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## Constellations of Strange Bodies: Engaging with the Concept of Mess and its Shifting, Swirling Conditions

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**Constellations of Strange Bodies:  
Engaging with the Concept of Mess and its Shifting, Swirling Conditions.**

An Interview with Martin Manalansan IV, *University of Minnesota*

Interviewers: Jed DeBruin, Lee Mandelo, and Sydney Mullins, *University of Kentucky*

*Martin F. Manalansan IV is the Beverly and Richard Fink Professor in Liberal Arts, Associate Professor and Director of Graduate Studies in the Department of American Studies at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. He received his Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy at the University of the Philippines in 1981, his Master of Arts in Anthropology at Syracuse University in 1987, and his Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology at the University of Rochester, 1997. He has written two books and several essays, including: Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men of the Diaspora (Durham: Duke University, 2003), The “Stuff” of Archives: Mess, Migration, and Queer Lives (Radical History Review, 2014), and Messy Mismeasures: Exploring the Wilderness of Queer Migrant Lives (South Atlantic Quarterly, 2018). He is also in the midst of writing his third book, to be called Queer Nightlife. Manalansan IV is interested in the ethnographic study of messes, measurements, and the “infra-ordinary.” He conducts research on Asian Americans, Filipino global diasporas, affect and embodiment, sexuality and gender, urban modernity and vernacular globalization. Manalansan also worked in AIDS/HIV research for ten years before returning to academia, an experience which led him to combine academic pursuits with social justice activism.*

**Jed DeBruin (JD):** *To open, we want to thank you for not only a brilliant talk but also for a lively discussion after, as well as agreeing to this interview. A concept that stood out to us across your work is your assertion that mess is “constitutive of queerness,” and that you seek to “locate discomfort, dissonance, and disorder as necessary and grounded experiences in the queer everyday” (2014: 97).*

*To continue in that vein, in a 2018 article that builds upon the concept of mess you stated in your 2014 article there is an “uneasy juxtaposition of the past, present, and future and the spaces both inhabited and conjured” (Manalansan, 2018: 503) in building an understanding of the Queer Six’s apartment. How does your understanding of their apartment challenge our typical categorizations of time and space, in and beyond the everyday?*

**Martin Manalansan IV (MM):** The apartment is interesting both as a spatial unit and as a modern architectural innovation. First, the apartment emerged in European cities as factories were being built due to the rapid migration of workers from the countryside – mostly farming communities. Settling into cities full of strangers, the apartment was to bring together people who are not always tied by blood, friendship and/or long habitation into small seemingly unobtrusive spaces.

In other words, European modernity necessitated a particular social order based on the idea of a constellation of strange bodies dwelling in bonded spaces and time. Apartments were built as discrete dwelling in accordance with the compartmentalized life of modern urbanity and individualized interiorities (both spatial and psychic). Neat temporal markers such as nightlife versus daytime, bordered spatialities such as domestic and public are products of Western modernity. These seemingly sharply drawn spatial and temporal boundaries are ideological constructions because they veil the messy and fraught conditions that are brought to light in everyday life.

**Sydney Mullins (SM):** *That's fascinating, the idea of those boundaries in space—like “the apartment”—serving to normalize a certain style of living, or story about everyday life.*

**JD:** *Yes, absolutely.*

**MM:** What my work aims to do is to interrupt the flow of these orderly spatial and temporal narratives. My aim is to show how marginalized people embroiled in the struggle for urban survival necessarily have to traverse, cross or upend such dichotomies of what is public and private. So, for example, contrary to the etymological roots of the word “apartment” which suggest a separation or a boundary one of the glaring realities of apartment dwelling is that you can sense (sounds, smells, etc.) people’s comings and goings – their daily activities in the building. There is no insulated refuge. In a later chapter of my book manuscript (a section of which is coming out in a volume called *Queer Nightlife*), I contend that nightlife (which is emblematic of European urbanity) is a flimsy temporal signpost. For marginalized subjects, especially working-class people toiling during graveyard shifts, there is no strict division between night and day, between work and rest, between private spaces of the home and the open noisy din of the outside world. Instead, one finds enmeshments and the blurring of borders.

**SM:** *In your article “Messy Mismeasures: Exploring the Wilderness of Queer Migration,” you assert that measurement’s evil twin sister is temperance. Can you expand on what you mean by temperance as well as how it is, in fact, measurement’s evil twin sister? Is temperance a luxury and fantasy of the upper classes, much like measurement?*

**MM:** Actually, my intention in the essay was to suggest that measurement and temperance compose a twin or more accurately, a Janus-like construction (two faces with one head). That might be a better way of putting it. Temperance is not just a classed form of disciplining and governmentality, it is (like measurement) deployed to maintain racial, gender, sexual and class status quo, strengthen the power structure, and stamp down dissent and chaos.

**SM:** *Thank you for the clarification!*

**Lee Mandelo (LM):** *In terms of resistance to those restrictions of measurement, I was struck by the discussion of “mess” as an archive and a guiding principle, during your talk as well as your recent writing. What drew you, initially, to the concept of mess—and what keeps you enmeshed with it now?*

**MM:** I have a complex web of inspiration and knowledge triggers, let me just mention two.

I am an immigrant and I have always been interested in diaspora and immigration. This interest is marked by my own experience and those of others where the idea of “settling in,” “assimilation” or in social science terms, “integration” are all really useless concepts. The processes of belonging and setting up a home are really discrepant and chaotic sets of practices that are contingent on a variety of temporal and spatial conditions. Does this mean mess has been a pivotal fulcrum of my memories and experience? Yes. I “swim” in it. What I want to do in my work is to take my readers to plunge into and get affectively enmeshed in these shifting swirling conditions that I as an individual and as an anthropologist have always seen to be a true rendition of modern social life.

I also came of age so to speak in the AIDS era where one of the great lessons of this pandemic is the untangling of identity and behavior – where identities like gay are unstable particularly in immigrant communities and communities of color. In the 21st century, especially after the publication of *Global Divas*, gender has become a major discussion. During the 90s when I was conducting fieldwork, transgender as a category was just starting to emerge (see David Valentine’s work). *Global Divas* was always seen as too overly concerned with gender and gendered meanings, some people have asked where is the sex?

Frankly, what I observed during my fieldwork is that sex cannot be divorced from imaginings about gender. The mainstream homonormative line has always been “gay equals men” and that “gendered inflected homosexuality” is ensconced in pre-modern or pre-gay sex/gender formations or cultures. Basically, the vibrant debate in transgender (at least one way of framing it) has been a useful way of looking beyond Western formations but at the same time, all of these identities, practices and institutions should set against the workings of late capitalism.

**LM:** *Yes, absolutely—I certainly see those complicated echoes between imaginaries of sex and gender within *Global Divas*. I am also thinking of your article “Race, Violence, and Neoliberal Spatial Politics in the Global City” and discussions of how cruising, policing, and post-9/11 securitization have impacted the movements of queer men of color—especially those who are migrants. What are some shifts that you have observed in the everyday, bodily life of “contemporary urban queer cultures,” from the publication of *Global Divas*, to that article, to the current moment?*

**MM:** As a way to add and complicate my answer to these last two questions, my contention about mess is more than just about undocumented queer immigrants. Consider this larger picture. Late capitalism has enabled authoritarian regimes and figures like Trump, Bolsonaro, Duterte and Modi. I find it fascinating that in all these regimes there is a consistent and specific political deployment of mess, dirt, and disgust in the service of maintaining power. In other words, as in the Trump case, immigrants are deemed as coming from “shithole” countries are criminals and dangerous disease bearing monsters who try to elude the borders and mess up the country. Therefore, Trump’s solution is a cleaning up and an eradication of the foreign, the sick, and the queer.

My framing of mess is to conjure not a state or condition to be cleaned up but to offer a generative and creative force that runs counter to the homonormative order of things. The mainstreaming of gay and lesbian has been instrumental in the propping up of such neoconservative political agenda. Thus, mess in the queer sense can be a counter-narrative to these prevailing conditions. In other words, mess – like the ideas of the wild and the brown commons (see Halberstam and Muñoz) are initial steps towards a more radical vision of the world and towards a queerness that is not yet here but is in the far horizon. Queerness is a messy vantage though a truly promising one. As we sit in and live with the mess, we can look through this critical lens/optic that will enable us to envision a just and queer future.

**LM:** *Thank you so much for that beautiful answer. The political potential of mess for a radical queer futurity leads me to another question, drawing on that “complex web” you mentioned before and your involvement with HIV/AIDS outreach and activism.*

*For queer folks who came of age after the ‘90s, I feel like there is a sort of fading-from-view of what those years were like for the people on the ground, working and struggling. What drew you to activism then, and what are some of the memories or experiences you carried out from that decade of work that you would wish for folks who weren’t there to know now?*

**MM:** I think what happened in the late 80s and early 90s was the emergence of a vibrant activism and critical optic due to the life and death situation of the pandemic. But with the waning of the pandemic and its eventual management, and most importantly the successful expansion of neoliberal capitalism, the edgy potentials of aggressively confronting violence and inequalities that were in place then have been anesthetized and homonormalized the edgy potentials. My contention is that the capitalist machinery through apparatuses such as the quantification and metrification of value, of humanity, of life in general – all these have dampened if not suppressed the renegade impulse. During the pandemic, it was very clear, there was no other way but to fight against the establishment from the dirty trenches. Despite the dampening of the renegade spirit, I still believe it can still be enlivened and jumpstart several

movements. I strongly believe that queer studies/theory (among many other critical viewpoints) can be the fuel that will set fire to a more radical way of dealing with the world at large.

**SM:** *We look forward to adding more fuel to this growing radical fire. Thank you for your time!*