

Ep10_BetweenAcrossThrough_CruzFashion

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00:03 Yana Romero: You're listening to Between, Across, and Through.

[music]

00:22 YR: Take a look at the tag on your shirt. Odds are if it wasn't made in China, your label reads "Made in the Philippines." That's because the Philippines is a giant in the global garment industry. And the tremendous scale of production demanded by the west requires manufacturing to do one thing. Move fast. Fast production, fast labour, fast fashion, all to move billions of dollars worth of product from the factory floor to your closet. But to say that Filipino fashion is just fast fashion would be hugely misleading. A long, slow history of Filipino couture exists among the country's powerful and wealthy. An industry that cultivates clients across generations, an industry that is totally dependent not just in the quality of the material, but also the sincerity of the labour. And elite Filipino designers will tell you that every stitch and every fold is intricate, calculated, measured. And to them, slow is magic. Today, Professor Kevin Lewis O'Neill, Director of the Centre for Diaspora and Transnational Studies, sits down with Professor Denise Cruz from Columbia University to explore a world of Filipino fashion. Please join us as we travel between, across, and through.

01:47 Kevin Lewis O'Neill: I'm Professor Kevin Lewis O'Neill. Thank you for joining us. Professor Cruz, I'm really curious. How did you become interested in Filipino couture?

01:54 Denise Cruz: When I was growing up, my mum would often tell me these stories about her life in the Philippines, and her life growing up in Manila. And part of that story involved when she would go to events or she would have events to dress up for, she would go to designers to have clothing made. And it turns out that her brother, at the time, would often accompany her and he ended up becoming a designer, too, actually apprenticing with the designer that my mum would visit. And so my uncle, who is Inno Sotto, is actually a well-established and rather famous designer in the Philippines. And so meeting him and getting to know him, I started to have a real appreciation for the work that he did. And one of the things that came up when I would talk to him about his life as a designer... I would ask him, "Have you ever thought of doing fashion elsewhere, fashion other than in Manila." And he would say, "No, I love it here, this life and this work is really important to me."

03:07 KO: What's your earliest memory of your uncle?

03:09 DC: So I was 11 years old, and we went to visit my uncle, and he lived at the time in Malate. We went up this older building up the stairs and into the door. I remember very clearly the doors opening. It was a beautiful room, there was this lush white couch and there was this beautiful screen, a wooden screen in the background. And then he had fashion books on the table. And he is a very glamorous figure, when you meet him, he's clearly someone who knows style and fashion. He's wearing... His standard uniform is a crisp, white shirt, he has long hair and a ponytail. And we met with him and he learned that I wanted to do... I like to draw. And so he had me draw for him. And at the time I was interested in drawing people. And so he sat down and looked with me and we

sketched together. So that's my first memory of my uncle. And only later on did I realise that where I met my uncle for the first time was the room that he does meetings with clients. That was the actual space where he will do an initial meeting with a client. And the more I began to understand his story and his career, the more I also began to see how complicated and fascinating and interesting the world of Filipino couture is.

04:38 KO: This research seems so disruptive against what the general public might think about when they think about clothes from the Philippines, which I think the general population would think or media will think about made-to-order or mass-produced clothes, but this seems entirely different.

04:55 DC: That's true. The primary way that we think about purchasing clothing in North America and about "Made in the Philippines" in general is what's called off the rack, or now, online. But anyway, it's ready-made, standardised sizes. And for a long time, the Philippines has been essential to garment production. It's now been displaced by other countries where labour has been cheaper but what would happen would be a company would have the clothing made in the Philippines and then it would be exported out of the Philippines under that company's name. That isn't the model that I'm interested in. So the model that I'm interested in is an elite model of fashion production in which what happens is a designer meets with an individual client, they together will work on the design, the client will participate in multiple fittings, it will be a long timeline in terms of production. And then eventually the client will have the garment.

05:57 KO: It seems like incredibly intimate labour where the relationship, I assume, is absolutely essential between the client and the designer.

06:07 DC: Yes, absolutely. And that's really important for the production of the clothing. And so what a designer, for example, what designers tell me when I ask them about their business, they say that one of their favourite things about it is working with these clients sometimes over decades and sometimes through generations. So a designer will have an individual client and then eventually maybe he'll end up designing for that client's children and their children's children. And you have these designer-client relationships that have extended for quite a long time. But what it means in terms of the production of clothing is that there isn't a sense of a brand that you might get with Global North fashion. So the idea that a designer or a design house like Dior, for example, or Chanel will have a designer working behind to create the brand. Here, it's a designer and an individual client. And so it creates really interesting questions, I think, both in terms of the clothing that's produced, but also the labour that's involved. So it is a really intimate process in which they're going back and forth to observe a fitting. It's fascinating because the fitting, in terms of the actual discussion of the dress, one designer described it to me as, "We talk about the dress for five minutes, the rest of the time is talking about the life."

07:30 DC: And they'll talk to them about their lives, about their health, about, "What is your child doing these days?" It's kind of very back and forth, friendly engagement a lot of times with their closest clients. So it is a form of intimate labour. But it's also an interesting version of intimate labour because if, for example, other kinds of intimate labour, you don't really see the labour. So the labour is displaced or the labour is rendered invisible. Here, with the designer, one of the first questions that a woman is often asked when she attends an event in one of these gowns is, "Who did

your gown?" Or, "I love your gown. Who did it?" And so the designer's name becomes circulated attached to the gown even though there's not a corporate brand attached to it.

08:18 KO: But with that kinda labour, there's also a heightened level of risk. If the production time takes so long and if the relationship is really dependent upon the designer and the client, the end product, does it ever not meet expectation?

08:33 DC: There is a high level of risk for the client. And so that's why a designer's reputation, a designer's connections or recommendations from another client is very important, and it's something that's very carefully guarded in that way. There are all sorts of things that can go wrong. So, for example, a lot of them contract with brides who for this one day can and are interested in spending quite a bit of money in terms of Philippine pesos for their gown. And so for that situation, there's a high level of risk because you don't know what the dress will look like until the day you put it on.

09:13 KO: Until the day they put it on. Oh my gosh!

09:14 DC: The day they put it on. Absolutely! So what happens is you go through the series of sketches and you do three fittings or so, usually. And usually what's involved is you do a sketch in conversation with the designer and you agree. And you talk about materials and embellishments like beading or lace, for example. And then what happens is they create the liner for the gown, and then the bride or the client will try on the liner. So that's the initial inside architecture of the dress so that they have a sense that it's going to fit. But then after that, then you might do a secondary fitting, but not when it's finished. So the actual completed gown often is the day itself or very close to the day itself. So although, the way of doing fashion in this way has lasted for decades. It was happening before World War II, but the really the height of the fashion era that I'm interested in is right after World War II to the present. It's beginning to change and shift because now, clients, they are becoming interested in the idea of, "Maybe I can just try a dress on." So there were these events where I would go to where I would say, "I love your gown. Who designed it?" And women would say to me, it's whispered with a little bit of embarrassment, "Actually, I bought this gown off the rack."

10:41 KO: So what is... I think that's great. But then so popular in North America is this show, Say Yes to the Dress, which is this tremendous ritual of women shopping for, I guess you'd call them prefabricated dresses. I mean they're already made, they're on the rack. And sifting through and trying to find some sorta emotional connection with the dress itself. But with Filipino couture, that connection's not with necessarily the dress itself, but with the designer?

11:08 DC: Absolutely. So you're not saying yes to the dress, you're saying yes to the designer. The burden for the designer is being able to craft a level of trust with the client to see if the relationship itself will work, to see if it's something that can be tenable over the course of the production of the dress. For the client, the client has to decide, "Is this really something that I want? Is this someone that I can trust? Is this someone who is making me feel good about the process of being able to purchase the dress?" So some of the most amazing fitting sessions or some of the most amazing designer-client interactions I observed were the ones in which a designer was very skilful at being able to craft this relationship in a short amount of time. "Trust me because I'll make you look beautiful on this most important day of your life."

11:54 KO: But does the designer ever play hard to get? So for the most successful designers, I'm sure they don't have to drum up as much business...

12:00 DC: Yes, they don't have to.

12:00 KO: And they can be quite selective. So is the audition both ways?

12:05 DC: Yes, the audition is both ways. So over the course of the work... I interviewed a number of designers at all tiers, and so some of the most established to people who were just starting out. You're right, for the most established designer, the name itself is enough and they can just charge whatever they want. Hundreds of thousands of pesos. So in terms of the audition being for the designer and the client as well, yes. The newer designers are the ones who are not very established, even the ones who are mid tier, they do have to talk about the procedure to woo a client, in a way, to make their work seem desirable, to make them seem trustworthy. I saw someone who was quite masterful at this, and he said to the client, "You can make your decision, just make it. Now that you have all of the material." And then he paused and said, "Well, don't wait too long because it's possible that I won't have time."

13:05 DC: And at the same time, he's also saying to the bride, "Well, it'll be just me overseeing your dress the entire time. I'm going to give you highly individualised attention." So he would have to walk this very fine line between saying, "You're gonna be at the forefront of my mind, but also, well, I'm in high demand."

13:27 KO: And these designers have, I assume it's an apprenticeship model, where people are working or training under the main designer. And so there is a shared labour. So does the main designer do the bulk of the labour?

13:41 DC: It depends on what kind of or how much business the designer has. But a lot of times, a designer in the Philippines often describes their work as being a one-person show, where they do the marketing, and the client relations, overseeing the production of the dress, and the creative design itself. So often what happens is, they will meet with the client and they will draw the design. And then what will happen from there, the process is it will then go to their patternmaker. And that's someone who will create or construct the actual patterns from which the textiles will be cut. So from there, it'll go to the cutter, and from the cutter, it will go to the sewers who will construct the dress. And then from the sewers to the people who are beading or doing the lace work. And then from there to the finishers, who do the final touches in terms of the seams.

14:32 DC: The designer, it depends upon how much business the designer has. So the more established designers, they do have a team of people doing this. And some of them, they've been working with their team for quite a long time. But people who are just starting out, it's just that person and the sewer. And they're doing that actual construction of labour themselves. And so for that kind of the designer, that designer, part of their sales pitch is, "It's really me. I'm really doing everything. You are seeing the person who's going to do every single part of the design. I know how much needs to be done. I will be there on your wedding day to help you put it on." So this is

something that, for a younger designer, they often highlight.

15:16 KO: It's amazing. And so returning... You had mentioned your interest in post-World War II in the industry. What shifted, or why is that an important marker in the industry?

15:30 DC: In general, post-World War II is seen as an important moment in global fashion. And usually the way the story is often told is, 1947 and Christian Dior, and the pioneering of the new look as reinvigorating post-war interest in fashion, in general. So that the kind of inspiring this conversation about what it meant to be fashionable or the idea that after the war, people were going to pay more attention or be able to pay more attention to dress. What's fascinating about that is in the Philippines, 1947, the exact same year, this is the year that a young designer named Salvacion Lim opens up a boutique in Manila, and also, I think, was pivotal to changing the nation's relationship to dress, because she becomes part of a large scale, post-war fashion frenzy in the city.

16:25 KO: And who is she? Last name is Lim?

16:28 DC: They now call her Slim. Salvacion Lim Higgins. And she is a Filipina designer who becomes immensely popular after the war. And there are other designers who are often talked about in this period, Ramon Valera, for example. But Slim Higgins is really interesting as a model because she starts this boutique. She becomes really affiliated with this idea of couture. So the word couture as a reference point or how people describe fashion, that really picks up in the 1940s and 1950s, in part because of an interest in French fashion filtering into the Philippines, where people actually start claiming the name and title of "couturier." And one of the things that happens in the 1940s is that the newer elite of Manila become very interested in reclaiming the social life that was in existence before Japanese occupation and with the end of the war.

17:28 DC: So Manila is rebuilding after the war. The 1950s is often talked about in the Philippines as being this... Very nostalgically, as being this high point of what Manila once looked like. But at this time, fashion becomes a moment of cultural fascination. There are multiple fashion shows a week. It's something that the government is really interested in, in promoting, they wanna promote the textile industry. All of these things are happening at once.

17:54 KO: And then so in the 1950s, after World War II, couture becomes a recognisable industry. But at the same time, it seems fundamentally different than what's happening in Europe or North America.

18:08 DC: Well, I interviewed this designer, and one of the first things he said to me just as we were sitting down in his office was, "What's fascinating about Filipino couture, Filipino fashion, is that we're still operating the way we did in the mid-century." And that's not the case for Europe and North America. So the model, for example, when Christian Dior was actually creating fashions was that he would create a collection, a select number of buyers and clients would be invited to the fashion show, and they would see the designs, and then it would be made for them. That was happening in the Philippines. The big change that happened was the shift to ready-to-wear in the 1960s and on, when now, the bulk of fashion is really about ready-made clothing rather than this look.

18:57 KO: So in the 1950s, you have the Philippines excited, and the government supporting fashion. Though it seems like from your research, there's a sense that, in the Philippines right now, couture is largely unregulated, not in a way that's regulated here in Canada or in the United States.

19:14 DC: Right, it's not formally regulated.

19:16 KO: What does that mean, "it's not regulated?"

19:17 DC: What that would mean, it's structurally different in that if in other countries in the world, you have either recognition or regulation, institutionally, of things like textile production or of things like being able to call yourself a couturier. What I mean is I could, for example, go there, set up an Instagram account, say that I'm a designer, promote myself. There's a way in which I could try to attract clients that way, but no one would be able to say... If I said, "I'm a couturier." No organisation is going to say to me, "You're actually not a couturier, you're not able to claim that title." So there are all kinds of people at all different levels who claim a couturier, whereas couturier in France, for example, it implies something very particular, primarily handmade, a certain number of collections per year, the commitment to certain artisanal practices. You have a long history of fashion institutions in fashion schools, you have fashion archives.

20:22 DC: So for a long time in the Philippines, in terms of fashion, you didn't have these things, so while the government was really interested in promoting fashion in the Philippines in the 1950s and '60s, that fell away once there was a shift to export processing. So once you become interested in labour as the primary export model, then what ends up happening, or what has ended up happening to the fashion business there, is that you don't get that government promotion or sponsorship. So when I talk to designers in the Philippines, a lot of what they say is what they wish for for the future of Filipino fashion is to have more government recognition that this is an important part of the Philippines in terms of its history of art and creativity and design. What if we were to shift the idea of "Made in the Philippines" as not being about cheaply made objects or clothing, but rather something that was really an example of elite production.

21:26 KO: So the government shifts towards made to order, or mass-produced clothes because it's better for the GDP, it's better for the economy. And then what slowly gets less invested is this couture as a national treasure. Is that...

21:44 DC: I think that's a...

21:45 KO: 'Cause some of the research seems... Part of it seems to be a deliberate attempt to cultivate a certain kinda appreciation and history of this industry.

21:57 DC: Absolutely, and I think in part because the world of Filipino fashion is poised, I think, on the edge of a transition a little bit, or it seems somewhat precarious to me now in light of what is going on elsewhere. So a lot of people in the Philippines, I think, would be quick to correct us and say that it's not an industry there because industry implies regulation, that they would instead call it artisanal practice.

22:26 KO: Does that mean, in terms of it's not regulated, do you see examples of designers coming from outside the Philippines to try to participate or is it so closed off that it's really difficult to get in unless you know the system?

22:42 DC: Well, I think that most of the designers are actually from the Philippines themselves, because they're familiar with the practices. When I say that the fashion in the Philippines, the reason why I want to promote it and to recover the history or to tell the history of it, is because I think that as people start shopping elsewhere... The attention for fashion is shifting, and what is important about promoting fashion for me is that there's this long, beautiful history of people who have created these really stunning gowns that are wearable, but I think also function as art objects, and there's a whole set of practices. So some of the designers that I've talked to who are thinking about retirement, a number of them think about their desire to teach or to start a school, in part because they wanna craft these techniques that they see as no longer in circulation.

23:42 DC: There's a whole artisanal practice, I would talk to designers and they would say, "There's a pair of sisters who for a long time have crafted these beautiful silk flowers that we used to use for embellishments on a dress. Those sisters are very old now, but they're seen as the last people in Manila who know how to do this kind of craft, what will happen to them?" So you have this history of people who make beautiful things in competition with, say, a generation of people in the Philippines who don't wanna take up that practice because instead a job at the call centre is going to make so much more money for them than doing this kinda work.

24:21 KO: There's such an interesting inversion here. So as an anthropologist, I oftentimes think about or read about things like cultural survival, which was this moment in anthropology about making sure that languages that were going extinct should be documented, and cultural practices that should be documented. An interesting inversion here, is that the artisanal cultural practices here aren't from "below," if we're doing this kinda spatial metaphor of class structure, but actually quite elite and from above. And you have, for, lack of a better word, global capitalism really putting this artisanal labour at risk.

25:02 DC: Yes, and I think that's one of the most fascinating things about the work for me is I think a lot of times as scholars, or at least in scholarly production, there's a little bit of discomfort with talking about the elite, especially in relationship to capitalism. That, for good reason, we've looked at the ways in which global capitalism and the production of objects or consumer products has affected labourers, and that's been really important, and certainly for the Philippines, a lot of really important and interesting work has been done about the exporting of labour. So I'm thinking here of phenomena like domestic caregivers or nurses, the idea that Filipino citizens go out and care for the global north.

25:45 DC: But the world of Manila couture is fascinating to me, in part because here we have a group of men and women, many of them, who I would identify as queer men and women who have become involved with the elite, have been essential to that power structure in Manila. And so what happens when you shift the stage in terms of labour from the traditional notion of labouring bodies for us to instead more elite producers? What happens is you see a whole new set of archives and subjects that weren't formally visible. What happens is you see this group of, for example, gay men

who are really essential to making some of the most powerful women in the city look beautiful. And in the Philippines, looking beautiful has had a long history of actually manifesting political power.

26:34 KO: Of course. And in the Philippines also, which is with my understanding, a strongly dominant Catholic culture, couture becomes an arena where gay men can articulate their professional ambitions, it seems.

26:46 DC: Absolutely, and so you have designers, for example, saying, "I became interested in fashion in the 1960s." They would see, in the 1960s, fashion became a place where they could craft their interest in art. Designers talking about, "When I was younger, I used to love to make clothing and paper dolls, or I was interested in beauty. And my parents instead maybe wanted me to major in something else, in business or in the sciences." We have that even with contemporary designers now, where fashion becomes a space for them to be visible in a new way. Now, the history of queerness in the Philippines is different from that in the global north, but what is important is that they're still marked both in the print archive and in the memories of the people who talk about that era as being gay.

27:39 KO: And so much of your work for me sounds like an effort to wrestle with questions of temporality. And so earlier you were speaking about these questions about fast production and slow production, and people maybe not having the attention span right now to engage this kind of artisanal labour. What are some of your reflections on this notion of temporality, and is it a question of just attention span? And then the expectations of these consumers have changed so radically because of other structural issues?

28:13 DC: Yeah, in terms of temporality, I think I would start, or I would ask people, "Do you feel pressure from things like global fashion from China or fast fashion? And I really remember I had the conversation with a journalist who has been covering fashion for a long time, and she said something that I've really been returning to in the course of writing. And what she said was, "You're saying that because you're not from here. The thing about Filipino fashion, or fashion design in the way that we do it here, is that it's always been like this, and it will always be like this. So despite fast fashion, global fashion, Asian fashion, whatever... Well, whatever these developments are, Filipino fashion will always be here." And I found that really fascinating as a disruption of what I had assumed would be... Even now, I talked about it as being somewhat precarious.

29:09 DC: In the end I differ with that journalist, but one of the things that I find so useful about the statement, "Filipino fashion has and will always be there," is the idea that Filipino fashion has sustained and been present, has weathered the storm of globalisation in really interesting and unexpected ways, in ways that we wouldn't think of. And that's really fascinating to me, is to think about rather than, for example, the way to survive in fashion today is to create fast, quick runs of clothing that's going to satisfy a customer who is constantly looking for a new trend. No, the way to survive and sustain in fashion is to craft a close, intimate, personal relationship that will extend through decades and through generations of a family. It's a completely different way, I think, of approaching, for me, globalisation and its effects on time and labour and incidents.

30:10 KO: And it completely reaffirms your statement that the designer's name is critical here. The

entire industry rests on that intimate relationship, multigenerational relationship, which is the designer's name. How is it working with the designers?

30:26 DC: First of all, they're really interested in talking to people about their work, and they've been really welcoming to me. I did a lot of cold-reaching out to people. I think they enjoyed being able to talk about the history of fashion. And what often happened in initial meetings is that the designers themselves would connect me immediately to other people. So one of the things that's interesting about my conversations with these designers is that people are always curious like, "Okay, but it was really competitive, and I'm sure it must have been... People were gossipy or there was a lot of rivalry with the designers." And that's actually not what I encountered in terms of the conversations with the designers themselves. Competitive rivalries did come up over the course of my longer relationship with them. However, in a lot of the conversations, what they would often say is that we would start talking about their work and maybe five minutes in, they would say, "Who you should really talk to is my friend and colleague here." That it was constantly, "Let's create a giant ladder structure to help provide as much information as possible."

31:38 KO: I've always found in research that that's oftentimes thematically very different than this one, but in overlooked industries or industries that really want to be recognised, that there can oftentimes be a very warm welcome to an outside researcher who asks informative, very sincere questions.

31:53 DC: Yes, and I found that, too. And a lot of people were interested, too, in having someone have the resources to be able to dedicate to doing the archival research and to tracing the history and to connecting the stories together.

32:08 KO: 'Cause you speak about sustaining, which is oftentimes, at least how I understand it, very designer-focused, and I'd love to hear you speak more about that. But it also seems that through your research, there may be a collective interest in some sort of larger sustaining of the system or the industry or whatever, but could you say a little more about sustaining?

32:28 DC: Sure, absolutely. So sustaining is a word that came up when I was asking a very established designer about long-term goals for someone in fashion in Manila. And what the more established designers would often say would be, "What really matters in the business is your ability to sustain." So they would use words like "to endure" or "to last," to go beyond an initial noticing and to have a career that can extend through years and decades.

33:01 KO: And that's not just a financial distinction, it's not just to keep running.

33:04 DC: No, no, it's not just to keep running, it's also, I think, the idea of temporal lastingness or persistence. And so I became interested in thinking about how these designers discuss sustaining because it was really grounded in what I saw was the present in terms of a almost lateral lastingness or persistence that was different than what I was seeing in terms of other discussions of time. There have been many scholars who have now written about critiques of capitalism and time, and globalisation and time, it's moving towards constant acceleration or a linear movement. But a lot of these scholars, I think, talk about it in terms of rupture or breaking away. And so I became really

interested in this idea of really lasting materially, relationally, and in terms of a business model.

33:58 KO: It makes perfect sense when you think about the kind of... Again, cultural survival is not the right word here, but it is about thinking through this industry, this couture as trying to establish a history, and maintain and sustain this respect for it. It's also struck me, and I don't know as a scholar, sustaining also seems like a metaphor for creative production that we would think as quite familiar. That it's not just about an initial idea, but a lifetime of creative production.

34:32 DC: Yes. And I think that's really critical for them. Although it's interesting, too, because so many of them don't have a brand attached to their name. A lot of them talk about their work as they will do this work, but when they're finished, they're not going to pass on their name to someone else, that it will be for their personal lifetime. There's not that sense, for example, that the brand of one of these designers is going to necessarily live on. So I think there's a real heightened awareness of the kind of work they can do in this moment.

[pause]

35:19 KO: I'm Kevin Lewis O'Neill and you're listening to the CDTS podcast. We're speaking from the Centre for Diaspora & Transnational Studies at the University of Toronto. The Centre works as an incubator for research across the humanities and the social sciences. We've been talking with Professor Denise Cruz from the department of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, exploring the themes of fashion, nationalism, and the aesthetics of power. We've talked about the precarity of an industry that for the western world is sometimes associated with cheap labour and disposable fashion, but has another equally important side, the artisanal labour of high fashion. So a big part of your work is looking at the transnational dimensions of Filipino fashion. Could you tell us a little bit about Toronto Fashion Week and Project Runway in terms of... In light of the transnational, or even just the mobile dimensions of Filipino fashion?

36:13 DC: Yes. So there are transnational elements to Filipino fashion in terms of designers who have travelled elsewhere, and in terms of designers who promote their work elsewhere. So there are travelling fashion shows for the Philippines. There was a show based here in Toronto called Canada Philippine Fashion Week. It was a celebrity designer charity event. That's no longer a regular event, although Filipino designers do travel elsewhere. But the idea of travelling fashion shows for the Philippines, it's actually something that has been in existence with Filipino fashion more generally for about, I would say four or five decades or since the 1960s, because the question for the fashion designers in the Philippines then was they were interested in entertaining the idea of, "Can we export this model globally?" They were fascinated with that. And so one of the things that they started to do was they started to do these fashion shows, which were immensely popular in Manila and other areas of the Philippines.

37:25 DC: So there was a show called Fashion on Wings, where eight different designers actually travelled, did the touring fashion show through different regions of the Philippines. And it's fascinating to see what happened to these shows because they accorded immense audiences. So I'm talking, the final show was that Araneta Coliseum, which is the same place where Muhammad Ali's, the Thrilla in Manila fight was. So that same Coliseum fills to 25,000 people watching the last night of a fashion event in the 1960s. And it is amazing to see the photos documenting that event. So once

this idea of what I call the fashion palabas, and palabas is a word in Tagalog that means show and spectacle. This travelling palabas, they think, "Okay, it worked in this national sense, can it work internationally in the Philippines?" And so then they start doing shows at the world's fair or in New York or Seattle.

38:25 KO: But at the world's fair, it would be reframed entirely.

38:27 DC: Oh yeah, totally. So the context is different and this is where the reframing is fascinating and that I think has long-term ramifications. Okay, so the travelling fashion shows within the Philippines, it's accompanied by a press discourse or a media fascination with these designers and also with the models, because part of it was seeing these models in these very glamorous gowns. So people know these names. But when you export to a place like the United States, you don't have that prior knowledge of the Filipino designer. So then what becomes the most marketable are things like embroidery or fabric.

39:05 KO: Oh, wow.

39:06 DC: So interestingly, I think, part of what I try to document is the ways in which the travelling international fashion show, you get the shift that ends up having long-term repercussions away from design and aesthetics of design instead to labour in terms of technique with embroidery, in terms of the creation of a textile that isn't available in North America.

39:32 KO: So it's something like from fashion to folklore, that it gets repurposed in a way.

39:37 DC: Yes. Absolutely, yes, yes, and there's other scholars who have talked about this but I think that's absolutely true, like what happens when this local cultural practice travels elsewhere without that context, how do people conceive of it or react to it? So now if you go to Manila, and if you were there in, say, the last 10 years, you would know that Project Runway was a show, of course, popular here and elsewhere. So they have a Project Runway Philippines...

40:03 KO: Excellent.

40:04 DC: With a cast, where there's a mentor designer, there's a cast of judges, there is a supermodel host, and they work with local designers, and it's the exact same model. So if you were to come to that new, you would think maybe, "Oh this is a show that has been imported from the global north into the Philippines." No, actually, that show, that model may have been in existence elsewhere but the interest in it has a longer historical arc, in which the fashion palabas became a cultural entertainment that could attract 25,000 paying customers to fill a coliseum.

40:41 DC: There's this 1960s article that says, "I think that fashion may have deposed basketball as the Philippines' preferred form of national entertainment."

40:50 KO: That is extraordinary.

40:51 DC: Yeah.

40:51 KO: That is extraordinary. And so then Project Runway emerges in the Philippines... You're right, so it's based on this longer history of interest in fashion, this effervescent excitement about fashion that is at least 50 years old, though then it becomes packaged in this easily reproducible... I mean almost, it's not fast fashion but the form of entertainment is quite speedy and in its reproduction, it's almost off-the-rack television that's battling with this really high-end elite couture. That's fantastic.

41:23 DC: Right, there's longer history. And so there's all kinds of repackaging, I mean, Imelda Marcos is globally famous, of course, for being one of the most prominent political figures to wear Filipino designers when she travelled. And one of her signature dresses, it's called the terno, it has these large butterfly... They're called butterfly sleeves. And so she becomes iconic in fashion. And so Imelda Marcos is someone that even the younger generation of people in the Philippines refer to. So people have been in fashion for a long time, what they're interested in is... Okay, Imelda Marcos, the younger generation remembers her, but she was actually capitalising on this longer history of fashion and spectacle of the connection between beauty and power and intimacy.

42:12 KO: And the system extends all the way to North America with Toronto Fashion Week. And so, Toronto Fashion Week, or at least, Filipino Fashion Week, is that what...

42:20 DC: Oh it's called Canada Philippine Fashion Week. So Toronto has a Fashion Week, so Fashion Week is a marketing event that people attribute to Eleanor Lambert, who is this New York publicist, basically, who said, "Okay, how are we going to attract US consumers to US designers rather than in Paris?" And so she comes up with the idea of what she calls Press Week. And you invite buyers and press representatives and fashion influencers, it's a very curated audience. And then you have designers show their collections, okay? Now there are Fashion Weeks everywhere, in places like Toronto, or Phoenix, Arizona, for example... All over the world because it's become now a tourist event in which people recognise that people who are interested in fashion, you can get people to come to the city in order to participate in Fashion Week. The difference is that these events are ticketed and available to the public.

43:19 KO: And that's strange because in the past I would have to be invited. I would have to be in the circle, but now anyone, even me...

43:26 DC: Now anyone can be invited.

43:27 KO: Right.

43:28 DC: So it's still the case in Paris where that's not... You cannot buy a ticket to Paris. You can through, I guess, various agencies, but the process in Paris, for example, is still you need to be accredited, you actually have to have an address in Paris to get an invitation. So Canada Philippine Fashion Week was not an event in which, for example, a buyer will go and buy and place an order that will later be filled. It was primarily for Filipinos in the diaspora, who wanted a connection to a practice that they either remember, or are familiar with, or know of. They wanna see Filipino designers. And for that reason, Canada Philippine Fashion Week looks very different than Fashion

Week in the US.

44:12 KO: And then how did it go in Toronto? You spoke a little bit about the difficulty of moving these shows outside of the bounds of the nation state with reception. How did it go?

44:25 DC: It's interesting because in part one of the things that the event did was it highlighted the diversity of, I would say, the Filipino community in Toronto. And so there was parts of that community that has been here for a long time, and there was also people in their 20s and 30s who now have their own careers and have a disposable income. There is also, of course, the large diasporic caregiver community in the Philippines. So there were all these various components of the Filipino community there. And again, this was to raise money for charity. But the tickets were also scaled, so there was a more affordable show all the way up to the final finale show.

45:10 KO: Filipino fashion here in Canada, I assume can be an engine for community building, but maybe it's also a moment that would accentuate some differences.

45:22 DC: Yes, and that's absolutely the case in terms of what I saw with Canada Philippine Fashion Week, which was supposed to be a celebratory event. So the idea was that you would go and you would see these designers and this show, you would participate, again, in this elite form of entertainment. Canada Philippine Fashion Week, as an event, was also different because it was really promoting the Philippines as a tourist site, so it was sponsored in part by Philippine Airlines. There were images of islands on screens in the background. There was a moment when you sang the Philippine national anthem. There was food involved, there was a roasted pig that went down the runway at one point, because it was a community event.

46:06 KO: So tell me that again, a roast pig down the runway?

46:10 DC: Right. So they called it... So at the first show, it was an event that coincided with celebration of Philippine nationalism, and so there were references to Jose Rizal, who was an important literary figure in the Philippines. There was a moment where everybody sang the national anthem. There was much talk about celebrating the Philippines with pride and with style. And for this kind of community event, really essential always in terms of Filipino culture is the food. And so at a break, in-between the display of fashion, the MC got up and said, "Okay, now we are going to have what you call the Parade of Lechon," which was parade of roasted pig. And so this fully dressed roasted pig comes down the runway and people are taking photos of it, and the audience quite enjoyed that moment. And then they passed out takeout containers of the pig for people to eat while you watched the show.

47:15 DC: And so on one hand, that is not something that would happen at a fashion show in Manila, so it speaks in part to the diasporic context and to the different community who would be attending that event. That event was also, again, supposed to be celebratory, so there were performances involved. And one of the performers sang a song. And to introduce the song, she said, "I would like to dedicate this to the many Filipinos throughout the world who are caregivers." And in that moment, it was this interesting reminder of the presence of global Filipino labour, which on one hand, and this is how I talk about it in the article related to this, is that it's a highly visible story

in terms of the figure that is going to come up is the, in many cases, the caregiver. Yet at the same time, within the City of Toronto, that labour is displaced and rendered invisible. So it was a moment of conflict in that space where a community was being asked to recognise members who are a part of that community, but not all of the community necessarily wanted to talk about that because it was supposed to be a celebratory national event.

48:37 KO: And it seems that in your research, fashion is a form of labour, but it's also a kind of aspirational endeavour. So when a journalist says, "There was Filipino fashion in the past, there it is right now, and will always be there." That seems to be both a statement of fact but also an aspiration, almost like a political project. And so I can imagine that when the complexity of a community gets recognised in a fashion event which was supposed to be aspirational, that there could be some pushback.

49:10 DC: Yes, yeah. So there is definitely... And that definitely, I think, happened, or you could see it visibly in terms of my perception of the emotional reaction of the people in the audience, their enthusiasm for, say, "Let's all sing a Filipino song that we all know and love," to this moment where, "Let's dedicate the next song to caregivers," was quite... There was a quite different feeling in the room.

49:34 KO: Yes. And then so back in Manila when this fashion event filled the stadium, I assume that was a fairly diverse crowd also.

49:46 DC: Also because they were ticketed. And so the other thing, because... Okay, so it's important to know that usually for a fashion wave, there's a time lag. So there's a time lag of, say, three months in which people will buy, but then they know that that isn't going to be available to consumers for a few months. These kinds of fashion shows in which 25,000 people were attending were very, very different because it's before that ready-to-wear model existed. Again, this is the 1960s, the early 1960s when this was happening. The audience was comprised of people who are hearing about fashion, who are interested, who maybe wanna participate in this elite cultural practice.

50:28 KO: Right. I wanna talk a little bit again about the designers and the specificity of the designer's name and the reputation of each designer. I understand that at this point in your research, you've decided not to use the names of designers, which isn't unusual for ethnographic and archival research in terms of preserving anonymity.

50:52 KO: It's slightly interesting in that sense that they're presumably elite public figures, though the more I hear about fashion and couture in the Philippines, it seems that the ecosystem is so... Sensitive is the wrong word, but... And volatile certainly isn't, but someone's name is their entire livelihood.

51:09 DC: Absolutely.

51:09 KO: So I wonder, could you talk us through a little bit about questions of anonymity in the research.

51:15 DC: And that was a really difficult question because one of my interviewees actually asked me, "Okay, you're writing the history of Philippine fashion, I'm gonna talk to you, but you're not gonna use my name in the actual writing." So it's really... It was a hard decision for me, 'cause on one hand, I want to recognise certain designers, so for the historical parts of the book, absolutely there are designers' names. But for the chapters that really delve into the contemporary dynamics, because as you're talking about, it is a very delicate ecosystem. And in terms of designers' reputations, it's so carefully guarded that I was worried about... Being able, for a designer, to speak candidly with me, about, say, the process through which the designer works with a client, that's something that I had to be really careful of. But it wasn't just the names, right? 'Cause one of the things, too, in terms of, how does a designer craft recognition? Okay, so for example, there are designers who have a long history with a certain kind of style or technique, and so when somebody sees their gown in public, you can know who that designer is based on that technique.

52:27 DC: So maybe it's a certain kind of embroidery or a certain kind of draping of a dress, a certain line, a certain kind of embellishment, okay? And so I also had to be careful in terms of anonymity, of naming various practices. So sometimes what I end up doing is talk about people in terms of accumulated identities, because in order to say I talked at length about a certain style or technique of production, people would know exactly who I'm talking about.

52:55 KO: So it's like a composite colour or something, it's to make sure that the identity... And what's powerful here is that someone like me who will obviously read the book and learn a great deal, won't know much at all and won't identify anything, but you're in a position which many academics don't find themselves, where your informants will read the book.

53:16 DC: Yes.

53:16 KO: And that seems to be the very, very specific audience that you're trying to be respectful towards.

53:22 DC: Yes, absolutely. And that's been really challenging, it's been exciting and challenging at the same time. How do you represent the complexity of this world in a detailed and specific way that will come alive for people who aren't familiar with it, but how do you also honour the actual practices of the people who are living there?

53:42 KO: And 'cause you have also a piece of your life or family in this industry, that it's about maintaining the relationships that you're cultivating and that your family has cultivated. As fading out from this conversation, why do you find the labour of the designers, in particular, so compelling with this research?

54:06 DC: They're in this very interesting position in part because they're highly visible, a number of the designers I've spoken with do identify as gay, they have a level of celebrity, and so that's one population. There's also a population of women designers, who also within the local story of Filipino fashion, that story has also been under-told because the gay celebrity designer is the one that has acquired a lot of public attention. So these two populations, I was really interested in

exploring. And I think those two populations only emerged when I looked at the designer. And so it was a combination, I would say, of my own interest in telling the story and also frankly of access to them.

54:56 KO: Having been raised in the United States, does your, for lack of a better word, Americanness, help in the fieldwork? Is it seen as an advantage, an edge? The Americanness thing always plays differently.

55:13 DC: Right. I would say it is not seen as an edge.

55:17 KO: It could not be.

55:18 DC: I'm very clearly marked as an outsider. And I guess it's an edge in that they see me as someone with scholarly and genuine interest in the work, who has enough of a connection to it and enough of a professional and scholarly interest in it that they want to be able to tell me this information. But, for sure, I would say that I'm marked as an outsider, and part of what was difficult was also being able to pass in these fashion events...

55:47 KO: I'm sure.

55:47 DC: As somebody of this world.

55:50 KO: So pass as in, so you have to buy nicer fieldwork clothes than I do. And I...

55:57 DC: Sure. Yeah. So I remember when I was working with one of my research assistants, when I was giving her instructions about things that she might wanna bring to the Philippines, and one of them, I asked her, "Do you have a floor-length gown?"

56:10 KO: That's absurd.

56:11 DC: "Because we will need that for the events that we're going to attend."

56:14 KO: "Pack it."

56:14 DC: Now, the reason why I know that is that early on in my research, I was invited to a fashion show that was at the opening of a ballroom, this was a cocktail hour, okay? And so I arrive at this event and I'm wearing a dress that my uncle has designed for me. And it's a beautiful, well-draped, a perfectly executed teal above-the-knee cocktail dress. And I come into this event and everyone there is wearing floor length gowns, their hair's done up, there's a red carpet, there's an incredible amount of jewellery, impressively, professionally-applied makeup. And I'm instantly marked as an outsider, or someone who has forgotten that this is the mode of dress in the Philippines, in terms of social events. And it ended up working out fine because I was able to... The marking of myself as an outsider, people are very kind in that, so no one shuns you if you're... It was not my experience that I was shunned for what I was wearing, but certainly there was greater care and attention because I had to be in these events.

57:23 KO: And then so back in Manilla, being completely aloof can be helpful in the field. So that maybe is not... Maybe you got more interesting stuff because of it.

57:32 DC: Right. Yes. I think in part, my inability to pass sometimes was helpful because then they approached it quite generously.

57:42 KO: That's great. Thanks so much for joining.

57:45 DC: You're welcome.

57:48 YR: That was Professor Kevin Lewis Neal in conversation with professor Denise Cruz from Columbia University. On our next episode, we'll talk to Professor VK Preston, and we'll ask the questions, "Can you appropriate dance?" And, "What did 17th-century ballet have to do with protesting against colonialism in Peru?" Please subscribe on your favourite app so you won't miss it. This monthly podcast was brought to you by The Centre For Diaspora and Transnational Studies at the University of Toronto. I am Yana Romero. Thank you for listening and joining the conversation.

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