

Martin F. Manalansan IV

Messy Mismeasures: Exploring the Wilderness of Queer Migrant Lives

Gay identity and its relationship to the urban has been a much, if not over-, discussed topic in LGBTQ studies. In many ways, it has become hegemonic to the point that trenchant critiques such as those of queer rural studies scholars have emerged. Nevertheless, this topic has a long and illustrious history. John D'Emilio's (1983) canonical and astute historical narrative was the first to showcase the intricate relationships between urbanization and the rise of gay identity and its shaping by Western capitalism. While D'Emilio's nuanced rendering has been instrumental in the formation of progressive ideas, some instrumentalist voices have taken control of the story, such as those of Richard Florida (2014) and Amin Ghaziani (2009, 2011, 2014). Both of them are sociologists by training, and their extensive, data-driven works have come to dominate many debates around gay identity and city life (albeit for specific time periods, respectively).

It is not surprising, given their similar disciplinary background, that both Florida and Ghaziani are focused on, if not obsessed by, the procedures, techniques, and concepts of measurement. Indices, factors, scales, and other units of mensuration are the stories by which they tell the tales of

The South Atlantic Quarterly 117:3, July 2018

DOI 10.1215/00382876-6942105 © 2018 Duke University Press

gentrification, “gay culture,” and urban modernity. Florida offers the concept of the “creative class,” which consists of gays, bohemians, and other edgy, mostly nonnormative, lifestyles. He argues that these people who reside in transitional urban neighborhoods are the social fulcrum for mobilizing forces of gentrification, thus enabling a path toward economic transformation and prosperity. Ghaziani conceives the emergence of a “post-gay” culture where a new liberal ethos and sensibility permeates the urban landscapes of North America, paving the way to other less-identity-based struggles. In the spirit of mainstream sociology, Ghaziani is also devoted to the ideals of measurement by focusing on ways to assess and calculate the limits and extent of contemporary sexual cultures.

I do not intend to rehearse any of the critiques about these two (there is more than a volume or two about Florida alone). I am not concerned with the “validity” of their data, but rather I offer a critical counterpoint or an alternative narrative beyond clinical and hygienic social measurements. Most quantitative scholars contend that numbers and measures tell a convincing story, even if, they say, these are not always complete. I believe otherwise. Numbers actually get in the way of obtaining a sensitive, visceral, affective, and emotional literacy about the struggles of queer subjects such as immigrants, people of color, and single mothers on welfare. It provides the lure of an orderly and domesticated data, while sweeping the mess of race, inequality, and other social debris under the rug. Numbers tame the wildness of life outside the normal—and this is not just an exuberant celebratory statement of resistance and insurgency. The “civility” of numbers obscures the inherent messiness and always tainted qualities of social life outside pristine norms. It takes on a distant, so-called objective, yet myopic, optic to brashly offer the ideas of “post-gay” culture and the creative class. This is also to say, not that messiness and wildness are static qualities, but just the opposite. Mess and wildness are fluid, contagious, and mercurial. It is precisely why this essay, while struggling to maintain some form of rhetorical intelligibility, intentionally runs short of clean-cut interpretations by remaining open, messy, and cluttered.

My work (Manalansan 2014) is a product of several years of fieldwork among Asian and Latino immigrants in New York City and is devoted to strongly offering a more trenchant way to engage with contemporary urban queer cultures (through disciplined or undisciplined scholarship) and to think through the theorization of queer as mess by not cleaning up or “scrubbing up the data” or by not slotting them into preset categories. Build-

ing from mess as a pivot of analysis, I examine the materiality and semantics of “wildness” to give more flesh to the contingent, messy, precarious conditions of queer undocumented immigrants. Using these subjects who do not “measure up,” who exist under the gay radar, or who are (especially at this particular political moment in America) portrayed and treated as “wild,” criminal, and recalcitrant subjects, I present below a reflective and nuanced polemic against measurement and offer an introspective analysis on the contingencies of mess and wildness as ontological and theoretical necessities.

Beyond the Spectacle of Measurement: An Intemperate Queer View

One thing is clear. Notions of measurement are pervasive—even in our very language. We speak of the measure of a man, his strength of character, the greatest good for the greatest number. We measure how long we live, how tall we are, how effective is a diet, how far we have to travel, and how much it all costs. Our modern world-view is constructed on a framework of measurement. Measurements both reflect structure in the natural world, and impose structure upon it. You might say that we see the world through the spectacles of measurement.

—David J. Hand, *Measurement: A Very Short Introduction*

Amid the rise of audit cultures and assessment regimes in contemporary times, we are confronted with the ever-increasing messiness and untamed dailyness of recalcitrant subjects such as queer immigrants. This essay works against the discourses around measuring, accounting, and auditing that have proliferated in management practices and institutional policies with the wild intractability of queer immigrant lives. In the age of Donald Trump and Brexit, we find not only the normative, often inhumane, imperatives of assessing migrant lives within circumscribed social and political parameters of productivity and value, but we also encounter the active refusal and uncomfortable emplacement of these migrant subjects within geographic, affective, and political arenas. Through ethnographic observations of and interviews with queer immigrants in New York City, discursive analysis, and textual interpretations, this essay offers a reflection on “wildness” through its everyday encounters with its evil twin sister, “temperance,” which is the guiding ethos of the regimes of measurement, assessment, audit, and valuation.

In various times in history, immigrants have been portrayed as animals, unruly subhumans, or diseased, sex-crazed criminals. While people might see the overt, flagrant demonizing of immigrants today as something

new, people on the move and other itinerant strangers have always been met with suspicion or derision. In this globalized world, such aggressions and violence are often more than just local, physical, and emotional spectacles; they are, more importantly, often ideological. In an August 9, 2017, online op-ed essay, law professors Amy Wax and Larry Alexander (2017) deplore the loss of the Western bourgeois cultural script of civility and responsibility by listing the deplorable, anachronistic, and antisocial conditions of single-parent households, crimes, black rap culture, and the antiassimilationist stance of Hispanic immigrants, just to name a few. At the heart of their rant is that “not all cultures are equal.” They decry the diminishing importance of bourgeois habits caused by the chaos of queers, people of color, and immigrants. They advocate a return to the hegemony of ostensibly “superior” bourgeois habits and hygienic traditions of virtuous civility, responsibility, and sophistication, well suited to the twenty-first-century free market environment. By imposing a hierarchy of value between cultures, Wax and Alexander render these so-called traitors to the true bourgeois promise of America wild, immature, uncivilized, and intemperate.

While I recognize the longer and more varied historical specificities of populist, anti-immigrant rhetoric, I turn to what has been a co-constitutive part of this phenomenon in relation to the modern West’s efforts to control various spaces through colonialism and capitalist expansion—the regime of measurement. Measurement, as a set of techniques and methods, is embedded in the ideals of Western objective science and a clear-eyed (tidy) bourgeois view of the world.¹ Hygiene, census, and anthropometric measurements were regimens of control and power. For example, body parts, such as skull size, were subject to various forms of metrics to see who was civilized, who was healthy, and who was closer to nature—or at least more animal-like. Measures and the various units of mensuration still play a major part of imposing a normative hegemonic worldview that domesticates wild things and clears away the debris of superstition, sexual deviance, and ideological insurgency. Today measurement through the use of metrics is the life (and death) of people as well as business, political, educational, and social institutions. The physical survival, social visibility, value or worth, success, and moral standing of persons and institutions are dependent on and determined by these metrics. Part of measurement’s value is its ability to succinctly reduce things to predictive, clean, “objective” data, untainted by so-called bias and subjective ideas. In social science research, measures and metrics are “scrubbed” clean of the detritus of ideology, emotion, and cultural mores.

Measurement (at least to Western-trained eyes and minds) is a universalized pivot of humanity. “It underlies our science, our civilization, our commerce, and our very lives. It forms the infrastructure on which modern humans exist, in the sense that our mental picture of the world is very much based on measurement” (Hand 2004: 24). Historians of science trace the development of the Western scientific regime of measurement as part of the rise of modernity, colonialism, and rational science. Thomas Hobbes and other philosophers have described the rise of the modern state by arguing that its establishment can only happen by departing from a period of chaos and unruliness, a state of nature filled with excess and anarchy, a veritable social Babel needing to be tempered, cleared up, and disciplined from the clutter of multiple voices, interests, and positions. It is only through the numerical, the quantifiable, and the repeatable that Temperantia, the Roman goddess of moderation and a patron of the useful arts and science (therefore the patroness of measurement), can reign over the neoliberal realm. In various visual depictions of this goddess, she is often portrayed as someone who, on the one hand, holds spectacles (tools for a more exacting “objective” vision)² and, on the other, tightly grasps the reins to the bit in her mouth, which suggests self-control, direction, and purpose (Klein 1974: 19). Notice the campy and queer tension in the (unwitting BDSM) imagery here, which I take as a welcome sign, as I shall demonstrate below.

I deploy this mythological and historical detour about measurement and metrics to underline my own trajectory, which is a critique of the spirit and aura of this mythology. To put it in more delicate terms, through their everyday struggles, the queer subjects, spaces, and practices I engage with below are illustrative attempts to dislodge and depose Temperantia from her reign of “objective” terror and challenge a specific kind of order through mess, clutter, and wildness. In the following stories and analysis, I rethink the ideas of queer survival in terms of mess, mismeasures, and the fabulous in the gritty, wild, frictive, quotidian encounters of undocumented queer immigrants in New York City. Indeed, how can we think of these subjects who exist in the wilderness of working-class immigrant life, who, more often than not, are messy and do not measure up?

This essay explores how the wild mismeasures and mess reflected in queer migrant quotidian experiences are not just machinations of state apparatuses but rather are also openings and opportunities for alternative ways of being and surviving. By mismeasures and mess, I do not mean mistakes or the use of improper units of measurement that can be remedied by inventing other more useful or “appropriate” units and scales. Rather, by

mismeasures, I consider multiple, fleeting, often implicit atmospheric intrusions like a sudden chill in the air or a swift swishing of hips in tight uncomfortable spaces. I conceive mismeasures as attempts to defy the rigors and lure of mensuration or, plainly, to go against the seemingly logical or rational impulse to assess, to audit, or to evaluate. Mismeasures are messy engagements that are performed in order to move, live, and survive. Mismeasures are those that thrive in spaces of the wild and the undomesticated. They are about impossible lives made livable through various fabulous and creative narratives that are spun and woven by minoritarian subjects. In other words, the failure or refusal to domesticate, clean up, temper, and tame the unpredictable and immeasurable lives of queer immigrants also contains a possible escape hatch or alternative from the strictures of oppressive evaluative frames, however temporary and momentary they may be. I limn various ethnographic moments where wildness and mess are enmeshed in migrant lives and where ideas of a “queer metrics” or the “mismeasurable” can become the basis for envisioning and forging possible futures. Wildness and mess are tactics that either go against or at least coexist with the modern normative inclination to clean, to temper, to count and be counted, to be visible, to be valued and to value any phenomena on the basis of standardized units and scales, and to refuse the concomitant compulsion to clean, tame, and domesticate. Therefore, through the words and deeds of the Queer Six, I propose an alternative set of optics for seeing and apprehending minoritarian subjects living on the fringes, on the spaces of social abandonment.

I utilize the notions of wildness and mess from particular locations and genealogies. The inspiring writings of Jack Halberstam (2014) and Tavia Nyong’o (2013–14), particularly those that engage with the Wu Tsang film *Wildness*, offer cultural and historicized articulations of the wild and wildness evoked by the pleasures and pains of queers of color. Sociologist Deborah R. Vargas (2014), in her own work, reflects on the exigencies of *sucio*, or “dirty,” as a necessary and vital analytical framework to understand the queer daily conditions of Latina lesbians. I offer an idea of wildness and mess as possible strategies for forging queer trajectories and states of being in a world that is bent (so to speak) on cleaning up and taming unruly jungles and wildernesses. I depart from the popular notion of mess as impossible excess and take on its alternative, often underused, meaning as plenitude—as abundance and as opportunity. Mess opens up other stories that do not yield to the calls for temperance, cleanliness, and measured behavior. Mess, then, is not an impediment to living but a way of being in the world.³

Welcome to the Jungle: Domestication, Wilderness, Mess, and the Fabulous

Since the early 2000s, I have been involved in fieldwork with a group of six queer undocumented working-class immigrants who live together in an apartment in Jackson Heights in the borough of Queens in New York City. Imelda, one of the residents and a Filipina trans woman whom I met in the 1990s, introduced me to the rest of the household. I affectionately call them the Queer Six. I must admit that the acts of bestowing a moniker on this group of people and using the word *queer* may seem both arrogant and initially offensive. I use the term both as an act of intimacy and as way to signal a complicated, yet fascinating, form of nonnormative collectivity and untempered domestic inhabitation.

After I met Imelda one wintry cold day, she invited me to her apartment to witness firsthand her unusual living conditions. I told her that it was not so unusual for people to live in cramped apartments in the city, quipping that it is the “New York style.” New York denizens inhabit their share of these kinds of uncomfortable, cramped domiciles, since what makes them true New Yorkers are the inventive ways they dwell amid the scarcity of space.

After battling with several locks in both the building’s main front door and the door of her first-floor apartment, she dramatically said: “Here, it is messy.” The smell of bodies and unwashed laundry assaulted my nose. In the dim yellow light, I had to blink several times until I realized that what I thought were big shadows were piles of boxes, packing crates, clothes, stuff, and more stuff. There was no real furniture except for a small table at one end and two folding chairs propped up against a wall. The stuff was piled in a somewhat haphazard manner. The smaller room was supposedly a bedroom, but no one slept there. It was used as permanent storage for stuff people rarely used for their everyday life. There was so much stuff in this room that the contents were spilling into the larger living area, which was just an extension of the bigger room. No one slept there, so it was used to store more stuff that the dweller did not use or need every day. The apartment’s small bathroom was marked by paths that had been cleared of stuff to navigate the way to its door. The household members did not allow anyone to cook or eat in the house because they were afraid of insect infestations, so the ovens were used as storage. The refrigerator was practically empty, aside from bottled water, batteries, and some medication.

It took me a minute or two to take it all in. My immediate reaction was that I had entered a hoarder’s apartment. It was similar to people’s reactions

upon entering a hoarder's domicile in the reality television series *Hoarders: Buried Alive*. Such responses are based on an incredulous shock at the onslaught of sensorial morass. The immediate judgment, both in my case and in the reality show, was that the situation was an impossible form of habitation, undomesticated, intemperate, and unruly (Manalansan 2014).

I learned that there were six people in this very small apartment. It was not a case of hoarding, nor was it a hoarder's residence;⁴ there was just not enough space for all six dwellers' stuff. When I asked Imelda what the dimensions of the apartment were, she tellingly answered: "Who has time to measure? Besides, why measure? We can't do it [measure the rooms] anyway with all the clutter." She went on to say that the apartment is well heated—sometimes too well—but she admitted that at least they have a place to settle into when they need to sleep, depending on their work schedules, with each of them working two to three, if not more, odd jobs.

Imelda's rants about standardized measurements immediately rang true. I thought of how vernacular notions regarding the value of residential spaces (one bedroom, 250 square meters, etc.) are part of how people evaluate homes, other people's professional successes and failures, their moral and economic well-being. All of these considerations about size, proportions, and measures are major components of how ways of life in New York City (where space is a premium), particularly in the gentrifying neighborhood of Jackson Heights, are assessed. Therefore, urban domestic life is a struggle between density and order, which is why self-help books on home organizing abound and are major best sellers. It is not a big wonder that the most recent international home-organizing expertise (Kondo 2014, 2016; Sasaki 2017) arose from Japan, where cramped domiciles have become fodder for sensational narratives of extreme forms of cramped domesticity, which in turn gave rise to these expert "solutions" on decluttering and cleaning up chaotic residences.

That said, the uncomfortable surroundings of the Queer Six's apartment were characterized by Imelda in an interesting way. "Parang gubat" ["Like a jungle"]. She was half joking. She was asserting not just a similarity but a material and gritty reenactment of the wildness of the jungle. Her other roommates through the years used words such as *jungle*, *tropical forest*, and *maze* to characterize the physical conditions of their residence. As I illustrate below, the Queer Six deployed the jungle metaphor to signal that it was a space to navigate rather than one to domesticate, clean up, temper, or tame.

It took me a while to take in how, for the several years they lived there, they tacitly accepted the seemingly chaotic conditions. I wanted to know

more about how discomfort and intimacy could coexist albeit in fragile terms and how they both enable fabulous survival. Being tacit does not mean just passive or static acceptance, but rather, as I said earlier, it is a form of navigating while being aware of the rigors, dangers, and pitfalls of the terrain.

By using the words *fabulous* and *fabulosity*, I gesture to their etymological provenance in *fabula* and narrative.⁵ Through the years, I gathered stories from the Queer Six and other people in the area and observed how they wove such fabulous tales into their everyday practices in order to get through the day and live to see another one. The subjects whom I am engaged with are working-class and undocumented, so they create their own stories of the fabulous that cannot and do not approximate the popular imaginary of the fabulous. Fabulous and fabulosity, then, are not just carbon copies of popular media's rendition of opulence and elegance, but are sometimes campy, often ironic engagements with spaces, things, and people in ways that reformulate material moments of pathos into exuberant humor, warm camaraderie, and aspirational performance. Sometimes these fabulous moments include tacit acceptance that some people might describe as resignation or surrender. However, the performances are not about giving up but rather about stories of survival struggles, strong self-possession, and world making with a wild flair while still sensitively attuned to people, times, and spaces.

A newcomer to the household would have lazily described the house as a sheer uninhabitable trash heap, brimming with chaos, anarchy, potential disaster, and dirt. However, the Queer Six through the years made sense of the seeming morass of their domestic world not by cleaning it up but by bringing a sense of "nature" into the residential space. The piles of clothes, the packing crates, and other objects became mountains, hills, trees, and the limited pathways were creeks, rivers, unpaved roads. The apartment, then, was a rough terrain that needed a more constant and careful navigation. Therefore, none of them considered it an easy, homelike refuge from a tough outside world; rather, it was an extension of it. Thin walls made their place of residence porous to the sensorial intrusions of street traffic, the sounds of pedestrians, the smell of garbage, and, since they were close to a church, the clanging of bells at different times of the day. While most of the windows were covered with a combination of thick curtains and old blinds, they could not muffle or prevent the "real" world from intruding into their domestic lives. In fact, the apartment could never be considered a private lair because privacy itself was a struggle, not a ready-made feature of the residence. They managed to create a space for each of the residents, but the borders were never clearly demarcated because of piles collapsing and objects falling out

of boxes. The spaces were not comfortable nests but small, fluid, shifting locales where possessions sometimes got mixed up and sleeping areas could be wherever they could stretch out over piles of blankets, boxes, or clothes.

Somehow, without any explicit agreement, the group settled into a form of haphazard routine or schedule, with people coming and going. With their multiple jobs and conflicting schedules, they maintained a couple of faint yellow lights that cast a perpetual nocturnal quality over the space. It took most people a minute or two to see things clearly. Natalia, one of the Latina roommates, used to say that there was no need for clear, bright lights, because the yellow lights brought a dramatic glow to things in the main room that was reminiscent of either dawn or dusk, major signposts of a twenty-four-hour calendrical unit of measure. At the apartment, night and day were not distinct slices of measured time due to the conditions in the dwelling and the multiple work schedules of the Queer Six. Sleeping and bathing were the main activities in the house and could happen at any time, since eating or cooking were rare, if not forbidden, and people were coming and going most of the time. Temporal units such as night and day bled into each other, subject only to the demands of occupations and survival. I think of how this might be in a thick tropical jungle, where the canopy of flora often masks the passing of night and day.

Because of the prevailing material conditions in the apartment and the way the residents perceived them, the Queer Six, through trial and error, spun daily stories and performances that engaged with the banal, if not ordinary, challenges of living in cramped and cluttered conditions. They never conducted a planned organizing spree and cleaning that would have led to a blissful domesticity; rather, they consigned themselves to a commonplace set of embodied practices that kept the aura of the chaos but buried it under a silent language and a mundane choreography of movement. Some people might think of this as a kind of orderly cleaning up or a capitulation to the demands of domestic bliss, but these performances were like the piles of possessions in the apartment, always on the brink of falling apart, never really stable or projected toward a hetero-orderly goal of filiation. **Much like the outside world, the Queer Six did not establish queer solidarity of the “family we choose” type but were rather loosely reined in a group of familiar strangers who maintained or struggled to maintain some form of distance while enmeshed in uncomfortable intimate or proximate circumstances.** To the apartment residents, accustomed to being in New York, in crowded buses, streets, and trains, these conditions were not new. However, at least within the confines of this one-bedroom apartment, the Queer Six articu-

lated and spun stories, practices and moments of exuberance, and unwitting irony that cannot be delimited or slotted into measurable units or pockets of times and space. The moments are messy and entangled with the piles of possessions, the aromas, and the “air” of the apartment but still entangled with these realities. These fabulous moments were not complete escapist fantasies but were tactics to provide a tiny breathing space, a quick story, and an event that the Queer Six could create to tell themselves and others of what is, what could be, and what should be possible.

Apart from portraying the apartment as a jungle, they developed an unspoken language of the body attuned to the muddled array of material objects and the uncomfortable forced intimacy of six virtual strangers who casually lived with one another. They choreographed their movements and positioned their bodies so as not to bump into each other in the dim light of the apartment and when they were passing through the narrow paths that led either to the bathroom or to the main door. Imelda used to say that this kind of choreography could be likened to strangers leery of each other’s touch, avoiding any form of intimate contact, and preventing accidental “explosions” of desire. On trains, on buses, and in other public venues, the proxemics of public intimacy are something that one learns, but this is intensified a hundredfold within the seemingly private precincts of a small apartment.

In addition to movements to avoid physical contact, most of the Queer Six did not speak English fluently, so most of them devised ways of speaking by not speaking, through facial expressions, hand gestures and movements, grunts, nods, stares, and even blank stares. This silent language might be unfairly compared to how animals communicate with each other, but this kind of language is less about communicating information than it is an acknowledgment of someone’s presence, a feeling of familiarity tempered by the demands for solitary existence in the midst of uneasy contiguity.

The silent language and domestic choreography might be seen as totally disaffected yet embodied ways of confronting the contingencies of living in such conditions. I contend that disaffection is not merely a literal withdrawal from the world but is also a strategic self-care tactic of marginalized people to maintain a set of conditions to survive. At the same time, I think of disaffection as an affective force that makes survival and flourishing possible. Disaffection can be seen as one of the main energies in the exuberant performances of fabulousness or fabulosity. In the apartment the performances consisted of a momentary turning away from, if not insouciant engagements with, material conditions that were filled with often unintended ironies and suffused with humor, frivolity, approximations of elegance, and the evoking

of various “elsewheres.” These moments of unmeasured or mismeasured performances of fabulousness required a sense of wildness and abandon that in turn opened these times into moments of moving on and surviving.

For example, in the years I observed the household, there were numerous impromptu fashion shows and beauty pageants, even in the wee hours of the morning, even while one or two of the household members were asleep. Walking across the narrow pathway amid the heaps of possessions was both tricky and treacherous. There were many moments of small avalanches followed by shrieks of horror and hilarity. Natalia, who was from Ecuador, would treat the tall stacks of clothes and other stuff as if they were the mountains near her hometown. She always said that she had led a rather difficult life, where she had to climb a “real” mountain to fetch water and go to school. At various turns, the stories were mixed with nostalgia for the land she left behind, but the stories (which were mostly short snippets) always possessed a strong aspirational tone, a hopefulness that things would turn out as she planned. Sometimes the traipsing or ramp struts that they performed were really about the distant worlds of high fashion and celebrities. Nevertheless, their stories and performances were always grounded, literally and figuratively, in a jumbled state of things and bodies in the apartment. While these performances could be construed as fantasies, they were not free-floating flights of the imagination that never arrived at anything or anywhere. What was fascinating during these wild moments was how they would weave and suture seemingly antipodal notions and stuff, such as a tattered robe for a Dolce and Gabbana gown, piles of clothes for the Andean mountains, or a narrow path in a crowded room with a high-fashion runway. The fusing of contradictory elements was then brought back to the silent room filled with stuff, a snoring body in slumber, dim yellow lights. One time, after a moment of hilarity and campy jokes, Imelda just mumbled: “At least we are here and not on a cold park bench. I have been there. I would rather be here in a crowded apartment than on a dark street corner. Who knows, with our luck, maybe in a few years we will be living on Park Avenue [*snickering*]—I do mean on the pavement. This is all crazy.”

At various turns ironic, sarcastic, wistful, hopeful, and defeated, Imelda’s words and similar stories told by the other household members may have seemed to be a mere jumble of fear and aspiration, but the honesty with which they confronted the realities was not always clear-cut. The Queer Six came from India, Ecuador, Colombia, and the Philippines, and their precarious conditions were entangled with a longer national and biographical history of uncertainty, violence, poverty, and day-to-day struggle even before

migration. The pageants and fashion shows were not just silly games but were a breathing space between a rising tide of water and a ceiling, a moment to exhale and to face the uneasy juxtaposition of the past, present, and future and the spaces both that they inhabited and that they conjured. In other words, these sites, situations, and moments illustrate the fraught and entangled notion of “safe space” and safety that Nyong’o (2013–14) elegantly notes in his essay on wildness. It is not a directly intentional or purposive fabrication or creation but a space one “falls” into in order to exhale, to rest, and then move on.

For the Queer Six members, temporal measures were immaterial especially in an apartment where day and night merged. As undocumented immigrants, the past was something they needed to forget, and the present involved a flux of daily routines of inhabitation that had no distinct or well-defined trajectories. The future was a time that they both dreaded and looked forward to. The Queer Six’s interwoven, rather muddled, attachments to and detachments from time and space could not be cleaned up by slotting and pigeonholing desires, distress, anxieties, hopes, and exuberant joy.

It might seem that domestic comfort, safety, and warmth are all relative states or situations. Having experienced homelessness, Imelda might easily just have said that the dingy, dark, messy, undomesticated apartment was better than having no place to live. But she and the other roommates saw these fleeting performances as part of a longer span of time, more than a mere comparison, but rather a confrontation of how things change so fast and how spaces require divergent strategies of inhabitation. A pile of clothes or boxes could cause a small avalanche, they could easily be deported, their lease might not be renewed—all these things were possible in their seemingly impossible lives. Yet the Queer Six confronted the messiness and wildness with their bodies, their stories, and their fleeting, fabulous performances. They focused their attention on their imagined future lives with an eye to the wildness and messiness of their present. They claimed and owned the domestic disorder of things through their embodied improvisations and habits that did not readily measure up to the standards of possible, normative lives. The Queer Six were not the embodiment of the animalistic criminal immigrant; rather, their experiences opened up questions about weathering through and surviving difficult events and spaces. Nor were they the exemplars of resilience and endurance, because they did not reproduce stable conditions or succeed on redemptive terms. Indeed, the arrangement did not last. The Queer Six’s undomesticated arrangement eventually splintered and they broke up.

Tracking Mess and Wild Lives

To dwell means to leave traces.

—Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*

It was the summer of 2013 when the Queer Six broke up. It was not a dramatic group fight, no one was deported, and the landlord was willing to look the other way again and renew the lease. Two members of the household got jobs in Long Island, one of them found a girlfriend and moved out to live with her, and then it was like another one of those avalanches. This time it was a slow free fall. At the same time, when they all realized that the domestic arrangement was no longer viable, there was a mad rush to pack so as not to incur further rental obligations. They all packed in a hurry. Because it was Imelda who was the original renter of the apartment and whose name was on the lease, she was the last one to go. She called to inform me that everyone had left and the apartment looked like a hurricane had just gone and devastated it. She was going back there to retrieve two of her remaining boxes of stuff. She invited me over, and when I arrived, Imelda was standing in an almost empty room that was now strewn with stray empty boxes, lots of newspaper, bits and pieces of plastic, a stack of dishes someone found at a street corner and now abandoned in the apartment, some shirts, and batteries.

Imelda looked at me and remarked that she did not remember the room ever being empty. It was always bursting with people and things. Now it just looked bereft. She said it looked a lot smaller, especially with the curtain drawn and the light from the bright summer sun streaming through. She disclosed the rent was now going to go up since the surrounding blocks, where old residents had lived for years, were being converted into condominiums. Gentrification is still in full swing in Jackson Heights, and now it has reached their block. Like a tidal wave. Forces of nature? In the aftermath, wildness still reigns.

Imelda picked up a pink shirt and said one of the Indian gay men used to parade around the house mimicking a female Bollywood star and dancing to nonexistent bhangra music. Imelda was puzzled as to why he left it. She looked around the apartment and whispered that, with the stuff left behind, it still looked a mess. Then she smiled and said that the apartment was cluttered even before all six of them occupied the space. And it remained messy and cluttered after they left. She admitted that it was different when the Queer Six were together in the apartment. Wistfully she added, at least they had beauty pageants and mountains.

Notes

I would like to thank the editors of this special issue for their enthusiastic support of my work. Allan Isaac, Bill Johnson-Gonzalez, and Anita Mannur were very helpful in enabling me to develop the ideas in this project.

- 1 Scholars have either championed or critiqued measurement in recent years, depending on their disciplinary locations. David J. Hand (2004, 2016) and Herbert Arthur Klein (1974) offer useful but glaringly positive historical and cultural analyses of the regime of measurement in the West and its intersection with colonialism, science, and modernity. For critiques of the seductive possibilities and fraught limits of measurement through metrics and quantification in modern disciplines and fields such as anthropology and public health, see Merry 2016 and Adams 2016. For an ethnographically based critique focusing on the “mathematics” of survival in the Guatemalan genocide, see Nelson 2015. In terms of what has been touted as the rise of “audit cultures” or accounting systems, see Strathern 2000 and Joseph 2014.
- 2 For a concise historical survey of objectivity and its relationship to modern notions of rationality, social hygiene, religion, and science, see Gaukroger 2012.
- 3 Mess has been theorized and conceptualized from different angles: social science methodology (Law 2004), systems management (Roe 2013), computer and Internet technology (Dourish and Bell 2011), and everyday life and domesticity (Abrahamson and Freedman 2007; Harford 2016; Roiphe 2012; Smith 2010; Gadzikowski 2015).
- 4 While the Queer Six were not hoarders, popular culture and scholarly works on hoarding and hoarders are particularly instructive. I have written briefly on the connections between hoarders and immigrants in terms of the ideas of human-object relations and unruly domesticity (Manalansan 2014).
- 5 For a more extended and sophisticated idea of the fabulous and fabulation among queers of color in the film *Wildness*, see Nyong’o 2013–14. I also thank Daniel Kim for his enlightening suggestions around fabulous and *fabula* during a presentation I gave at Brown University.

References

- Abrahamson, Eric, and David H. Freedman. 2007. *A Perfect Mess: The Hidden Benefits of Disorder—How Crammed Closets, Cluttered Offices, and On-the-Fly Planning Make the World a Better Place*. New York: Back Bay Books.
- Adams, Vincanne, ed. 2016. *Metrics: What Counts in Global Health*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- D’Emilio, John. 1983. “Capitalism and Gay Identity.” In *Powers of Desire: Politics of Sexuality*, edited by Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson, 100–130. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Dourish, Paul, and Genevieve Bell. 2011. *Divining a Digital Future: Mess and Mythology in Ubiquitous Computing*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Florida, Richard. 2014. *The Rise of the Creative Class*. Rev. ed. New York: Basic Books.
- Gadzikowski, Ann. 2015. *Creating a Beautiful Mess: Ten Essential Play Experiences for a Joyous Childhood*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf.
- Gaukroger, Stephen. 2012. *Objectivity: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Ghaziani, Amin. 2009. "An 'Amorphous Mist': The Problem of Measurement in the Study of Culture." *Theory and Society* 38, no. 6: 581–612.
- Ghaziani, Amin. 2011. "Post-Gay Collective Identity Construction." *Social Problems* 58, no. 1: 99–125.
- Ghaziani, Amin. 2014. "Measuring Urban Sexual Cultures." *Theory and Society* 43, nos. 3–4: 371–93.
- Merry, Sally Engle. 2016. *The Seductions of Quantification: Measuring Human Rights, Gender Violence, and Sex Trafficking*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Halberstam, Jack. 2014. "Wildness, Loss, Death." *Social Text* 32, no. 4: 137–48.
- Hand, David J. 2004. *Measurement Theory and Practice: The World through Quantification*. London: Arnold.
- Hand, David J. 2016. *Measurement: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Harford, Tim. 2016. *Messy: The Power of Disorder to Transform Our Lives*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Joseph, Miranda. 2014. *Debt to Society: Accounting for Life under Capitalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Klein, Herbert Arthur. 1974. *The Science of Measurement: A Historical Survey*. New York: Dover.
- Kondo, Marie. 2014. *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing*. Translated by Cathy Hirano. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed.
- Kondo, Marie. 2016. *Spark Joy: An Illustrated Master Class on the Art of Organizing and Tidying Up*. Translated by Cathy Hirano. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed.
- Law, John. 2004. *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research*. New York: Routledge.
- Manalansan, Martin F., IV. 2014. "The 'Stuff' of Archives: Mess, Migration, and Queer Lives." *Radical History Review*, no. 120: 94–107.
- Merry, Sally Engle. 2016. *The Seductions of Quantification: Measuring Human Rights, Gender Violence, and Sex Trafficking*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Nelson, Diane M. 2015. *Who Counts? The Mathematics of Death and Life after Genocide*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Nyong'o, Tavia. 2013–14. "Wildness: A Fabulation." *Scholar and Feminist Online* 12, nos. 1–2. <http://sfonline.barnard.edu/activism-and-the-academy/wildness-a-fabulation>.
- Roe, Emery. 2013. *Making the Most of Mess: Reliability and Policy in Today's Management Challenges*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Roiphe, Katie. 2012. *In Praise of Messy Lives: Essays*. New York: Dial.
- Sasaki, Fumio. 2017. *Goodbye, Things: The New Japanese Minimalism*. New York: Norton.
- Smith, Keri. 2010. *Mess: The Manual of Accidents and Mistakes*. New York: Perigee.
- Strathern, Marilyn, ed. 2000. *Audit Cultures: Anthropological Studies in Accountability, Ethics, and the Academy*. London: Routledge.
- Vargas, Deborah R. 2014. "Ruminations on *Lo Sucio* as a Latino Queer Analytic." *American Quarterly* 66, no. 3: 715–26.
- Wax, Amy, and Larry Alexander. 2017. "Paying the Price for Breakdown of the Country's Bourgeois Culture." *Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 9. www.philly.com/philly/opinion/commentary/paying-the-price-for-breakdown-of-the-countrys-bourgeois-culture-20170809.html.