local bright lights and the global gay scene—Benedicto presents *bakla*-ness, embodied in the 'figure of the *parlorista*, or the cross-dresser working in one of the many low-end beauty salons scattered throughout the city', (74) in contradistinction to gay globality—an imagined 'network of urban sites and scenes ... bound together under the universalized, mediated, and commercialized sign of "gay"', (76) a world whose construction requires the relocation of the local, backward *bakla* to an other place and time. Benedicto shows, moreover, how their actual physical distance from the global gay scene as manifested, for instance, in circuit parties in the gay capitals of Montreal, Sydney, London and New York,

paradoxically allows bright lights scene gays to distance themselves from *bakla*-ness. As Benedicto notes, this stands in sharp contrast with the immigrant gay scene in 1990s New York described by Martin Manalansan, wherein the shared immigrant experience led to a downplaying of class difference and shared performance of *kabaklaan*.¹ In their disidentification with and rejection of the lower-class, effeminate *bakla*, the gays of the scene share common purpose with lower-class gay Filipinos aspiring to hypermasculinity. Both, however, require the on-going spectral presence of *kabaklaan* 'to assert their difference from locality and secure a sense of global belonging' (91) or to distance themselves from the femininity the *bakla* embody. The continued 'inability to exorcise *kabaklaan* is the effect not only of its material persistence but [also] of,' Benedicto writes, the 'perverse desire to see its presence, since ... the image of the *bakla* allows us to extract pleasure from being approximates of global gayness'. (91)

If private cars and a chaotic network of roads serve physically and symbolically to link together the shifting nodes of the bright lights scene, the grubby, run-down Ninoy Aquino International Airport and the international airlines that fly in and out of it serve in the same way to link the bright lights scene to gay globality. As Benedicto shows in Chapter 4, Manila's primary international airport brings Filipinos of all classes and scenes together—whether driving for hours in the same exhaust-ridden, heavy traffic waiting to get there, or standing for hours in the same long, slow-moving line outside the US embassy waiting to obtain a visa, or, at least sometimes, seated for hours in the same uncomfortable economy class section waiting for the plane to reach its destination. Disembarking elsewhere, these travellers quickly move apart based on their status—overseas Filipino worker or privileged Filipino tourist. Or perhaps not quite. As many soon discover, outside the Philippines their class identity isn't always legible, and, thus, in spite of having 'attired themselves in ways that emphasize their higher-class status', (109) they stand likely to be associated with domestic workers and nurses as 'national-cum-racial sameness ... erodes the borders painstakingly policed at home'. (108) In the final chapter (Chapter 5), Benedicto carries with the resultant 'race-based exclusion' (114) that ultimately renders it impossible for gay Filipinos to fully 'enter ... gay globality', (117) which remains tantalisingly just out of reach. At the threshold of gay globality, gay Filipinos of the bright lights scene, upon being confronted with their

racial otherness may find themselves shocked and shamed into silence by the erasure of their class privilege and their othering for their lack of whiteness, for their third-world-ness. As Benedicto astutely observes, however, this conspiratorial silence—their reticence to speak of their race-based conflation with their lower-class compatriots and exclusion from their longed for global gay scene—‘sustains and invigorates the never-to-be-fulfilled promise of global gay belonging’. (117) In the end, they may find ‘that the privileged third-world subject ... can only be global *at home*, away from the gaze of the other who judges, in the third-world city that simultaneously threatens and impels dreams of globalness’. (131)

Under Bright Lights, with its focus on gay life on the borders of and within Manila’s bright lights scene in the opening decade of the twenty-first century, serves as a fitting counterpoint to Manalansan’s *Global Divas*, with its focus on life for border-crossing gay Filipino men in New York City in the closing decade of the twentieth century. It also serves as a worthy counter-example to the suggestion that queer people in Asia don’t look to Western queer cultures for ‘exemplary models to be imitated’, as Peter Jackson has written of queer people in Thailand.² That assertion comes in the introduction to a collection of essays on ‘queer Bangkok’, wherein Jackson is rightfully pushing back against the mistaken notion that Asian queer cultures are merely mimicking Western queer cultures, and Jackson has usefully detailed elsewhere how class shapes Asian queer interactions with the West.³ However, those members of the bright lights scene whose lives and lifestyles Benedicto illuminates don’t seem to experience their local performance of gay globality as mimetic but rather as a sign of their belonging to that illusory and alluring sphere. So perhaps, then, rather than a counterexample, the privileged gay Manileños of the bright lights scene might be said to serve as a complicating counterpoint. Eschewing the focus on ‘struggle’ and ‘resistance’ (14) typical of the field that might awkwardly be called non-Western queer studies, Benedicto’s examination of privileged gays in the ‘landscape of contradictions’ (xix) that is third-world, postcolonial Manila, also importantly draws attention to ‘how privilege works even in the spaces inhabited by a figure like the *third-world queer*’. (13) In this beautifully written book, Benedicto’s class-based disunifying examination of those queer spaces and his disarticulation of the figure of the third-world queer shed light on local structures of privilege whereby ‘the third-world queer is not just

the other but an other that makes its own others ... at the center of the city and at the margins of the world' (14)—always and ever in pursuit of 'the dreams of mobility that underpin life under the bright lights'. (44)

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James Welker is an associate professor in the Department of Cross-Cultural Studies at Kanagawa University, Japan. His research focuses on gender and sexuality within women and girls' culture in late twentieth century Japan—with an emphasis on the *ūman ribu* (women's liberation) movement, the lesbian community and the queer *shōjo* manga (girls' comics) sphere. <jrwelker@kanagawa-u.ac.jp>

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¹ Martin F. Manalansan IV, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2003.

² Peter A. Jackson, 'Queer Bangkok after the Millennium: Beyond Twentieth-Century Paradigms', in Peter A. Jackson (ed.), *Queer Bangkok: Twenty-First Century Markets, Media, and Rights*, Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong, 2011, p. 8.

³ Peter A. Jackson, 'Capitalism and Global Queering: National Markets, Parallels among Sexual Cultures, and Multiple Queer Modernities', *GLQ: Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2009, pp. 357–95.

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