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“THAT’S MY TOMBOY”: QUEER FILIPINX DIASPORIC TRANSMASCULINITIES



Gina Velasco

ABSTRACT. This essay explores the circulation of the figure of the tomboy within queer Filipinx diasporic culture. In particular, I examine “That’s My Tomboy!” a segment of *It’s Showtime*, the popular Philippine variety show on ABS-CBN, filmed in front of a live audience in Quezon City, Philippines. Circulated globally on the international cable channel, The Filipino Channel (TFC), *It’s Showtime*, stars the hugely popular *bakla* performer, Vice Ganda. A vignette on the show, “That’s My Tomboy” is a talent competition in which tomboys compete for cash prizes through modeling and singing. This essay uses an interdisciplinary approach that integrates personal narrative and analysis of television and social media to analyze the queer diasporic figure of the tomboy. Beginning with an autoethnographic vignette, I describe my experience, as a queer diasporic Filipina American femme woman, with the term “tomboy.” In particular, I describe the experience of bringing my masculine-presenting, nonbinary partner to meet my family in Dallas, Texas, for the first time. Upon meeting my partner, my Filipino father immediately asked her if she had seen “That’s My Tomboy.” In this encounter, my partner was immediately recognizable to my immigrant father as a tomboy, both from his personal experiences with Filipinx female masculinity, but more importantly, through his engagement with Filipinx diasporic popular culture. My father’s familiarity with the figure of the tomboy — mediated through his consumption of Philippine popular culture through The Filipino Channel — reflects the circulation of this figure within the Filipinx diaspora. Drawing on this initial theorization of the figure of the tomboy within Filipinx diasporic culture, I then analyze the emergence of other tomboy figures, such as Jake Zyrus and Ice Seguerra, within both television and social media that circulate throughout the diaspora. Ultimately, I argue that social media representations of tomboys create possibilities for queer pleasure and spectatorship, contributing to a broader Filipinx queer diasporic mediascape.

I was nervous to bring home my partner, A, for the first time. Not only was A the first person that I had brought home to meet my parents in over a decade, but she was the first gender-nonconforming, masculine-presenting partner of mine that I had brought to my family's home. Although out to my parents since college, I had largely kept my social life separate from my family. It was not because my Filipinx immigrant family is homophobic; in fact, I have an extremely queer family, with several queer and trans relatives present at every gathering of my close, extended family in Dallas, Texas. As a queer femme, cisgender woman, my queerness is often elided within my family's heteronormative understanding of gender. Thus, bringing my masculine-presenting partner home was an unintentional coming out of sorts — despite my resistance to such narratives and their incongruity within Filipinx understandings of queer sexuality.

Upon meeting my partner, my Filipino father immediately asked her if she had seen “That’s My Tomboy,” a segment of the popular Philippine variety show, *It’s Showtime*, that was broadcast globally on the international cable channel, The Filipino Channel (or TFC) from 2013–2015.¹ Excitedly, my father gave an animated and detailed description of the show. In this encounter, my partner was immediately recognizable to my immigrant father as a “tomboy,” both from his personal experience with “masculine of center” Filipinx such as my butch lesbian aunt, but more importantly, through his engagement with Filipinx diasporic popular culture. This moment of recognition, in which my father recognized my partner as a tomboy, initiated the forms of homosocial “masculine bonding” which would come to characterize my father’s relationship to A. Almost instantly, he connected to her in ways that he had never connected to me, as his feminine-presenting, femme-identified daughter.

As Kale Fajardo has noted, the Filipinx tomboy is a racialized and classed figure that embodies a masculine of center identity.² While Fajardo argues that the term represents a specifically transmasculine, working class identity, the term “tomboy” has been used to denote both butch lesbian and trans male identities. In his ethnography about Filipino seafarers, Fajardo describes how the cisgender male seafarers that he encountered developed a form of working class, masculine homosociality with him as a Filipino diasporic tomboy.³ Citing their personal experiences with other Filipinx tomboys, the seafarers that Fajardo interacted with drew on common experiences of working-class masculinity.⁴ Similarly, my father developed a rapport with my partner based on his perception of her masculinity. He would go on

1. *It’s Showtime*, Directed by Bobet Vidanes, ABS-CBN Entertainment, 2013–2015.

2. Kale Bantigue Fajardo, “Transportation: Translating Filipino and Filipino American Tomboy Masculinities Through Global Migration and Seafaring,” *Gay and Lesbian Studies Quarterly* 14, no. 2–3 (2008):405.

3. Fajardo, “Transportation,” 417.

4. Fajardo, “Transportation,” 417.

to offer to “teach” her about auto mechanics, and at times consulted with her (instead of asking me directly) about my health, perceiving her to be in the position of protecting and caring for me, her feminine partner.

My father’s familiarity with the figure of the “tomboy” — mediated through his consumption of Philippine popular culture through The Filipino Channel — reflects the circulation of this figure within the Filipinx diaspora. Like other diasporic Filipinx, my father engages with Philippine pop culture through his consumption of diasporic media in the form of The Filipino Channel. As a cable channel that is broadcast in the U.S. and in other national sites with large Filipinx communities, the Filipino Channel has built its brand on notions of diasporic belonging. *It’s Showtime* is filmed in front of a live audience in Quezon City, Philippines. The show stars the hugely popular *bakla* performer, Vice Ganda. “That’s My Tomboy” was a talent competition/beauty pageant on *It’s Showtime* in which tomboys compete for cash prizes through modeling, singing, and dancing.

In conversation with “That’s My Tomboy,” I examine two tomboy figures within Filipinx diasporic social media of the past decade: Jake Zyrus and Ice Seguerra. Robert Diaz notes that the rise of musical star Jake Zyrus marked the emergence of the figure of the tomboy in Philippine popular culture.⁵ Diaz cites Arjun Appadurai’s concept of *mediascapes* in his analysis of two queer figures within Philippine pop culture — Jake Zyrus and Vice Ganda. Drawing on Appadurai’s theory of *mediascapes* as forms of media that circulate transnationally, beyond the nation of origin, Diaz argues that queer *mediascapes* “are essential to reproducing nationalist sentiments in an age of globalized information flows, even as they expand the nation-state’s geographies and affective affinities.”⁶ Social media, in particular, is one of the most salient *mediascapes* through which queer diasporic Filipinx subjects negotiate queer and trans politics. In particular, Diaz focuses on the centrality of social media to the stardom of Jake Zyrus, who was discovered through YouTube performances of his singing, which eventually caught the eye of U.S. celebrities Ellen DeGeneres and Oprah Winfrey. Building on Diaz’s work, I examine two sites of social media focused on tomboy masculinities: the YouTube video of a concert performance by Jake Zyrus and Ice Seguerra, and a YouTube video of the “That’s My Tomboy” competition on *It’s Showtime*. Using autoethnographic vignettes and pop culture analysis, I theorize the potential for queer diasporic *mediascapes* through the viral circulation of the figure of the Filipinx tomboy.

5. Robert Diaz, “The Limits of Bakla and Gay: Feminist Readings of My Husband’s Lover, Vice Ganda, and Jake Pempengco,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 40, no. 3 (Spring 2015): 735.

6. Diaz, “The Limits of Bakla and Gay,” 724.

The Power of Two

I turned on my computer and did a Google search for Jake Zyrus and Ice Seguerra. Of course, as a queer diasporic Filipina, I was already familiar with Jake and Ice. From Jake's earlier performance as exchange student Sunshine Corazon on the U.S. television show, *Glee*, to Ice's role on the Philippine *teleserye* (or soap opera), *Be Careful with My Heart*, Jake Zyrus and Ice Seguerra are two of the most visible tomboys in Filipinx diasporic popular culture of the past decade. Both are former child stars who have come out as trans men, shifting their public persona from that of a hyperfeminine actress/singer to a transmasculine identity. My eye was drawn to a YouTube video of Jake and Ice performing a Michael Jackson medley at their 2013 concert at the Smart Araneta Coliseum in Quezon City, Philippines, titled "The Power of Two: The Unbreakable Tour."⁷ The video opened with a scene of a dark stage of Araneta Coliseum, a popular concert venue in Manila, Philippines, showing a huge video screen at the back of the stage, on which a black and white video sequence is displayed in front of a screaming crowd. Beginning with a slow motion shot of Jake, then Ice, both singers strut and swagger before the camera. Jake "pops the collar" of his white t-shirt, worn under a blazer, while Ice wears a leather jacket reminiscent of Michael Jackson. An individual image of Jake in front of a microphone appears, then Ice playing a guitar fill the screen, accompanied by voiceover narration and text that are superimposed onto these images. The viewer hears Jake and Ice vocalizing short phrases, which are reinforced by text on screen, such as "I confessed," "In spoke the truth," "The real me is out," "This is me now." Finally, we see Jake and Ice in the same shot, as they walk toward the camera. With a close up shot of Jake's face, the narration and text, "Accept me," comes onto screen, followed by a close up of Ice's face, accompanied by the text and narration, "Respect." Interspersed is a numerical countdown visualized on screen. The video sequence ends with the huge text, "Power of Two/The Unbreakable Tour," which overwhelms the gigantic screen on stage. As the screen fades to black and rises to the ceiling, music fills the stage, and the audience waits in anticipation for the performers to enter the stage. The opening bars of Michael Jackson's song, "Black or White" are heard as back up dancers perform flips across the stage. The screams of the audience hit a crescendo as the viewer finally sees Jake and Ice walking down a short staircase at the back of the stage, toward the audience. They pause midway to look at each other, then Ice proceeds to walk down to the main stage, wearing an all-black ensemble and singing, "I took my baby on a Saturday bang," as identically dressed male dancers perform hip hop dance moves behind him. The spotlight then shifts to Jake, who,

7. "CHARICE & AIZA SEGUERRA - Micheal Jackson Medley (Power of Two Concert)." YouTube, uploaded by QritikoLTD, September 28, 2013, <https://youtu.be/mq3h6SR3pck>.

wearing a dapper, silver close-fitting suit, soulfully belts out Michael Jackson's iconic lyrics, "But if you're thinking about my baby, it don't matter if you're black or white," while strutting across the stage.

As I watch this video, my ear is drawn to the screaming audience at Araneta Coliseum. I am transported thousands of miles across the globe to be with my queer Filipinx comrades, a part of the queer Filipinx public created through this diasporic mediascape. The high-pitched screams of the fans in the audience resonate with my own queer pleasure in seeing Zyrus and Seguerra perform on stage. As a queer femme, cis Filipina American woman, I am interpellated into a queer diasporic public, mediated through social media. I wondered about the screaming fans in the audience. Were they queers like me, or simply fans of Jake's and Ice's musical talent? I imagined Araneta Coliseum full of Filipinx queers, focused on the two transmasculine figures on stage. Were these queers also transfixed by Jake's sharp suit, his Michael Jackson-like dance moves, and his soulful voice?

Here I foreground my own social media consumption, not to emphasize the commodification of the figure of the Filipinx tomboy, but to explore how queer pleasure and viewing practices can be generative starting points for theorizing queer diasporic mediascapes. I build on the question posed by Gayatri Gopinath, "Ultimately, what does a consideration of queer representation, as it migrates from a national to a diasporic cinema, tell us about the dynamic relation between nation and diaspora?"⁸ As a form of queer diasporic representation, "That's My Tomboy" assumes at least a partially queer audience, perhaps including a queer, diasporic, Filipinx femme such as myself. "Queering" the beauty pageant, an enduring trope of Filipinx performance, "That's My Tomboy" centers transmasculinity, **not** femininity (cisgender or transgender) as the object of desire. Here the spectator is explicitly queer, deriving pleasure from the transmasculine performance on the small screen. Viewers of this YouTube video across the Filipinx diaspora, such as myself, engage with queer mediascapes through their pleasure in consuming these images.

"That's My Tomboy"

I open the YouTube video of "That's My Tomboy" from its second season on *It's Showtime*. As I enlarge the YouTube video to fill my computer screen, my eyes rest on Mary Christine Nishie Fernandez, who goes by the more gender-neutral nickname, "Nishie," a twenty-four-year-old tomboy from Las Piñas, Philippines.⁹ Nishie saunters onto the stage of the live set of *It's Showtime*, wearing a close-fitting, tailored black suit

8. Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 94.

9. "It's Showtime That's My Tomboy Astig 2- Mary Kristine Nishie." YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=juHoREIrfSw>

and a dapper, but shy smile. Hir short, masculine haircut and slight figure compliments a slightly awkward, but charming, affect. As s/he walks onto stage, s/he is surrounded by back up female dancers scantily clad in short, tight black skater dresses and heels. While the dancers perform synchronized movements in the background, Nishie walks to a different section of the stage. At each location on the stage, s/he pauses, poses, and smiles, while the sound of a camera is heard. The audience members scream while Nishie models and poses; the faces of backup dancers are obscured from the camera. The backup dancers seem faceless and interchangeable. Nishie is then handed a microphone by one of the dancers. S/he banters flirtatiously with Vice Ganda, before launching into hir talent routine. To the musical soundtrack of The Weeknd's hit song, "Earned It," made famous by its use in the soft BDSM film, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, Nishie removes hir jacket, slings it over hir shoulder, and begins to gyrate suggestively. Performing the wave-like movement reminiscent of macho dancers, Nishie thrusts hir pelvis toward the audience. The performance is clearly intended to evoke a form of tomboy sensuality, at times awkward, but unique in its assumption of the presence of queer desire on the part of the viewer. The gaze is a queer one, as the tomboy is the object of desire for the pleasure of the (queer) viewer. Such representations of transmasculine figures as the object of desire are rare within global popular culture. Although transmasculine characters are increasingly present within U.S. television, they are rarely represented as objects of desire for a mainstream U.S. audience. In contrast, "That's My Tomboy" assumes the presence of a queer spectator, even as *It's Showtime* builds on a broader Filipinx diasporic — though not necessarily queer — audience through its global circulation on the Filipino Channel.

Trans and Queer Diasporic Mediascapes

My use of the prefix "trans" spans multiple nodes of a network of interrelated meanings. I draw inspiration from Jian Chen's and Lisette Olivares' theory of transmedia, defined as the "bodies, images, sounds, materialities, politics, and informatics [that] offer points of contacts and expressive meaning making rather than static representations and theories."¹⁰ I use the term "trans" in relation to the term "tomboy" to suggest a traversing of both gender identities and sexual orientations across national sites within the Filipinx diaspora, from tomboy as "butch lesbian" to "working class man trans." As the asterisk after the term "trans" has come to connote the capaciousness of possible variations of gender identity and expression — transgender, nonbinary, etc. — so does "trans" function in a similar way when applied to geographic and geopolitical sites. I build on Nguyen's and Hoskins' concept of

10. Jian Neo Chen and Lisette Olivares, "Transmedia," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, No. 1-2 (May 2014): 245-248.

the “transpacific” to rework the term “transnational,” highlighting the flows across the Pacific, from the street corners where tomboys and cis men hang out together in metro Manila to my dad’s living room in Dallas, where he sits watching The Filipino Channel and singing karaoke with my family.¹¹ The transpacific virality of the figure of the Filipinx tomboy is less a sign of the spread of a global queer or trans identity, and more a figure that indexes Filipinx queer mediascapes across the diaspora. I foreground the pleasure of spectatorship in queer diasporic viewing practices through my own engagement with social media representations of Filipinx tomboys. This is not to suggest fixed notions of queer genders or sexuality that *translate* across the Filipinx diaspora, but to emphasize the creation of a mediascape — a queer diasporic public — in which multiple individual and collective engagements with queer and trans Filipinx embodiment are possible. “That’s My Tomboy” and “The Power of Two” are forms of transmedia that destabilize fixed notions of queer, trans, and tomboy, while eliding the supposedly binary tension between “Filipina/o” and “Filipinx.” Rather than become mired in reductive debates on the use of the term “Filipinx,” my intention is to suggest a more capacious approach to theorizing queer Filipinx diasporas, one that allows for multiple, contradictory notions of queer and trans embodiment. This is less a process of *translation* as it is an acknowledgement of multiple vernaculars and movements across (and within) national sites.

11. Viet Thanh Nguyen and Janet Allison Hoskins, “Introduction: Transpacific Studies: Critical Perspectives on an Emerging Field” in *Transpacific Studies: Framing an Emergent Field*, eds. Viet Thanh Nguyen and Janet Allison Hoskins (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2014), 2.