

Babaylan

SHIFTING IDENTITIES IN DIASPORA

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LOCATING BABAYLAN.¹ ARTICULATING THE BAKLA.

Babaylan works as a health-outreach counselor for various Asian/Pacific Island gay communities in San José, California. Having been raised both in the Philippines and the United States, he has spent a lifetime straddling national, gendered and ethnic identities. Our initial conversations—that eventually gave birth to this ethnographic project—emerged from a shared and enduring interest in the *bakla* as a cultural marker. As “the quintessentially effeminate gay male of Filipino popular imagination,” the *bakla* signifies an ethnic and gendered subject that evokes a specific expression of queer life.² For Babaylan, in particular, the *bakla* offers both a constructive space *and* an assertion of subjectivity that allows him to simultaneously navigate his Filipino and American lives. He locates within the *bakla* a narrative of gender that includes broader negotiations around migration, ethnicity, religion and nation. Through my ethnographic encounter with Babaylan, I was able to situate the *bakla* within his travails as a first-generation Filipino immigrant, critically examining the assumed *stasis* of the *bakla* as a cultural icon. I claim that through his deployment of the *bakla* as an inert cultural and gender sign, Babaylan exposes both the diasporic Filipino’s profound sense of alienation and accompanying capacity for creative adaptation.³

¹ In order to maintain the confidentiality my informant’s identity, I adopted *Babaylan* as a pseudonym. *Babaylan* refers to a leadership position typically reserved for women in pre-colonial Philippines. In rare circumstances, *effeminate* men occupy this space as well. My decision to choose this “label”—in consultation with my informant—is based upon the sexual and gender ambiguities that this leadership position evokes. See J. Neil C. García, *Philippine Gay Culture: The Last 30 Years, Binabae to Bakla, Silabis to MSM* (Quezon City, Philippines: University of the Philippines Press, 1996), 126-129. A more historical rendering of the Babaylan’s role in colonial Filipino society is rendered by Teodoro A. Agoncillo, *History of the Filipino People, 8th Edition* (Quezon City, the Philippines: Garotech Publishing, 1990), 102, 104.

² I cull this definition from García’s *Philippine Gay Culture: The Last 30 Years* and Martín F. Manalansán’s ethnographic study, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora*, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2003.

³ My use of the ‘*bakla*’ as a theoretical figure echoes Donna Haraway’s description of the cyborg as “a fiction mapping [of] social and bodily realit(ies).” See Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York; Routledge, 1991), 150.

At the most basic level, Babaylan extends an ontological claim upon the bakla. It is a culturally specific expression of desire and sexual behavior. But flung to diaspora, the bakla negotiates even his⁴ trademark effeminacy, adapting *both* masculine and feminine comportment to signal an ethnic self that is translatable across socio-political lines. “Bakla” thus functions as a transnational tactic, consolidating a subject that both resists and negotiates absorption into the normative trope of North American (masculine) gay life. In this sense, the bakla exemplifies a “discursive strategy,” a framework of mimicry that articulates a stable self.⁵

As a locus of postcolonial and queer reflection, the bakla offers insight into one’s maneuverings around personal and communal accountabilities. In undertaking this ethnography, Babaylan and I—both self-identified bakla—embody the complex mechanisms of self-representation that confront those who live between worlds. By mirroring the bakla to one another—and so blurring the distinction between ethnographer and informant—Babaylan and I offer insight into the perennially shifting narratives of Filipino diasporic lives.

NEGOTIATING THE BAKLA BEFORE THE NATION THE CONSTRUCTION OF A NATIONAL SELF

My engagement with Babaylan revolves around our weekly health outreach at the Fountainhead, a prominent men’s bathhouse in San José, California. Each Friday evening, we plant ourselves in the common lounge where we playfully “peddle” condoms, candies and health education materials. Clothing, demeanor and speech contour the boundaries of our outreach. By conducting our work

Unlike the oppositional “nature” of Haraway’s cyborg, however, I am careful to claim that the bakla works and thrives within a given cultural (and gendered) map that enables him to negotiate both difference and similarity. This will be discussed further in the text.

⁴ My use of masculine pronouns does not adequately reflect the ambiguity of the bakla’s self/gender-representation. Since Tagalog/Filipino pronouns are gender neutral, Tagalog/Filipino speakers do not typically contend with the inherent gender categories of English grammar.

⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 49-50.

fully clothed, Babaylan and I signal sexual unavailability. Conversely, language and flirtation—which we dispense liberally—encourage rapport to ensure a successful outreach. The prevalence of English, Tagalog, Spanish, Chinese and Vietnamese evokes a broad negotiation around positionalities: they speak as much about ethnic location as one’s ability to entice or dispel a potential partner. Before the masculine, North American “gay culture” of the bathhouse, Babaylan brandishes the bakla as an effeminate and culturally specific expression of homosexuality. The bakla serves as much a boundary marker as he does a channel of familiarity. By “queen-ing” it up at the Fountainhead, we *emasculate* our desirability to portray *harmless* gay men with whom clients could relate safely. In short, we re-appropriate effeminacy as a “locus of power” in order to control the (white) masculine desire that configures the bathhouse ethos.⁶

In significant ways, our “play” around gender and cultural signification mirrors Babaylan’s capacity to straddle cultures, languages and relationships. While he moved to the United States as a child, Babaylan was raised in Daly City, a burgeoning suburb in the San Francisco peninsula and home to one of the largest Filipino diasporic communities in the world. Later relocating to Oakland, Babaylan found himself immersed in a predominantly African-American community that rendered him—for the first time in his life—essentially minoritized: “I was one of only a handful of Asians—and the *only* full-blooded Filipino—in elementary school!” Enmeshed therefore in this dual location of being “native” and “other,” Babaylan swiftly obtained the cultural dexterity to dance between ethnicities and languages.

At the age of 12, Babaylan spent a year in the Philippines. It was a move that re-introduced him to the multiple languages, cultures and inherent contradictions of his native land. It also marked

⁶ In her study of Filipino-American cyber-culture, Emily Ignacio asserts that “Asian women have been portrayed by the Western media as ‘super feminine’—subservient, dependent women who know how to please their men sexually.” Conversely, Asian men have been typically cast as “eunuchs, asexual beings who lust after both white and Asian women.” Ignacio claims that these stereotypes safeguard the virility of white males and the overall dominance of western cultures over Asia. Emily Noelle Ignacio, *Building Diaspora: Filipino Community Formation on the Internet* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 81-82.

his first encounter with bakla as “embodied effeminacy.” While his upbringing in an African-American context privileged masculinity in his self-identification as a gay man, Babaylan soon learned that to be gay in the Philippines was essentially to *be* bakla.⁷ The ontological security of the effeminate bakla offered Babaylan a way to ground his (American/gay) sexuality within his (Filipino) ethnic identity. Clumsy or otherwise, the bakla enabled Babaylan to consolidate a comprehensible “Filipino self” before the complexity his bi-national existence.⁸

During our outreach at the Fountainhead, two Filipino clients reflected the intricacy of Babaylan’s dance between ethnic and gendered identities. Ron and Egay migrated to the United States at different points in their lives. Egay had lived in Chicago for the better part of 20 years, was previously married (now divorced) and swaggered the hyper-masculinity of North American gay culture. Ron, a more recent immigrant, was significantly more effeminate, affecting the stereotypical flamboyance of the bakla. He wielded effeminacy with ease, using *swardspeak*—the “queenly” Filipino jargon—to connect with Babaylan and me. Egay’s overt masculinity reflected an implicit rejection of bakla as a form of self-definition. He located himself within a discreet subculture of “men-who-have-sex-with-men,” i.e., “normal guys” who were no different from “straight men” except for the object of their sexual desire.

For Babaylan, Ron was not merely “bakla,” nor was Egay simply “gay.” Their ambulation around effeminacy suggested a contention with an ethnic self that challenged claims for and against the “authentic Filipino.” Ron—the self-identified bakla—was implicitly “more Filipino” than Egay. Projecting thus an essentialized ontology upon the bakla, Ron embraced accountability to a people

⁷ This popular claim is upheld in media and pop culture. More realistically, the diversity of Filipino gay life is vast—straddling the spectrum of masculine and feminine comportment.

⁸ While there is a strong tradition of drag, camp and “queen” culture within mainstream gay communities across the US. However, I will assert that for the bakla, effeminacy stakes a particular claim upon an essential self that is slightly different from western notions of effeminacy as a performative act. For further treatment of performativity and repetitive acts, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1999), 176-177.

and nation. Egay's rejection of bakla implied not only a disregard of one's roots, but a deliberate choice to *be* (more) American.

I AM FILIPINO. I AM AMERICAN.
BRIDGING BI-NATIONAL FIDELITIES

More than a tactic to locate a distinctly "Filipino self," the bakla for Babaylan evokes a strategy to engage difference. The diasporic bakla potently subverts threats of erasure brought about by exile: "*Malakas ang powers ng bakla, 'day!*" [The bakla is powerful, sistah!]⁹

At an early point in our outreach, Babaylan disclosed his relationships with Sandro and Pabling that expressed profoundly his struggle to locate a sense of national fidelity. He had met Sandro during a brief visit to the Philippines. Like Babaylan, Sandro was engaged in justice work. He represented both an affective anchor and a commitment to a national, ethnic and political cause. Babaylan left the security of his American upbringing to live and work with Sandro. Their life together did not last long, however. Financial necessity forced Babaylan back to the United States within the year.

It was during this period of separation that Babaylan met Pabling, a Mexican-Persian graduate student engaged in political activism. He satisfied Babaylan's intellectual and affective cravings. Pabling expanded Babaylan's notion of "home," exposing his contentious relationship to both the Philippines and the United States. Unlike Sandro who affirmed Babaylan's Filipino-ness, Pabling complexified his entanglements with diasporic life. Indeed Babaylan often claimed how location and relationships determined the degree of his national identification: "When[ever] I am in

⁹ This is a phrase that Babaylan often uses to describe the multitudinous ways that the bakla negotiates relationships. It evokes a sense of agency, strength and resilience that he believes to be inherently unique to the bakla.

the United States, I recognize more clearly how Filipino I am. In the same token, I realize[d] how American I [was] when I [lived in] the Philippines.”

While his tempestuous dance between nations cut deeply into his political commitments, it also gave birth to an ethical and religious sensibility that allowed him to bridge the disparate fidelities of his bi-national life. Baptized Catholic but raised in a Filipino-American Baptist church, Babaylan stood at a unique intersection of Filipino and American life. His familiarity with (North American) Protestant culture distinguished him from most Filipino immigrants who were more at home with (Spanish) Catholic worldview.¹⁰ While Catholic Filipinos tended to blend ethnic and religious identities, Babaylan effortlessly detached religion from his ethnic self.¹¹ Politics and community work instead grounded his religious commitment. Self-sacrifice and collective engagements ensured the durability of justice. For Babaylan, this was the stuff of authentic faith not loyalty to a religious or ethnic tradition. His ability thus to secure a “Filipino self” beyond the peculiarities of a religio-ethnic worldview enabled Babaylan to engage North American culture on its own terms. His Protestant upbringing thus rendered American life comprehensible without compromising the integrity of his ethnic identity.

Negotiating ethnic, gendered and religious markers is essential Babaylan’s ability to forge meaning. By clinging to *both* Pabling and Sandro, by invoking a determinedly Protestant ethic to validate his political activism, Babaylan submits to spaces *inter dicta*, between the discourses of

¹⁰ Rachel Bundang reiterates the complexity of this relationship: “Faith and theology aside, Catholicism’s cultural significance and its ties to who I am as a Filipina are as thick as blood itself. My experience of Church cannot be encapsulated in a single sticking point and is greater than one sole controversy.” See Rachel A. R. Bundang, “This is Not Your Mother’s Catholic Church: When Filipino Catholic Spirituality Meets American Culture” in *The Brown Papers*, Vol. III, No. 1 (October 1996), 7.

¹¹ According to the 2001 American Religious Identification Survey of the City University of New York, there are “differences between...identification and affiliation (that) draw attention to differences in meaning associated with religion itself. For some, religious identification may well be a social marker as much as a marker designating a specific set of beliefs. For others, it may be a reflection of a community or family anchor (that) point(s) to one’s sense of self.” See *American Religious Identification Survey 2001*, The Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

Filipino and North American life. In these travails, Babaylan echoes the dilemma of every Filipino who must straddle multiple locations in order to make sense of the unwieldy flux of diasporic life.¹²

“MALAKAS ANG POWERS NG BAKLA!”
“THE BAKLA IS POWERFUL!”

Throughout our conversations, I often grasped in vain for a coherent definition of the elusive “bakla.” As both ethnographer and fellow bakla, I was drawn into the complexities of Babaylan’s narrative. What emerged from my initial inquiry was instead an intricate ethnography that embodied a “double consciousness” of sorts, the forging of the bakla as an amorphous subject, a cultural *habitus* to which Babaylan and I were both complicit.¹³ Ethnographers such as Aihwa Ong echo this ambivalence in their rejection of “tendencies [that] consider the subjects’ power as totally defined by the ethnographer.” For Ong, ethnographic encounters necessarily engender anxiety that challenge stable notions of self.¹⁴ She subscribes thus to a *de-centering* engagement that leaves both ethnographer and subject essentially *translated* before the other.

By exploring my role as *both* bakla and observer vis-à-vis Babaylan as *both* bakla and informant, I evoke the bakla’s *inherent* ambiguity, ensconced as he is between woman/*babáe* and

¹² Babaylan acknowledged that while he had long been eligible for US citizenship, he had always resisted applying. Whatever phantasmic “stability” he gleaned from diaspora rested upon the accompanying recognition that he would never be at home in *one* place. Home had long been rendered multiplied, singular in its ambivalence. And so, Babaylan echoes the depths of Bhabha’s anguish as one who straddles between cultures and nations: “...as I begin to write this essay, my life divided between Britain and America, I cannot imagine returning to live permanently in India. But what is even more surprising is that I cannot imagine what it would be like to live without that unresolved tension between cultures and countries that has become the narrative of my life, and the defining characteristic of my work.” Homi Bhabha, “The Vernacular Cosmopolitan” in *Voices of the Crossing: The Impact of Britain on Writers from Asia, the Caribbean and Africa*, edited by Ferdinand Dennis and Naseem Khan (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2000), 134.

¹³ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 64.

¹⁴ Aihwa Ong, “Women Out of China: Traveling Tales and Traveling Theories in Postcolonial Feminism,” in *Women Writing Culture*, eds. Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 353.

man/*lalake*, between the porous frontiers of US and Philippine life.¹⁵ Together, we articulate a “speech act” that is both distinct and resonant with the broader experience of Filipino immigrants.¹⁶ Our negotiations within the empire—configured through gendered or cultural lenses—embody the ways that colonial subjects participate in the imperial agenda. As with thousands of Filipino immigrants before us, the bakla contends with the suffocating metanarrative of heterosexism and the perennial threat of ethnic and social misrepresentation that derail efforts at personal and communal integration.

Complicit as we both were in the construction of this ephemeral bakla, Babaylan and I realized early on how the ethnographic process left me, the observer, implicitly observed. More than a sounding board, I confirmed and/or refined Babaylan’s claims about nationhood and diaspora. His employment of self-representation was thus anything but static; he was engaged in a *reflexive* process of re-configuration that evoked a “third space” of discourse.¹⁷ Undertaken within the power dynamics of the ethnographer and the informant, our “interstitial articulations” illuminated the bakla’s mimicry of compromised positions, rendering supposedly static identities unfettered. To an analogous degree therefore that the colonized mimics the colonizer—acting as both object of

¹⁵*Babáe* (n): Tagalog word for Woman; *Lalake* (n): Tagalog word for Man. The bakla’s etymology is traditionally understood as a melding of “babáe” and “lalake.” Thus the bakla embodies conceptual ambiguities in gender and identity. Within a culture that imposes clean distinctions between lalake/man and babáe/woman, to be bakla implies participation in the undulating terrain of gender in-between-ness.

¹⁶ I use the phrase “speech act” analogously to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s analysis of speech/silence as spaces at which power is negotiated and constructed. Sedgwick asserts, “it is the interlocutor who has...broadly knowledgeable understanding of interpretive practice who will define the terms of the exchange.” Within the powerful-powerless binary, the powerful is oblivious to the situation of the powerless. Hence, it is the limited perspective of the powerful that sets the tone of discourse. Babaylan—as bakla, immigrant, transient and diasporic—must accommodate the multiple languages of his numerous communities of accountabilities, e.g., the US, the Philippines, the gay and bakla worlds. As outsider, he must gain fluency in the language of the master. His impressive ability to penetrate the diaphanous boundaries of these universes thus speaks much of his ingenuity to engender power and agency within interstitial spaces. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 4.

¹⁷ Bhabha, 89.

oppression and agent of self-articulation—Babaylan and I engaged in a dance of mutual re-writing of self before the other. Perhaps it was upon this ambivalence that we encountered *both* the bakla’s curse and the creative possibilities that could only arise out of his fluid ambiguity.

THE BAKLA IS CLAIMING SPACES OF STABILITY IN MOVEMENT

Babaylan resists erasure by both clinging onto the bakla and speaking from his location. While pragmatic in its tactic, he reinscribes Gayatri Spivak’s ominous warning *against* modernist tendencies to speak for (and so essentialize) a “subaltern voice.”¹⁸ For Babaylan, however, embodying the bakla is not akin to usurping his voice; an essentialized bakla serves really as an assertion of Babaylan’s *own* existence. Babaylan speaks not for the ephemeral subaltern. He speaks for himself. He speaks *as* bakla.

For Babaylan, the bakla offers both a constructive space *and* an assertion of subjectivity. When he wields effeminacy to seduce, educate or even repel, Babaylan engages diverse cultural, religious and political strategies to ward off threats of erasure. Babaylan will *not* be easily absorbed within North American gay culture because he is not *just* gay. Babaylan will *not* be subsumed beneath the normative discourse of “Filipino” because he challenges even its categorical durability. The diasporic bakla evokes a sensibility that allows Babaylan to resonate with Filipinos who must also contend with the forced ambiguities of exile. This essentialist tactic harkens to a broader Filipino narrative that secures his meanderings between locations and categories.¹⁹ For Babaylan, the bakla

¹⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271-313.

¹⁹ In this sense, Babaylan echoes Spivak who asserts the ambivalent dynamic of postcolonial subjectivity: “Postcoloniality as agency can make visible that the basis of *all* serious ontological commitment is catachrestical, because negotiable through the information that identity is, *in the larger sense*, a text. It can show that the alternative to Europe’s long story—generally translated as “great narratives”—is not only short tales

exists both in the specificity of his travails and within the shared narratives of diasporic Filipinos. This is why he found Ron compelling and Egay disdainful. This is why Sandro and Pabling tug at the heartstrings of his national fidelities. This is why his Baptist (American) upbringing evokes as much claim upon integrity as does his clear sense of being ethnically Filipino. Babaylan *is* as Filipino as he is American.²⁰ By committing himself to a “real bakla,” Babaylan evokes the subaltern’s stubborn refusal to be silenced by the prevailing discourse of multiple colonizers.²¹ If only to claim a comprehensible self, Babaylan—like the bakla—must nourish a sense clear of cultural rootedness while sustaining the capacity to creatively adapt to the erratic demands of diasporic life.

(*petit récit*) but tampering with the authority of storylines.” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside In The Teaching Machine*. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 65.

²⁰ On a further elaboration of her much-contended, “strategic essentialism,” Spivak claims: “...the way in which one conceives of oneself as representative or as an example of something is this awareness that what is one’s own, one’s identity, what is proper to one, is also a biography, and has a history. That history is unmotivated but not capricious and is larger in outline than we are. This is different from the idea of talking about oneself.” *Ibid.*, 6.

²¹ Babaylan’s apprehension of the bakla as a “real self” mirrors Manalansán’s assertion that “the bakla possesses what is called the ‘female heart’ (pusong babae).” Among Manalansán’s informants, this assumes the existence of a “core” within the social construction of the bakla—“that of the male body with a female heart.” The bakla is perceived therefore as a specific gender category within the broader *babae-lalake* binary of the Filipino gender universe. That bakla is as real as the *babae* and the *lalake* are real. In this sense, Manalansán appeals to an interior self that echoes Strobel’s deployment of *kaloóban*. Manalansán, 25.

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APPENDIX

Bakla Etymology by Babaylan

1. ω [ba]²²
upturned heart
new mother's bosom
wingless womb
 \mathcal{I} [ka]
rivers running coupled
alongside each other's course
distinct and in cooperation
 \mathcal{S} [la]
scar of lightning
snake on a branch
root of man

2. *upturned heart*
rivers running coupled
scar of lightning

new mother's bosom
alongside each other's course
snake on a branch

wingless womb
distinct and in cooperation
root of man

3. *upturned scar*
alongside each other, new
wingless man

heart of lightning
womb and root
distinct and in cooperation

²² Babaylan, *Bakla Etymology*. Babaylan sent this poem after I asked him to review the final draft of the ethnography. I thought it appropriate to close these reflections with Babaylan's words, his ruminations on the bakla as a harbinger of ambiguity and possibilities. Babaylan poignantly enlivens in art the multivalent narratives that I tried to convey.

The poem is divided into three parts. The three strophes of the first section are prefaced by *Baybayin* (also known as *Alibata*)—the pre-colonial script of tribal communities in the Philippine archipelago. In this script, *bakla* is written as $\omega\mathcal{I}\mathcal{S}$. Babaylan proceeds to play with *Baybayin* as a way to express the bakla's ambiguous dance around gender and social significations. See Paul Morrow, *Baybayin: The Ancient Script of the Philippines* [<http://www.mts.net/~pmorrow/bayeng1.htm#variant>] and Hector Santos, *Literacy in Pre-Hispanic Philippines*, [<http://www.bibingka.com/dahon/literacy/literacy.htm>]