

**Visualizing Self and Surface: Identifying Filipina and Queer Filipinx
Self-Formation in Superhero Komiks**

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Abstract

The definition of and discourses surrounding Filipinx identity have been historically circumscribed by gendered and racial expectations. Such expectations have been essentialized through colonial and state narratives, as well as the more unintentional means of socially-driven standards that stem from the Philippines' eras of occupation. Filipinas and queer Filipinxs have been particularly subject to stereotyping by colonial powers and the Philippine elite, which results in their continued relegation to certain stigmatized or limited roles. I look to Filipinx komiks to demonstrate that accounting for the construction of appearance, both in terms of self-representation and the representation of others, destabilizes the hegemonic notion of essential identities. Indeed, the interconnection of surface and self is purposefully overwritten in the colonial and hegemonic advancement of singularizing images of the Filipina and the queer Filipinx. This thesis aims to challenge the naturalization of identities that are assigned to Filipinas and queer Filipinxs by emphasizing modes and cultures of self-formation as they are represented in Mango Comics' *Mars Ravelo's Darna* and Carlo Vergara's *Zsazsa Zaturannah*. The komiks' superheroes, Darna and Zaturannah, emphasize self-formation by visualizing the different configurations of gender, race, sexuality, and class that Filipinas and queer Filipinxs construct as surface appearances in order to navigate social hierarchies that seek to other them.

I discuss how komiks can afford the unique representation of Filipina and queer Filipinx self-formations by examining sequentiality and the interplay of visual and narrative components—characteristics that distinguish komiks from other mediums, particularly in their ability to emphasize marginalized perspectives. I also discuss specific

instances in which Darna and Zaturannah represent self-formation. At the same time that they signal the historical and on-going systems that seek to delegitimize Filipina and queer Filipinx subjectivities, Darna and Zaturannah push femme and queer transformations to the forefront and demonstrate the power and joy of performance. *Mars Ravelo's Darna* and *Zsazsa Zaturannah* at once name systems of social degradation and resist circumscription within them, through complex interconnections of form and representations of self-formation.

Lay Summary

This thesis examines how komiks can uniquely represent Filipina and queer Filipinx self-formation. Whereas colonial and state narratives seek to limit Filipinas and queer Filipinxs within stereotyped roles, komiks offer forms of representation that emphasize rather than exclude self-formation. I use Mango Comics' *Mars Ravelo's Darna* and Carlo Vergara's *Zsazsa Zaturnnah* to examine how Filipinas and queer Filipinxs perform different configurations of gender, race, sexuality, and class to navigate oppressive social hierarchies. I discuss how the sequence of graphics and the connection between visual and narrative components allow komiks to represent Filipina and queer Filipinx self-formation in ways that other mediums cannot. I also discuss how the komiks' superheroes, Darna and Zaturnnah, include two significant sides of Filipinx self-formation: the historical and on-going systems that seek to limit Filipina and queer Filipinxs, and the performances that Filipina and queer Filipinxs construct in order to survive or exceed those limitations.

Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Jeanne Francis
Nicole Perez Dingle.

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Introduction

Filipinx komiks cannot be defined by a singular origin or style, since the concept of being Filipinx in and of itself implies many cultural histories, practices, and perspectives. One of the most apparent symptoms of the Philippines' complicated national development is the numerous and often contradictory modes of self-representation that populate Filipinx media. Due to its colonial past and entangled lineages with Spain, Japan, and the United States, "Filipinx" as an ethnic and cultural category is challenging to define, and visualizing its meanings often involves the process of identifying colonial influences in the shaping of Filipinx subjectivities and negotiating the points of intersection that still index Filipinx people.

The term "komik" itself indexes the negotiation between colonial and Filipinx cultures. As opposed to "comics," *komiks* are distinctly Filipinx in culture and histories. A simplified explanation for the spelling is that the first Filipinx artists were heavily influenced by US comics and applied onto the American spelling the Tagalog "k" (De Vera and Arong 107). However, the history of this seemingly playful orthographic twist reveals the visual "difference and distinction of a language whose viability, legitimacy, or autonomy is in question" (Thomas 939). Dictated by Spanish spelling conventions, the hard "k" sound in Tagalog script was typically represented by a "c" or "qu," and it was not until a few years following the Philippine Revolution that "k" was mobilized by Tagalog revolutionaries as a symbol of anti-colonial contestation (Thomas 938). The term "komik" thus reflects the medium's power in pushing forward new perspectives, which its creators have demonstrated since its conception. Even the censorship of komiks during periods of occupation and dictatorship shows that the visualization of subjective

experiences and desires plays a significant part in defining Filipinx-ness, and that komiks have always provided a documentation of history and culture that can destabilize hegemony and canon.

In light of the negotiations and transformations that Filipinxs undergo to navigate hierarchies of race, gender, sexuality, and class, this thesis investigates *how* Filipinx identities are formed rather than *what* Filipinx identity is. Focusing on the construction of Filipinx identities enables me to do two things: expand the definition of and discourse surrounding Filipinx plurality so that it includes Filipina and queer Filipinx identities, and challenge the naturalization of identities that are assigned to Filipinas and queer Filipinxs by colonial powers and the Philippine hegemon. The ongoing development of the komiks industry demonstrates that the process of defining what it means to be a Philippine medium is attached to the process of finding ways to visualize and understand Filipinx subjectivities. Considering this, I will focus on how komiks can afford the visualization and narrativization of Filipina and queer Filipinx self-formations.

A Brief History of Komiks

Leading up to and during World War II, narrativizing the current political climate was popularly done through political cartoons which satirized the Philippines' relationship with American and Japanese authorities. Comics historian John Lent cites the serial publications directly following the Philippine Revolution as well as during the American occupation as precursors to Filipinx komiks ("The Philippines" 3). One such magazine was *Liwayway*, first published by Ramon Roces in 1923. Its name, which translates to "dawn," is said to have signaled a new beginning in popular print culture in

the Philippines (“The History of Philippine Komiks”). Written by Romualdo Ramos and illustrated by Antonio “Tony” Velasquez, *Mga Kabalbalan ni Kenkoy*¹ debuted in 1929 in the magazine *Liwayway* as the first Philippine komik strip (“The History of Philippine Komiks”). John Lent discusses how Kenkoy can be interpreted as “a satire on the 1920s’ trend to rapidly Americanize the Philippines” (“Philippine Komiks” 49). Kenkoy’s fashion and use of Taglish—a lingual mix of Tagalog and English—did mirror the Philippines’ American influences, but while some have argued that Kenkoy depicted a Filipino’s failed attempt at becoming more American, Velasquez’s insistence that the character is purely Filipino (Lent 49) suggests that incorporating rather than disregarding colonial contexts is important in visualizing Filipinx subjectivities. Kenkoy quickly became one of the most well-known komiks characters in Philippine history when Roces incorporated *Kenkoy* as a standard segment of the magazine and translated the komiks into other dialects for *Liwayway*’s sister magazines (“Philippine Komiks” 48). *Kenkoy*’s popularity became such a governing influence in how Filipinxs understood national politics that its publication persisted during the Japanese occupation (1942–1944), when the Japan Information Bureau took control of publications like *Liwayway* (“The Philippines” 4). Japanese authorities, upon recognizing the political influence that *Kenkoy* held, even conscripted Velasquez to create daily komik strips “depicting the life of Filipinos under the new Japanese social order” (“The Philippines” 4).² Discourses

¹ Translates to “The Stupidities of Kenkoy.” Remedios Velasquez Francisco, Tony Velasquez’s youngest daughter, states that her father was happy to see that “*kenkoy*” was being used in the Philippines as a word referring to a funny person (De Vera). “*Kenkoy*” continues to be used when referring to something or someone that is funny.

² According to Lent, Velasquez felt the need to assure his readers that “‘*Kenkoy* did not get involved in politics or war, just sanitation’,” referring to the health campaigns that were being implemented by the Japanese and promoted through Velasquez’s komiks (“The Philippines” 4). However, scholars like Warwick Anderson discuss sanitation as a method of colonization, in which “corporeal deficiency” is

surrounding Velasquez's drawing style have noted that *Kenkoy* sported a similar approach in caricaturing facial features, movement, and emotion to Walt Disney's works from the same era ("Philippine Komiks" 48). In an interview with Lent, Velasquez argued that he could not have been influenced by Disney's style since he was in the Philippines and Disney was in the US ("Philippine Komiks" 48). However, given that *Kenkoy* debuted under US colonial rule and that the US continues to influence Philippine politics and culture, similarities between American comics and Philippine komiks cannot be easily disputed by distance. Indeed, as more serial publications continued to develop after Philippine independence in 1946, many komiks creators were inspired by the highly successful comics that American soldiers brought over during WWII ("The Philippines" 5).

Roces and Velasquez advanced the industrialization of komiks creation when they established Ace Publications in 1947 ("The Philippines" 5). At this point, the political cartoon business and Philippine society at large were financially disadvantaged by the aftermath of WWII. This was the driving force behind the rise in popularity for regularly published komiks, as opposed to general entertainment magazines like *Liwayway*. Ace Publication's first series, *Pilipino Komiks*, was met with great success and introduced an era of high popularity for serialized komiks ("The Philippines" 5). This era, now widely referred to as the Golden Age of komiks, spanned throughout the 1950s to 1970s and included numerous genres of fiction and cartooning styles. Although many series were dedicated to mirroring or even directly translating American comics ("The Philippines"

equated to primitivism and the "savage" locals are "civilized" through "biological and civic transformism" (159).

6), the komiks industry “became a prime vehicle to promote Tagalog” (“Philippine Komiks” 51).³

The Rise of Superhero Komiks

The popularity of the first Filipino superhero komiks indicated a fascination with forms of Filipino expression that were unrestricted by American structures of narrativity, fiction that was equal parts an escape and a mode of self-discovery. Mars Ravelo, one of the most prolific *komikistas*⁴ in Philippine history, made his debut in and was most active during the Golden Age of komiks. Alongside Captain Barbell and Lastikman, Darna was one of Ravelo’s first heroes and is his most lasting impression on the Philippine and international comics industry. In 1950, *Pilipino Komiks* introduced a character named Narda, a young girl in rural Philippines who sees a stone fall from the sky and, motivated by a sudden impulse, swallows it (“Darna: The Original Filipino Superheroine”). Narda then discovers that she can transform into a powerful being by invoking the stone’s inscription, which reads “Darna.” Darna’s long-lasting popularity suggests that conceptualizing Filipino femininities plays a large part in popularizing Filipino narratives, particularly narratives that use fiction to explore relevant social and political subjects.

On one hand, Darna can be read as a reinforcement of essentialist ideals of the Filipina figure that stem from Spanish colonization. Narda is contextualized as a *morena* through her ethnic and geographic background, and by swallowing the stone she becomes

³ During Japan’s occupation of the Philippines, Japanese officials aimed to reincorporate Tagalog as a national language and “purge” the nation of American influence (Cruz 154). This laid the groundwork for the centrality of Tagalog in the formation of an independent political and ethnic identity.

⁴ A portmanteau of “komik” and the Tagalog word *artista*.

what is visually coded as a *mestiza*-type woman.⁵ Early iterations of Darna conceptualized Narda as a medium through which Darna could manifest (“Darna: The Original Filipino Superheroine”), which then suggests a relationship between empowerment and the approximation to whiteness. Furthermore, the stylization of Darna’s body and costume gave shape to the misogynistic idealization of Filipinas as somehow both powerful and passively available for voyeuristic consumption. Such an idealization is discussed by Denise Cruz, who compares two essentialized roles of Filipinas: the caregiver and the mail-order bride. Cruz states that the essentialization of these roles “center on presumptions about the transpacific Filipina’s ability to offer (domestically or erotically) what other women cannot or are not willing to provide” (222). A merge between “exceptional servitude” and “Orientalized eroticism” is particularly apparent in state narratives surrounding the Philippine labour system (Cruz 222).

Nevertheless, Darna’s costume and depiction of violence was unfavourable to conservative Filipinxs. When Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law in 1972 and retained all media production for the sake of stifling dissent and advancing his political agenda, the Church vied for the censorship of cultural productions like superhero komiks, as their representation of Filipinx self-formation did not adhere to Christian standards (“Philippine Komiks” 52, 55). Demonstrating the influence that komiks had in the narrativization of events and thus the public’s perspective of their situation and history, Marcos banned the representation of the Philippines’ economic precarity and social

⁵ *Morena* is a term used to describe tan or dark-skinned Filipinas. Before its recent re-appropriation as a badge of Filipinx pride and plurality, it was used to derogatorily distinguish Filipinas with native features from *mestizas*, who typically had lighter skin and Spanish features.

unrest in all media, including komiks (“Philippine Komiks” 55). The Marcos government had even instated komiks that illustrated Marcos as a war hero (“Philippine Komiks” 55), further affirming the impact that heroes like Darna had on general media consumers.

Even when martial law was lifted and companies like Ace Publications sought to restabilize the komiks industry, it was clear that komiks were bound by the state’s decisions. The national economic decline had rendered many komiks initiatives defunct (“The Philippines” 6), and successful *komikistas* either moved to the United States to work for American publishers or brokered their work from overseas (“The Philippines” 10). As the Philippine government sought to establish national independence and a distinct political presence on the global stage, Filipina and queer Filipinx re-positioned and mobilized to fit the framework of American-Philippine relations and the idealization of American modernity.

On the other hand, as Darna’s popularity accumulated throughout the Golden Age of komiks and her persona was adapted to film and television, Darna became known as a champion of the Philippines, a defender of those who were incapable of defending themselves (“Philippine Komiks” 74). In an unpublished interview for *MOD Filipina*,⁶ Ravelo stated that he was motivated to create a superhero that acted as a female counterpart to DC Comics’ Superman, who, to comics audiences worldwide, represented America and its political and economic power (“The Lost Works of Mars Ravelo”). While this appears to be an extension of the misogynistic and Orientalist association between masculine (American) power and feminine (Filipinx) subjugation, Ravelo intended for Darna to be as powerful as Superman and distinct from him in terms of style

⁶ An entertainment magazine that was popular in the mid-70s and throughout the 80s (“The Lost Works of Mars Ravelo”).

and narrative (“The Lost Works of Mars Ravelo”). Similarly to Kenkoy, Darna incorporated rather than disregarded the context of the Philippines’ cultural and political relationship with America. Whereas Homi Bhabha’s discussion of colonial mimicry illuminates the lack of originality that can be projected onto the Philippines under the colonial gaze, imitation can also be read as a method of aestheticizing the self in order to level the hierarchy between the oppressor and the oppressed, as discussed by theorists like Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns and Abigail De Kosnik. Both Ravelo and Velasquez explicitly addressed the similarities between their komik inventions and those of American cartoonists (“The Untold True Beginning of Darna”; Lent 49), and I believe this to be indicative of mimicry as a method of identifying and exceeding colonial influences when reimagining representations of Filipinx subjectivities.

A New Champion Emerges

Reminiscent of Darna’s heroic appearance during the colonization of Filipinx and erasure of their identities, Carlo Vergara debuted a new Filipinx superhero that emphasized queer Filipinx identities during a time when they were exploited and sanitized by the state’s neo-liberal restructuring of the Philippines. In 2002, Vergara published *Ang Kagila-gilalas na Pakikipagsapalaran ni Zsazsa Zaturnnah*,⁷ the protagonist of which is Ada, who identifies as *bakla*.⁸ As highlighted by Martin Manalansan in *Global Divas*, *bakla* “is a problematic Tagalog term” because it “conflates

⁷ Translates to “The Amazing Adventures of Zsazsa Zaturnnah.”

⁸ *Bakla* has been historically defined and used as a derogatory term, but it is currently accepted as a term to describe numerous forms of Filipinx queerness, particularly for Filipinx masculinities. Its use in describing Filipinx transness, however, is still a point of contention among Filipinxs, as discussed by Martin Manalansan and Bobby Benedicto. In *Zsazsa Zaturnnah*, Ada describes themselves as *bakla*.

the categories of effeminacy, transvestism, and homosexuality and can mean one or all of these in different contexts” (25). However, as Vergara emphasizes in *Zsazsa Zaturnnah* and as I will discuss in Chapter 2, “the main focus of the term is that of effeminate mannerism, feminine physical characteristics . . . and cross-dressing” (Manalansan 25). In a campy re-imagining of Darna’s origin story, Ada is hit by a stone from outer space and, after swallowing it, finds that they can transform into a female superhero by invoking the stone’s inscription, which reads “Zaturnnah.” Operating both as a revival of flashy komik superheroism and a hypervisible incorporation of Filipinx queerness, Zaturnnah gained a cult following among Filipina and queer Filipinx audiences. Vergara’s komiks demonstrate that visualizing intersections between race and gender plays a significant role in re-imagining Filipinx identity formation for the current age of emphasized plurality. This especially speaks to the reconfigurations of race, gender, and sexuality that Filipinxs self-consciously produce when traversing the Philippines’ “modernized,” market-driven concepts of acceptable queerness. For example, call center work in the Philippines has expanded its recruitment and valorization of emotional labourers to queer Filipinxs, but the work environments “tend to be highly stratified by gender” and the work itself “often involves compulsory and feminized performances” (David 382). Furthermore, Vergara destabilizes heteronormative systems by exposing how they “confuse compulsory social roles with essences and refuse to recognize personal authenticity as a cultural performance” (Halperin 187). Vergara’s visualization of *bakla* performances in *Zsazsa Zaturnnah* de-naturalizes the idealization of homogenous, Americanized expressions of queerness and emphasizes the conscious construction of different selves through performance.

Objectives and Theoretical Approaches

In Chapter 1, I will establish how komiks uniquely afford an alternative form of knowledge production and cultural history that makes space for Filipina and queer Filipinx representation. I will outline the limitations of photography and the comparative sequentiality of komiks, focusing specifically on komiks' unique ability to visualize causality without necessarily confining the reader to a linear understanding of time or hegemonic understanding of history.

In Chapter 2, I will take a closer look at the cultural histories and social issues that underlie the komiks' visual and narrative form. In particular, I examine how Darna and Zaturannah challenge essentialist concepts of Filipina and queer Filipinx identities and instead emphasize the conscious and continuous construction of selves. By making hypervisible the varying configurations of race, gender, sexuality, and class that Filipinas and queer Filipinxs can perform to navigate social hierarchies and exceed essentialized roles, *Mars Ravelo's Darna* and *Zsazsa Zaturnnah* reimagine more pluralistic and positive modes of representation and self-formation.

This project aims to expand discussions of Filipinx representation to modes of culture and knowledge production that reflect the effect of colonial and postcolonial ties on Filipinx self-formation without submitting to stereotypes and essentialist narratives that circumscribe Filipina and queer Filipinx identities. By looking to komiks, I hope to emphasize the space that can be made for Filipina and queer Filipinxs in representations of and discourses surrounding Filipinx subjectivities. As the history and form of komiks in and of themselves embody the complicated intersections and contradictions of race, gender, and class that Filipinas and queer Filipinxs configure and reconfigure to survive

multiple systems of marginalization, I aim to establish that the visual-narrative form of komiks can uniquely capture the complexities of self-formation.

Chapter 1: Re-imagining Filipinx Representation Through Komiks

Visual mediums like photography and written mediums like novels have long been used to canonize hegemonic accounts of history and aestheticize them as objective truth. As Susan Sontag argues in *On Photography*, a photograph's lack of sequentiality can afford the sanitization of the significant contexts that surround the captured moment, producing what can be presented as a "neat slice of time" (13). While history itself cannot be "neat," the fact that a photograph's rendering of reality hides more than it shows (Sontag 18) can be dissimulated by narratives that fabricate the image outside of the frame. The photographer's taste and conscience are inherently reflected in their photographs (Sontag 4), but the photographs can then be enveloped by more explicit (i.e., narrative) interpretations of history that claim objectivity.

Considering that photographs' lack of sequentiality can be used to de-emphasize subjective interpretations and experiences (Sontag 5), one should consider that the comparatively hypervisible sequentiality of comics affords re-imaginings of racial and cultural representation that integrate subjective interpretation as a vital part of its cultural production. Unlike photographs, comics require readers to self-consciously interpret separate pieces of a story—each panel, each page, each interaction between word and image—and form a whole that they deem to be an appropriate assemblage of the parts (Chute 17). The readers' assemblage of information "may or may not coalesce into meaning" (Chute 17), and the meanings that they devise vary in proximity to the meanings that the creator intended, due to the spaces for subjectivity that the comic form affords. The abstraction of meaning in comics is especially purposeful in racial and cultural representation since it can destabilize the notion of a singularly correct

interpretation. Through the unique “spatial syntax” produced through gutters and panels (Chute 4), comics enable readers to participate in the formation of the creators’ subjective interpretation of racial and cultural representation and continuously position their own interpretations in relation to the creator’s. As such, comics allow readers to place pressure on singularizing notions of chronology and “the idea that ‘history’ can ever be a closed discourse, or a simply progressive one” (Chute 4). Comics thus present a re-imagined form of resisting singularizing interpretations of race, culture, sexuality, and gender.

1.1 The Limitations of Photography

Susan Sontag argues that while photographs can memorialize pieces of history that are of personal, familial, and cultural value (6), they are also prominently used as tools of power (5). In terms of documenting Asian histories, photography has been used to officialize racial difference and exclusionary Western immigration laws. An example of this is the introduction of photographic documentation as proto-passports following the Chinese Exclusion Act in the US and Canada. Lily Cho argues that Chinese head tax photographs were intended to standardize the ritual of masking racial and cultural difference before attaining citizenship (175). The Chinese head tax photographs were the symbolic and literal circumscription of immigrant personhood, as they rendered its subjects powerless against the singularization of their identity to a single frame and the social systems that use it to determine the course of their migrant lives (Cho 168). Thy Phu identifies a similar process of “visual domestication” (28) through the subsumption of Japanese “picture marriages” into American surveillance practices. In the early 1900s, Japanese men living in America and women residing in Japan and Korea exchanged

photographs as a way of organizing marriages (Phu 47). Whereas “picture marriages” signified modernity and prosperity for Japanese communities in Japan and America (Phu 47), Americans that opposed Japanese immigration thought that the practice was uncivilized and thus recoded the photographs as a tool of proving difference (50). The photographs’ approximation of (or failure to approximate) the subjects to Christian standards of marriage and family served as a dis/qualification of their immigrant status (Phu 27). Turning to photographs of Filipinx and their use as tools of power, Robyn Magalit Rodriguez points to the visual marketing strategies that have been used in the global deployment of Filipinx migrant workers. According to Rodriguez, the Marketing Branch of the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) distributes marketing materials through hotel business centers in the Philippines, at international trade fairs, and directly to potential employers in receiving countries (61). Through photographs of Filipinx workers either in the midst of their duties or posing with other workers, the flyers and brochures are meant to promote the Philippines as the preferred source for labour and aestheticize its people as a commodifiable collective (Rodriguez 62, 77). Such marketing materials feature Filipinx with bright smiles and demonstrative familiarity with their work environments (Rodriguez xi, 62), appealing to the Orientalist reflexes of projecting onto Asians a duplicable figure that is at once affective and indistinguishable from their service environments (Cheng 5) and characterizing Filipinx as having the natural (racial) desire to help people (Rodriguez 61).

In addition to being used as tools for power, Sontag also argues that photographs can be used to reinforce moral positions that are de-emphasized or non-existent in their actual context in history (13). Subject to being “swallowed up in the generalized pathos

of time past” (Sontag 16), photographs pose a potential problem for the documentation of histories that are susceptible to appropriation or erasure through colonial and hegemonic narratives. How do we know if a photograph has ingrained within us a perspective that is aestheticized as objective but is no more of a mediated experience than a drawing? This question can be posed toward a photograph of José Rizal’s execution by the Spanish military that came to light in the 1920s. The assumption of objectivity afforded by photography secures the narrativization of Rizal’s execution as an act of martyrdom. Despite the ambiguous identity of the man shown in the photograph and its disputed authenticity among historians, this image is identified as the only surviving photograph of Rizal’s execution and is thus treated as an official account (Augenbraum xxiv). In turn, the curated pathos of the photograph feeds into characterizations of Rizal as a martyr and advances nationalist narratives that idealize concepts of self-sacrifice. Even if the photograph documents a reliable account of Rizal’s execution, its “affective link to the past” is a manufactured one (Hirsch 210), as it can be used to reinforce moral positions regarding issues not of its time. For example, those that support the Philippines’ neo-colonial relations with the US could justify their stance by romanticizing Rizal’s movement against Spanish colonialism as a movement in favour of Americanized ideals of modernity (Augenbraum xxiv). Similarly, those that center Filipinx national identity in Catholic ideals of self-sacrifice can use the photograph’s contextual ambiguity to their advantage and claim that Rizal had renounced his anti-Church sentiments just before dying (Augenbraum xxii).

Contrastingly, Roland Barthes problematizes the reading of photography as merely a tool of hegemony. He describes photography as a “protestation of singularity”

and argues that the observer (or in his terms, the Spectator) is best prepared to receive transmissions of information through photographs that “existed” for them (8). That is, the gap between the message that a photograph might carry and the message that the Spectator is prepared to receive is either bridged or misaligned by the Spectator’s own experiences and/or susceptibility to accepting any hegemonic narratives that are associated with the photograph. This is especially useful to consider when discussing photographs that carry cultural importance across generations, as it puts into perspective that numerous subjective experiences, originating in both public and private spheres, can coalesce, overlap, or contradict one another in a single photograph. Illustrating this is Marianne Hirsch’s “The Generation of Postmemory,” in which Hirsch discusses familial photographic archives of Holocaust survivors. Here Hirsch argues that photographs can mediate postmemory, which she defines as the “affective link to the past, a sense, precisely, of an embodied living connection” (210). She uses the concept of postmemory to distinguish familial photographic archives as the transmission of subjective experience, as opposed to public archives that transmit canonized history (Hirsch 210). In this light, consideration of the image’s materiality, including the identification of the photographer, who it was intended for, and whether it is an original or a copy, can provide an opportunity for subjective experiences to resist circumscription, appropriation, or erasure by hegemonic narratives. Particularly without inscriptions that could contextualize photographs in subjective experiences and thus differentiate it from (or, in some cases, consolidate it with) “canonical” history, photographs remain vulnerable to “narrative elaboration and embroidery” which can minimize its importance in the history of its subjects (Hirsch 216). The gap between the message that a photograph might carry and

the message that an observer might be prepared to receive is precisely the gap that komiks can negotiate. Unlike photographs, which can embroider subjective histories (Hirsch 216) and reinforce hegemonic moral interpretations of the photograph's context in history (Sontag 13), komiks actively call attention to the inherent narrativity of visual mediums and thus destabilize the idea that any one interpretation of history should be canonized or naturalized as more culturally important than others.

Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, for instance, literalizes the process and craft of determining what a frame might exclude (Chute 17). Focusing on *how* the comic form affords alternative narratives of history, Hillary Chute discusses the importance of gutters in comics and their role in depicting a family's postmemory of the Holocaust in *Maus*. Chute states that gutters paradoxically constitute a "present blankness": aesthetically, gutters are blank spaces between visualized moments in time, but the blankness of these spaces provide a gap onto which the readers can project their own understanding of causality (35). By interspersing frames with pauses in narrative and imagery and thus creating windows to rather than requisites of a particular perspective, the comic form affords a balance between the message that the creators seek to transmit and the message that the readers are best prepared to receive (Barthes 8). Furthermore, *Maus* "openly eschews any aesthetic of transparency" by incorporating narrative interpretation as an inherent part of its visual representation of familial history (Chute 17). Comics leave room for the readers' understanding of history and causality, and yet they ensure that the context of the text is a part of the reading experience and resist erasure by hegemonic narratives of history (Chute 33). This balance is what distinguishes comics as a medium that is particularly equipped to emphasize marginalized subjectivities.

1.2 The Possibilities of Comics

Although there are styles of photography that play with the depiction of realism and although photographs can be understood to “protest” singularity (Barthes 8), comics afford a distinct blend of abstraction and realism. Scott McCloud’s concept of “amplification through simplification” shows that comics can emphasize certain ideas or emotions by abstracting the specificities of realism (30). McCloud describes cartoon faces as shells that readers cannot only relate to but inhabit due to the simplicity of their features (36). Through this perspective, comics can enable readers to fill the surrounding narrative universe using their own perspectives and colour the narrative with personal emotions (McCloud 33). Conversely, comics can also give shape to stereotypes through simplified visualizations of race. In her introduction to *Drawing New Color Lines*, Monica Chiu discusses comics as “visual imperatives” that are produced from “public fantasies” about racialized subjects and are shaped by various intersections of material history, politics, economics, and pop culture (3). While Chiu identifies typing as a reading strategy used by American audiences to easily identify raced characters, she notes that it can also “be relegated as an insufficient (exaggerated, limited, even grotesque) visual marker beyond the frame and in comics’ interpretations abroad” (5). Indeed, as Chiu outlines in a brief review of scholarship on comic stereotypes, the act of simplifying certain elements when visualizing race traces back to the circulation of racist caricatures, but it is by visualizing or narrativizing the *process* of simplification—choosing which elements to simplify, which to amplify, and being mindful of who the readers are—that can distinguish “accepted concepts” regarding race from harmful representations (5). Chiu refers to Jared Gardner’s argument that the sequentiality of

comics is key to its affordance of typing without engendering racial stereotypes (5–6).

Unlike single-panel caricatures that can leave its intentions in abstracting race ambiguous, comics intentionally encourage readers to actively participate in the unfolding of a narrative against the relevant social backdrop (Chiu 6). Comics can visualize race through an explicit continuity of attitudes that surround it, grounding it in the readers' contextual knowledge regarding race while defusing its association with racial stereotypes.

1.2.1 Challenging Stereotypes Using Non-Linearity in *Mars Ravelo's Darna*

Mars Ravelo's Darna, Mango Comics' three-part revival of Ravelo's komiks, demonstrates how komiks can use abstraction and sequentiality to narrativize and visualize aspects of Filipina self-formation. One particularly impactful example can be found in the first issue, where a transformation from Darna to Narda is shown with a half-page, nearly full-length panel (see Figure 1). In this panel, the cause (Darna invoking Narda's name) and effect (Darna transforming into Narda) of the transformation are shown on top of one another in a single panel, which seems to contradict the principle of comic sequentiality as the result of gutters and panels. Darna and Narda are both in full view and unseparated, so one could interpret them as existing simultaneously if not for the lightning that shrouds Darna, which signifies the power that she summons to conduct the transformation, and the smoke that gathers around Narda, which signifies the result of the transformation. Even to a reader that is unfamiliar with Darna, the sequentiality that is naturally drawn from the depiction of lightning and smoke enables the reader to interpret the passage of time within the panel.



Figure 1: Darna transforming into Narda.

In this paradoxical visualization of invisible and present action, *Mars Ravelo's Darna* de-emphasizes linearity in the transformation and instead focuses on Narda and Darna as mutually co-constructed identities. They are visualized as equal components of the transformation, as opposed to one character being in control of the other. Just as Chiu discusses about the affordances of sequentiality, the single-panel transformation from Darna to Narda intentionally encourages readers to participate in the unfolding of the event of the transformation (6). Furthermore, the panel simplifies the very concept of transformation by de-emphasizing linearity, and as a result, enables readers to focus on the intersubjectivity of Narda and Darna.

In the context of Darna's komik history, illustrating the transformation using a single panel amplifies the racial and social hierarchies that underlie the narrative relationship between Narda and Darna. Earlier komiks conceptualized Narda as only a medium for Darna ("Darna: The Original Filipino Superheroine") and thus associated Narda's empowerment with an approximation to whiteness. These komiks built the foundation of Narda's character using an accepted and common idea regarding Filipinx from rural backgrounds—namely, that moving to an urban center to find work or education is to become valuable within the state's model of American modernization. The stereotype that Filipinx are "pre-modern" can be traced back to Spanish colonization, though its instantiation in contemporary Philippine society is rooted in America's transition from a military to civilian occupation of the Philippines. Through the establishment of overseas education and work programs (Rodriguez 5), travelling to America for professional and educational development became synonymous with progress and independence within the Philippine imaginary. Although Filipinx did not

necessarily have to migrate to receive American education by the 1920s due to increasingly Americanized local education (Rodriguez 6), “a kind of culture of migration” had already settled in Philippine society (5). This influenced the continued ties between the Philippine and US labour markets and the societal idealization of Americanized modernity past the establishment of Philippine independence in 1946. Upon declaring martial law in 1972 and throughout Ferdinand Marcos’ presidency, the Philippine government formalized the idealization of American modernity by building on the Philippine labour export program and paving the way for the Americanization of future labour industries, such as the business process outsourcing industry (Rodriguez 9–11). Accompanying the Philippine state’s movement toward a neo-liberal economy were increasingly affirmed racial stereotypes, such as Filipinas as an especially and naturally docile labour force (Rodriguez 13). These narratives instill the idea that social and economic limitations can be overcome by embracing the “true” hero within—that is, by participating in the construction of a nationalistic identity that essentializes rural, low-class Filipinas as patriotic and self-sacrificing (i.e., accepting of subservient roles). Such stereotypes were advanced by the state for the sake of recruiting Filipina workers and becoming a vital source of labour during the rise of globalized production.

The characterization of Narda as merely a vessel for Darna, who is visually coded to be more “white” than Narda, thus aligns with narratives of colonial modernization. Considering this, the visualized intersubjectivity of Narda and Darna shown in Issue 1 of *Mars Ravelo’s Darna* challenges accepted concepts surrounding colonial modernization and racial hierarchies among Filipinxs. Whereas Chiu emphasizes sequentiality in visualizing racial types without engendering racial stereotypes (5–6), the hierarchical

order between dark-skinned and light-skinned, rural and urban Filipinx is diffused in *Mars Ravelo's Darna* through the visualization of non-linearity. The panel does not outright forgo sequentiality, but rather draws attention to the underlying racial stereotypes surrounding Filipinas with a rural upbringing by defusing the expectation of Narda as the “before” and Darna as the “after.” In accordance to this de-naturalization of linearity and idealization of American modernity, the komiks’ illustrations of Narda transforming into Darna also diffuse the expectation of a hierarchy between the two characters. In these illustrations, Narda is shrouded by lightning and Darna by smoke, suggesting that one is not merely a by-product of the other (see Figure 2).

In other sequences, *Mars Ravelo's Darna* also amplifies the underlying gendered stereotypes that often come hand-in-hand with the idealization of Americanized modernity. One such sequence is when Narda first begins to grow accustomed to her dual identity as Darna. The way in which Narda’s process of acceptance is visualized creates a parallel between her ideological journey and her physical journey to Manila.

Firstly, the panels that depict Narda’s past emphasize her environment as rural, the sky obstructed by trees rather than buildings (see Figure 3). The rurality of the environment is also reflected in the materiality of Narda’s childhood home, which appears to be a *bahay kubo*—the type of house that is most identified with traditional Filipino culture, as it was used since before the colonial implementation of Spanish and American architecture and remains common in rural communities (“Evolution of Houses in the Philippines”).⁹ Indeed, the location of Narda’s childhood home is identified as “a

⁹ The traditional *bahay kubo* is made from resources that are native to the Philippines, such as the nipa palm tree (“Evolution of Houses in the Philippines”) and capiz shells (“Capiz Shells”). More affordable and widely available than glass and concrete, nipa wood was and continues to be used for the main infrastructure, and capiz shells can be used for window panes. According to the Materials, Art, Technology,

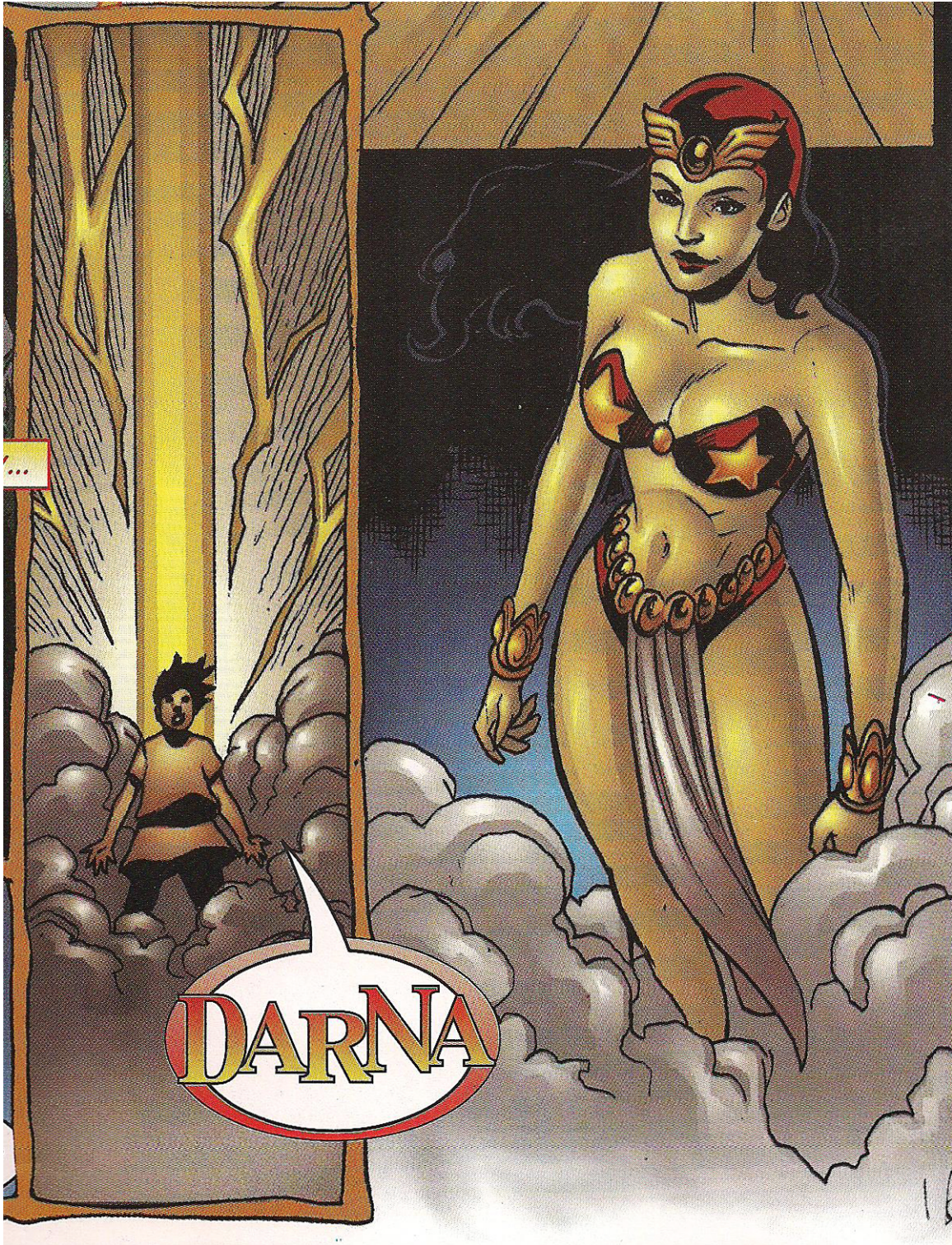


Figure 2: Narda's first transformation into Darna.

Innovation, and Creativity Hub (MATIC) in the Philippines, “[c]apiz shells were first used in the Philippines during the Spanish occupation in making slide windows for churches” (“Capiz Shells”).



Figure 3: Narda's childhood home.

barrio south of the metropolis” (Yonzon, Orosco, and Monsanto), *barrio* being a Filipino term which refers to a rural settlement. The interior of the house reflects a comfortable life, but without the items that are typically found in more metropolitan living spaces like Narda’s dorm room in Manila, which is filled with CDs, posters, and magazines (see Figure 4). Narda’s past is therefore framed with the assumption that it was simple and centered around her family. Narda’s origin story is also *literally* framed to reflect a sort of



Figure 4: Darna's dorm room, filled with "modern" items.

pre-modern existence: the panels depicting the rural past are lined with thick, jagged edges, whereas the panels that move Narda into her urban present have crisp outlines, as if to portray a process of refinement. As Narda begins to become comfortable in her role as Darna, her change in location suggests that performing heroism naturally follows that the hero must be in the city. The transition between the rural and urban locations is bridged by a full-width panel of Darna flying to the right, with who we might assume to be her brother, still a child, on her back (see Figure 5). The progressive movement that is implied in this panel, combined with the presence of her younger brother as a passenger, brings to mind the Philippine state's emphasis on the gendered expectation that Filipinas are the caregivers of their family and the nation.

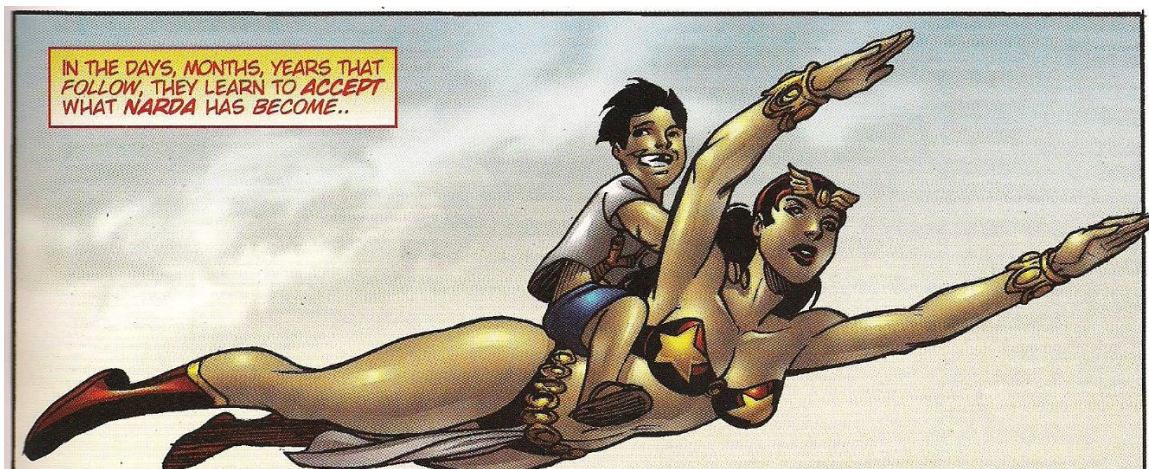


Figure 5: Narda takes flight as Darna, with her brother on her back.

This signals the gendered expectations surrounding Filipinas that have permeated in Philippine society since before the establishment of Philippine export labour systems. What motivates Narda to move to Manila? Why does rurality take on a naturalized incompatibility with superheroism? Narda, just as her grandmother depicted in her childhood home, is driven by an internalized familial duty. Although Narda's

responsibilities end up reaching far beyond the ironing and disciplining that her grandmother is shown doing (see Figure 3), she does not exceed the expected role of the Filipina by assuming mobility. In fact, the visualization of rural-to-urban migration implies that Narda's progress is tied to her family, and that Darna's duty to care for the Philippines aligns with Narda's familial duty.

This gendered responsibilization of Filipinas has since been enabled by narratives of mobility in later eras of migrant labour. As a way of recruiting workers and justifying the continued uneven development that hinges on class, ethnic, and gendered difference, the Philippine state emphasized rural-to-urban migration as a desirable option to fulfill familial responsibilities. A similar visualization of familial responsibility as a central and perhaps heroic Filipinx value can be found in Celia Correa's painting, "Balikbayan Express." In this painting, Correa depicts Darna carrying a *balikbayan* box from Toronto, Canada to Los Baños, Philippines. *Balikbayan* boxes originated in 1973, when the *Balikbayan* program was made to encourage temporary and permanent migrants to return to the Philippines as tourists, "and, ultimately, as investors" (Rodriguez 81). One incentive that participants in the program were given was the opportunity to bring two boxes in place of luggage and "purchase up to \$1000 worth of duty-free merchandise upon arrival" (Rodriguez 81). Through this program, the Philippine state reframed migrancy as an opportunity to bring gifts and necessary items back to their family in the Philippines (Rodriguez 81). This "ritual," as Correa names it, is performed by overseas Filipinx today. The similarities between Correa's painting and *Mars Ravelo's Darna* suggests that the idealization of rural-to-urban migration is not strictly a state-driven mechanism to pressure Filipinx into the labour system and participating in the

Americanization of the Philippines. The stereotype of Filipinxs as pre-modern is certainly based in racist logic, but to say that Filipinxs engage in these systems purely because of state influence would erase their subjective desires to provide for one's loved ones and seek opportunities for self-fulfillment. Furthermore, such an assumption would also mistake the deliberate, self-conscious reconfigurations that Filipinxs undergo to attain acceptance within othering environments as the legitimization of essentialist narratives.

Mars Ravelo's Darna visualizes and narrativizes the expectations that underlie Narda's character as a Filipina from rural Philippines and the relationship between her and Darna. The komiks signal the Filipinx anxiety of being "the chosen" and not "the chooser" of one's social position (Yonzon and Monsanto), and subsequently enable the readers to actively participate in the diffusion of this anxiety by incorporating Narda and Darna's intersubjectivity into the experience of their sequentiality. Narda and Darna's intersubjectivity unfolds against the social backdrop of racial and gendered stereotypes and hierarchies (Chiu 6), and thus become a meaningful alternative representation of Filipina self-formation. *Mars Ravelo's Darna* suggests that colonial and post-colonial influences cannot be excluded when visualizing Filipinx subjectivities, but also that the Philippine state and elite society cannot claim the right to gatekeep Filipinx identities because Filipinx-ness cannot be contained within singularizing definitions of race, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality.

1.2.2 Visualizing Queer Filipinx Subjectivities in *Zsazsa Zaturannah*

The balance between simplicity and specificity that comics afford can also be understood as an opportunity for alternative queer representations.¹⁰ Speaking specifically to queer Filipinx experiences, the “plasticity” of the ways in which *bakla* negotiate social and cultural borders (Manalansan 59) invites visual representation, as these negotiations often require surface transformations. Such transformations can be as obvious as drag and similarly overt performances, but on a daily basis, more covert transformations like mimicking a particular racial, sexual, or class identity enable *bakla* to become accepted by certain social spheres. Considering the covert visual self-formations that *bakla* undergo to navigate different social situations and relationships (Manalansan 16), I look to comics as a medium that can be distinctly constructive in the illustration of understated or hidden emotions and relations that underlie surface appearances (Chiu 17). Here I return to the concept of sequentiality and echo the understanding that comics enable readers to actively participate in the unfolding of a narrative against the relevant social backdrop (Chiu 6). McCloud identifies “panel-to-panel transitions” as a central convention of comic sequence (70) and defines several types of transitions that can be used to create “a continuous, unified reality” from visually separated static images (67). Whereas some transition types, like “moment-to-moment,” “action-to-action,” and “subject-to-subject,” depict moments in time and space in a way that resembles a realistic understanding of causality (i.e., they typically depict cause and

¹⁰ Although I refer to scholarship on *bakla* in my discussion of *Zsazsa Zaturannah*, I use the term “queer” to mark the potential reach of the komiks’ representation of self-formation. Ada’s representation of queerness is specifically *bakla*, as explicitly stated in the very beginning of the komik, but I deploy “queer” to name the mixture of communities, practices, and self-formations within Filipinx audiences that the komik could make visible through the visualization of non-heteronormative expressions of gender and sexuality.

effect and outline a linear relationship between the two), other types require more “deductive reasoning” and imagination for it to coalesce into meaningful information (McCloud 70–71). “Scene-to-scene” transitions, for instance, transport readers “across significant distances of time and space” (71), encouraging readers to connect otherwise disconnected moments using narrative and emotional implications. Similarly, “aspect-to-aspect” transitions enable readers to explore “different aspects of a place, idea or mood” without being anchored by time (McCloud 72). Thus, using “scene-to-scene” and “aspect-to-aspect” transitions, comics afford the unfolding of internal elements alongside the external, the invisible emotions and relations that produce or are products of changes in surface appearances.

This affordance can be seen in Jenifer Wofford’s *Flor de Manila y San Francisco*, which narrates the emigration of a Filipino nurse to America. In “Flor 1973: Skylab,” a large, central panel shows Flor standing on a busy street with her luggage in hand, wistfully looking to the sky as she hopes that San Francisco is as good of a place as Manila (Wofford). Above the central panel is a group of smaller panels, one of which depicts Flor’s family in the Philippines, seemingly posing for a group photo. The “scene-to-scene” transition between these two panels transports the readers to the Philippines and in front of Flor’s family, as if to witness the very moment that the photo was taken. Though the two panels are separated by a significant distance of time and space (McCloud 71), readers can deduce the emotions that create a “unified reality” between them (67), especially if the readers are knowledgeable in Filipinx transnationalism. To such an audience, it is no coincidence that Flor’s hopeful gaze into the San Francisco sky appears to also point at the panel above that depicts her family. The relationship between

the two panels makes visible a connection that is not readily apparent to the naked eye but is persistently present in the everyday lives of transnational Filipinxs—the connection between family and everyday life.

In the opening to *Ang Kagila-gilalas na Pakikipagsapalaran ni Zsazsa Zaturnnah*, Vergara uses “aspect-to-aspect” transitions to similarly emphasize an emotional connection between Ada and their community.¹¹ *Zsazsa Zaturnnah* opens with a full-width landscape of Ada’s hometown, which appears to be a small community in a rural area of the Philippines (see Figure 5). Similar to Narda’s rural hometown, the surrounding mountains mark the rurality of Ada’s location and imply the town’s (and its residents’) pre-modernity.¹² The association between highland areas and low-class lifestyles can be traced back to Spanish occupation, when the Spanish military sought to cultivate the indigenous land in the Cordilleras as a part of their colonial project (De Leon 75). Just like the mountainous region of the Cordilleras, the people that resided there were seen as undeveloped. This racialized distinction between rural highlands and the lowland metropolis of Manila is signalled in *Zsazsa Zaturnnah*’s opening landscape and serves as socio-geographic context for Ada’s pre-modernity and lower class position. Following this establishing landscape, the panels begin to move using “aspect-to-aspect” transitions, allowing the readers’ eyes to wander within the setting that surrounds Ada before seeing their place in it.

¹¹ I use they/them pronouns when discussing Ada because the character is not assigned gendered pronouns.

¹² The American phrase “the boondocks” (or “boonies”), which refers to out of the way and perhaps wild places, originates in the Tagalog word *bundok*, meaning “mountain.” American soldiers brought the term to the US after the Philippine-American War, in which Filipino fighters used mountain and jungle areas as homebase (Gandhi).



Figure 6: Introduction to Ada.

Through aspect-to-aspect transitions, the readers' introduction to Ada is illustrated through separate moments that are not necessarily differentiated by time; rather, this type of transition requires the reader to "assemble a single moment using scattered fragments" (McCloud 79). The resulting effect is similar to that of Darna transforming into Narda, in that the task of situating Ada within their environment is left to the reader. Visually, Ada's introduction evokes loneliness. The landscape of Ada's hometown shows a clumping of houses surrounded by empty land, which may create the assumption that the community is close-knit (Vergara 5). The first panel of the page, which places the readers on Ada's street, confirms this expectation by showing several neighbours interacting with one another as they do daily tasks. Two neighbours, who appear to be men, are shown leaning over a car's engine and working together to fix it; up the street, two other neighbours who may be wife and husband are shown barbequing food. The following panel zooms in on the building at the center, focusing specifically on a window that reads "Ada's Beauty Salon" (5). The readers are then transported inside the salon, where Ada is revealed working on a client's hair (5). Unlike the neighbours outside of Ada's salon, Ada is not shown in an equally mutual interaction. Rather, they stand behind their client, embodying an isolating service role in a way that their neighbours—who could be working as mechanics and store owners—are not. Even if only considering the visual composition of the komik's opening page, the readers' assembly of "scattered fragments" may coalesce into an interpretation of Ada's position in their environment: Ada is accepted in their community as a beautician, but they are separate from the social livelihood of the masculine camaraderie and heterosexual partnership enacted by their neighbours. Burdened by their inability to embody heteronormative standards, Ada is

focused on serving their community and reaping the respect of their neighbours through their work as a beautician (Vergara 6)—one of the few roles deemed to be socially acceptable for *bakla*. Indeed, many queer Filipinxs are kept in low-income jobs in the beauty, entertainment, and sex industries through exclusionary social structures (David 393). Furthermore, as Bobby Benedicto discusses, the image of the *bakla* that is produced through such systems of marginalization is “embodied by the caricatured figure of the *parlorista*, the cross-dresser working in one of Manila’s many low-end beauty salons” (318). Especially considering that the *parlorista* continues to appear in mainstream media as a fixed source of comic relief (Benedicto 326), Ada’s visible melancholy as they work on their client’s hair might then be interpreted not as an isolated instance of loneliness, but as a visualization of the greater stigma that surrounds many queer Filipinxs. Even as the Philippines’ rising BPO industry integrated *bakla* as an integral part of the globalized workforce and thus the nation’s economic and political growth, *bakla* were deemed socially valuable only through feminized performances (David 384) and stigmatized as “socially and morally dangerous” (383). Through the visual and narrative composition of Ada’s introduction, Ada’s social isolation is made material. However, the material amplifies that which is immaterial—the social isolation of queer Filipinxs on a much larger scale, and the essentialist narratives that seek to relegate queer Filipinxs in social and economic hierarchies even when in valorized roles of emotional labour.

Similarly to *Mars Ravelo’s Darna*, *Zsazsa Zaturannah* presents the possibility of re-imagining representations of Filipinx identity formation through Ada’s relationship with and transformations into Zaturannah. However, whereas Darna and Narda are emphasized as intersubjective, Ada and Zaturannah are emphasized as two roles that Ada

plays depending on the situation. When Ada is hit by the magical stone, their friend Didi suggests that Ada swallow it and invoke the name inscribed on the stone (Vergara 10), setting up the narrative expectation that Ada would be invoking the spirit of a super warrior the way that Narda does. When Ada swallows the stone and invokes the name of Zaturnnah, the readers are indeed presented a muscular and curvaceous warrior woman, but rather than revealing another subjectivity, Zaturnnah's first words, "*babae akooh!!*" ("I'm a woman!!"), reveal that Zaturnnah *is* Ada (Vergara 12). If the transformations between Narda and Darna negotiate Filipina self-formation with the idealization of Filipinx-ness achieved through Americanized modernity, then Ada's transformation into Zaturnnah can be interpreted as a negotiation of *bakla* self-formation and *bakla* roles that are defined by hegemonic society. For example, the fact that Zaturnnah *is* Ada, even if Ada identifies themselves as *bakla* and Zaturnnah as a woman, suggests that interior essences do not determine gender as it is seen. In fact, the relationship between Ada and Zaturnnah suggests that "an interior and organizing gender core" (Butler 363) is only an illusion mobilized by "the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence" (362). The magical stone that Ada swallows does not require them to contain and give way to another subjectivity that is "essentially" female in order to transform into Zaturnnah. Then who is Ada invoking if Zaturnnah did not already exist? I approach this question using Martin Manalansan's argument that *bakla* identities consist of "possible scripts of self/selves that shift according to the situation" (x). In transforming into Zaturnnah, Ada enacts a "script," a performance of gender. Similarly to the non-linear transformation from Darna to Narda in *Mars Ravelo's Darna*, *Zsazsa Zaturnnah* does not delineate the metaphysical transformation from Ada to Zaturnnah. Instead, the komik form enables

readers to consciously assemble the visual and narrative information of Ada's transformation and construct a relationship between Ada and Zaturannah. Furthermore, the gaps in space and time afforded by komiks destabilize any essential interpretation of Filipinx queerness by enabling the readers to insert their own perspectives and self-consciously position themselves in relation to the text's representation of queer Filipinx subjectivities. Unlike other written and visual mediums that can be aestheticized as truth and mobilized as hegemonic narratives, interpretation and subjectivities are ingrained in *komikistas'* representation of Filipinx identities and are emphasized as necessary processes of the reading experience.

Through the komik's emphasis on the parts which make the whole (Chute 17), it enables the readers to self-consciously assemble narrative meanings that resonate with the message that they may be prepared to receive (Barthes 8). For Filipina and queer Filipinx readers, the presentation of "scattered fragments" (McCloud 79) enables them to assemble the amplification of Filipinx experiences which are continuously de-emphasized under hierarchies of gender, race, sexuality, and class. Furthermore, it allows readers to self-consciously position their personal experiences and perspectives in relation to the texts' representation of queer Filipinx and Filipina subjectivities, unlike hegemonic narratives that advance an essential interpretation of them. Komiks therefore present a unique opportunity to re-imagine representations of Filipina and queer Filipinx as expressions of and catalysts for self-formation.

Chapter 2: Emphasizing Filipina and Queer Filipinx Self-Formation by Visualizing Performativity and Narrativizing its Uses

Expanding my discussion of sequentiality in Chapter 1, this chapter will more closely examine the parts that make the whole—that is, individual illustrations that in and of themselves reflect Filipina and queer Filipinx self-formation and cultures and, when taken together and put into sequence, visualize the process of negotiating several selves according to the place or situation. I argue that Ravelo and Vergara’s komiks challenge Philippine social hierarchies by hypervisualizing the different configurations of gender and class that Filipinas and queer Filipinxs construct as surface appearances. In opposition to hegemonic narratives which seek to attach essentialist ideals onto Filipinas and queer Filipinxs and relegate non-Westernized presentations of sexuality, race, and gender to “the annals of a specifically local and implicitly ‘out-dated’ culture” (Benedicto 326), Ravelo and Vergara’s komiks hypervisualize rather than de-emphasize the ways in which Filipinas and queer Filipinxs actively reconfigure themselves and their environments to survive or transcend such limitations of time, space, and social hierarchy.

While queer and Filipina performances and transformations occur on an intimate, every day scale, hegemonic conceptualizations of Filipina and queer Filipinx identities reframe performativity as false evidence of essentialist ideas regarding such identities. Environments and communities that seek to restrict “acceptable” Filipina and queer Filipinx identities within Westernized ideals of race, gender, and sexuality conflate exteriority and interiority, mistaking performance for performer. Filipinx performance, specifically the feminized performances necessitated by the Philippine emotional labour

economy, has been naturalized as a part of the Philippine nationality which in turn limits Filipinas and queer Filipinx within roles of depreciated social dignity. This depreciation emerges under racial capitalism, under which Filipinas and queer Filipinx are integrated into the Philippines' neo-liberal hierarchy according to a global market which demands the essentialization of their identities. At the same time that Darna and Zaturannah signal essentialist ideals of Filipinx performativity, they subvert them by using performance to reconfigure themselves and their environments in order to transcend these limitations. I will examine the hypervisibility of femininity, queerness, and the surrounding stereotypes naturalized by hegemonic narratives through varying forms of Filipina and queer Filipinx performance: the fluid configuration of selves, *puro arte*, and mimicry.

2.1 Casting Different Selves

In *Global Divas*, Martin Manalansan describes a popular myth regarding *bakla* identities that serves as an appropriate beginning point for discussing the performances involved in constructing queer Filipinx identities:

According to popular lore, the bakla possesses what is called the 'female heart' (*pusong babae*). This idiom encapsulates what is perhaps the core of the social construction of the bakla—that of the male body with a female heart. The yearnings and needs of the bakla are seen to be similar to women's. This construction explains why some bakla [...] would say they are looking for a 'real' man.

(Manalansan 25)

The idiom of *pusong babae* appears to reconcile the non-heteronormativity of being *bakla* with the gendered distinction between men with "female hearts" and "real" men. In

this case, the distinction between effeminate *bakla* and masculine Filipino men is based on inherent gendered interiorities more so than the presentation of gender. More precisely, *pusong babae* might suggest that the reason for the physical and stylistic effeminacy that is characteristic of *kabaklaan* (the social practices and norms associated with being *bakla*) is the female essence within *bakla*. The idiom of *pusong babae* thus fails to capture the performativity that is central to the construction of *bakla* identities and to gender itself. Rather than being inherent or unchanging, *bakla* identities consist of multiple and potentially contradictory iterations that are elicited by varying social environments and relationships (Manalansan 16). Different localities and the varying social hierarchies that they house can influence the performance or dissimulation of a particular “script” of self (Manalansan x), and each situation spawns a different inflection of class, race, gender, and sexuality “in such a way that a singular consistent self is not suggested” (16).

Zsazsa Zaturrnah narrativizes the heteronormative distinction between effeminate *bakla* and masculine Filipino men through Ada’s relationship with their love interest, Dodong. Dodong’s stylization as a muscular man gestures toward the “real” masculinity that is “what [a *bakla*] is told he should desire” (Manalansan 26). His “manliness” is explicitly drawn attention to by Ada and Didi’s focalization, which further strengthens the representation of effeminate *bakla* desiring masculine Filipino men (Vergara 22, 57–59).



Figure 7: Visual emphasis on Dodong's "macho" figure.

According to Manalansan, the inscribed role of a *bakla* in the Philippines is to financially provide for his lover, who is likely to be a “real,” “straight” man (26). The social expectation is that *bakla* must be emotionally, sexually dependent on their more “manly” lover due to their desires’ similarities to heterosexual women. Yet, because *bakla* are not women, they are also expected to “slave away at work in order to survive and get what he is told he should desire—the ‘straight’ macho man” (Manalansan 26). In this perspective, to gain economic success is to gain the ability to sustain a socially accepted relationship.

However, Ada and Dodong’s attitudes toward their careers and each other complicates their inscribed roles as a *bakla* and a “macho” man. In the beginning of *Zsazsa Zaturannah*, Ada’s friend Didi suggests that they should move to Manila to become a more successful beautician and possibly secure a *mestizo* boyfriend (Vergara 6). Here Didi demonstrates the idealization of whiteness and Westernized modernity, as well as the social expectation of *bakla* using their money to obtain a relationship. Ada disagrees with Didi’s suggestion and disassociates from their inscribed role as a *bakla* by stating that a city boyfriend would only siphon their earnings, and that gaining happiness or fulfillment does not naturally follow economic mobility (Vergara 6). Rather than idealizing a *mestizo* partner as a dominating lover, Ada demonstrates that the equation of whiteness with modernity need not dictate ideals of success or love. Similarly, Dodong subverts the idealization of “the ‘straight’ macho man” (Manalansan 26) by presenting a reconfiguration of sexuality, gender, class, and race that runs contrary to *bakla* and Philippine social norms. In the interviews that Manalansan conducted with *bakla* immigrants in New York, many acknowledged that “the most valorized corporeal image

among gays is almost always a young muscular Caucasian body” (73). Although this observation is of a specifically diasporic context, it reflects the “connection of upper-class status with whiteness and lower-class status with dark complexions,” a prevalent view in Philippine society that stems from the colonial idealization of Spanish heritage and neo-colonial idealization of American culture (Manalansan 116). The idealization and conflation of whiteness, financial success, and “macho” physique extends “the material power of money” into “the realm of love and nurturance, of pleasure and control” (Manalansan 113). In contrast to this hierarchy of race, gender, class, and sexuality, Dodong does not conflate heteronormative masculinity with whiteness, nor does he demonstrate the expectation that Ada has to “earn” his attention. Though Dodong’s muscular physique is the focus of his visual stylization, it is paired with his characterization as the main caregiver of his family, and in later chapters, of Ada. Ada acknowledges that Dodong’s family relies on him to take care of them (Vergara 78), which subverts the expectation of the *bakla* (or the Filipina) to take on the role of caregiver. Though Ada is initially convinced that Dodong could never love them and keeps him at a distance through a cold exterior (Vergara 19), Dodong persistently demonstrates his interest in taking care of Ada, even going as far as to offer his own body as a host for the magical stone when he sees the hardships that Ada has to face as an impromptu protector of their town (Vergara 78). In line with Ada’s disassociation from the expectation that they must desire a “‘straight’ macho man” characterized by a conflation of whiteness and success, Dodong contradicts the naturalized association between affective roles and effeminacy, particularly the essentialized effeminacy of *bakla*. The social hierarchies that exist in Ada and Dodong’s environment are reflected in

their conscious performance of the roles that are expected of them: Ada contains their effeminacy in the expected realm of their beauty salon, and Dodong keeps his distance from Ada, only smiling and waving from afar (Vergara 7, 23). But once the social order is disrupted by the debut of Zaturnnah and emergence of the villains that seek to destroy her town, Ada and Dodong distance themselves from their inscribed identities through their ability to dissimulate the specific hegemonic expectations that limit them to essentialized queer roles. *Zsazsa Zaturnnah* thus demonstrates how queer Filipinx self-formation consists of “the manipulation of surface appearances” according to the social situation, and how such fluidity in gender performance contradicts the idea of “a singular consistent self” (Manalansan 16).

2.2 Identifying *Puro Arte* in *Zsazsa Zaturnnah*

Compared to the dis/simulation of assigned roles or stereotypes in order to fluidly navigate varying environments and the hierarchies that they carry, more exaggerated reconfigurations of surface appearances work to explicitly and extravagantly disrupt them. One such approach can be found in Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns’ discussion of *puro arte*—which literally translates to “pure art” in Spanish (2)—as an idiom that encompasses the “theatrical, superficial, and hyperbolic” nature of Filipinx performativity as well as the underlying histories and ongoing politics that influence it (1). To call someone *puro arte* is to expose their “propensity for histrionics” and/or “for showing off” (Burns 1), which echoes the essentialist ideal of Filipinas and *bakla* as excessively emotional. However, Burns notes that *puro arte* has been rearticulated by Filipinas and queer Filipinxs as “a mode of self-presentation to exceed their erasure as

subjects” (2), particularly in activist contexts and public performances. Burns argues that *puro arte* can be and has been used as a deliberate transformation of the body for the purpose of “exceeding . . . the assigned script of Filipinos as docile U.S. colonial subjects” (7), and its efficacy is largely dependent on a self-consciously constructed gap between the interior and the exterior. There is therefore a productive connection between Burns’ discussion of *puro arte* and Manalansan’s argument that *bakla* identities consist of “possible scripts of self/selves that shift according to the situation” (x). That is, in their conscious construction of “selves,” Filipinas and queer Filipinx employ the hypervisualization of performance as a method to reinscribe their assigned identities as deliberately performed rather than inherent. By inflecting their assigned roles with hypervisible performativity, Filipinas and queer Filipinx can destabilize the authority given to essentialist ideals of Filipinx identities and disrupt the misogynistic, colonial gaze which sees the racialized performing subject as the role that they are playing and naturalizes the exterior as the product of a “true” interior (Burns 118–119).

Zsazsa Zaturannah visualizes this rearticulation of gendered Filipinx performances through references to Filipinx pop culture that are known for being *puro arte*. In a scene where Zaturannah is suddenly stricken with her duty to fight a horde of zombies for the sake of her townsfolk, she runs away in overdramatized fear and distress, marked by the comedic phoneticization of her crying: “Huhuhu!” (Vergara 48). Perfectly expressing the “theatrical, superficial, and hyperbolic” nature of *puro arte* (Burns 1), Zaturannah expresses her distress through a monologue that seems to exaggerate the situation that she finds herself in. Zaturannah’s graphic stylization as she delivers her monologue can in itself be described as *puro arte*, in that her movements and hair are overly animated and

feminized (see Figure 8). She laments that her humble dreams to help her community are being denied as if by divine punishment, the assumption here being that Ada feels that her identity as a *bakla* dooms them to undue hardship (Vergara 48). She calls herself “*isang bituing walang ningning*” (a star without shine) and “*isang kastilyong buhangin*” (a castle of sand), which are verbatim references to two pop culture texts (Vergara 48).

The first, *Bituing Walang Ningning* (1985), is both a cult-classic drama film starring Filipina icon Sharon Cuneta and a popular song sung by Cuneta. The film revolves around a singer whose fan, played by Cuneta, grows to outshine her stardom. The second, *Kastilyong Buhangin*, is a well-known song from 1977 that was originally performed by Basil Valdez and famously covered by Regine Velasquez, a popular Filipina singer. Zaturannah’s references to these texts signals her approximation to their plot and/or message, which, for Filipina and queer Filipinx readers, adds a specific emotional experience to the subtext of the moment. For example, Zaturannah relates her task of saving her town from zombies with *Bituing Walang Ningning*’s plot, which encompasses “the ambivalence of success, and [is] about the difficult choice of resisting fame and visibility, especially if both come at a price one is not willing to pay” (Diaz xxxii). As with *puro arte*, the purpose of the reference is at once to call attention to the serious injustice of restricting *bakla* within roles of depreciated social dignity and to express it in such an exaggerated performance that it rearticulates queer performativity—the very aspect that is used to label *bakla* as unserious—as the tactic with which *bakla* navigate such restrictions. On one hand, Zaturannah’s emotional flight from the task of fighting zombies hypervisualizes a gendered “propensity for histrionics” (Burns 1).

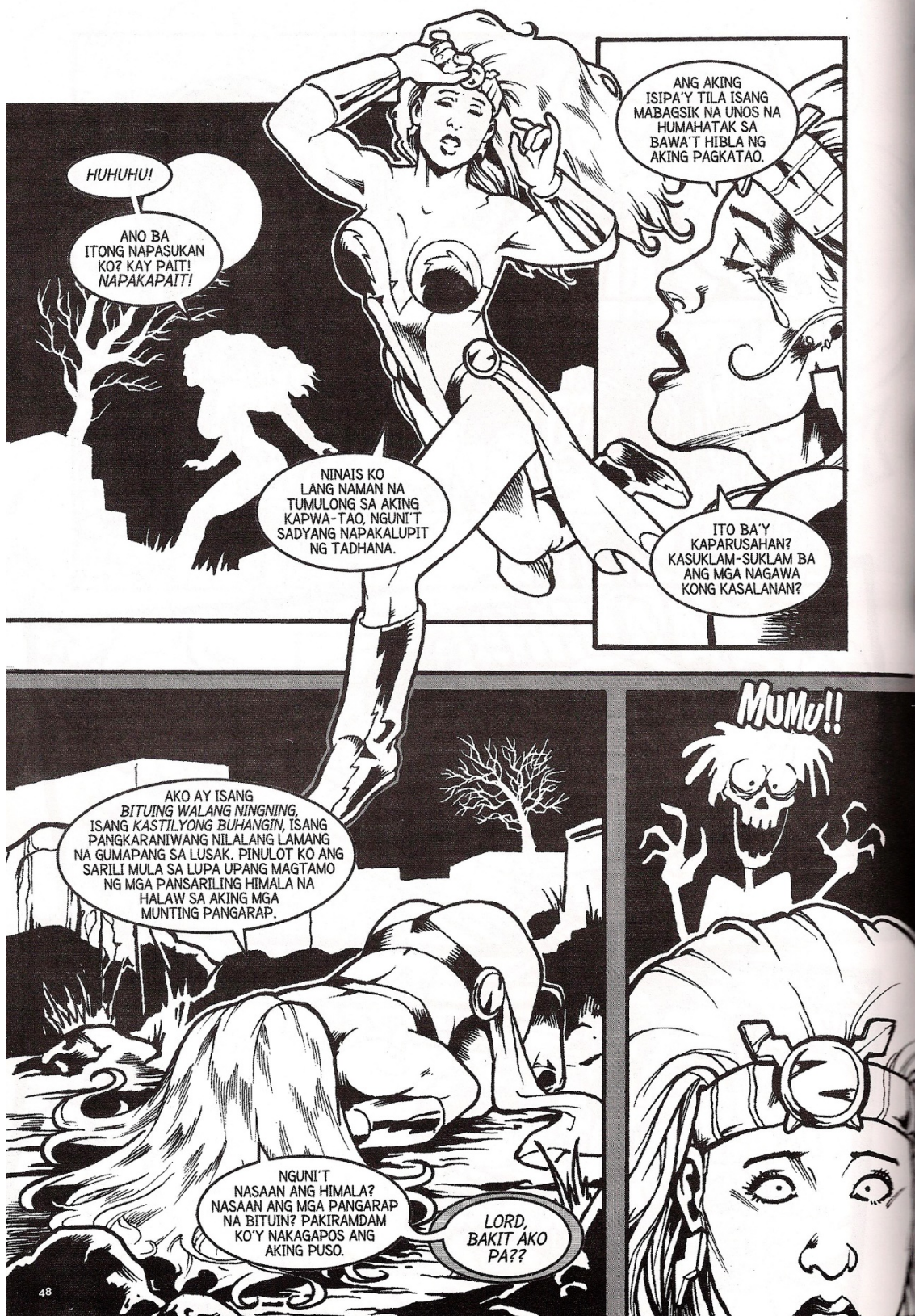


Figure 8: Zaturannah fleeing from the zombies.

But, through the lens of *puro arte*, Zaturannah's overacting actually hypervisualizes the feeling of helplessness that comes from being unable to escape social structures that perpetuate the depreciation of *bakla*. Through *puro arte*, Zaturannah's monologue can be read as a balancing of "archetypes and stereotypes, mockery and homage" that locates "joy in the performance of excess" (Burns 102), without denying the historical and on-going systems that seek to delegitimize Filipina and queer Filipinx subjectivities.

Zaturannah's reference to *Bituing Walang Ningning* thus invokes the emotional labour of having to modulate visibility under hegemonic structures of gender, sexuality, and race that are uninviting to "unacceptable" expressions of queerness. Ada's transformation into Zaturannah does not counteract or gloss over the ordeal of navigating social and economic hierarchies that marginalize *bakla*; rather, it demonstrates how the modulation of queer visibility through performance allows them to rise against adversity without losing the flair and frivolity so closely associated with *puro arte*—a central theme of *Bituing Walang Ningning* that Robert Diaz notes in the introduction to *Diasporic Intimacies* (xxxii).

Diaz provides another incorporation of *Bituing Walang Ningning* in expressions of queer Filipinx self-formation. During the opening reception of the Toronto-based conference "Diasporic Intimacies" in 2015, Filipina drag queen Sofonda Cox gave a lip-synch performance of the song "Bituing Walang Ningning." Considering her popularity in the mainstream Canadian drag scene as well as the location in which the conference took place, Diaz notes that her choice of song reflected the social and environmental reconfiguration that can be elicited by queer Filipinx performance. Through her clothes and her movements, Cox imbued the performance with the extravagance that is

associated with Cuneta and the film (Diaz xxxii), which parallels Zaturnnah's exaggerated movement, hair, and emotion at the moment of her reference to the same text. But, in light of her role in the mainstream drag community and its juxtaposition with the distinctly Filipina role that she asserts during "Diasporic Intimacies" (Diaz xxxii), she also adds to the performance the subtext of negotiating hegemonic expectations and the articulation of queer Filipinx subjectivity when forming the self or selves (xxxiii).

Through the extravagance and exaggerated femininity of drag, Cox emphasized performativity as a key part of forming queerness and Filipinx-ness, especially in social and economic hierarchies that seek to depreciate both. Referring to Burns, Diaz indeed identifies Cox's performance as a demonstration of *puro arte*, in that it invited her audience to value the persistence of queer and Filipinx archives and genealogies through cultural productions and the communities that build around them (xxxiii).

Speaking to community building through queer knowledge production, it is important to note the intertextual connections that exist between *Bituing Walang Ningning*, *Kastilyong Buhangin*, and *Zsazsa Zaturnnah*. Sharon Cuneta appeared as Darna in *Captain Barbell* (1986), a film adaptation of a komiks character of the same name created by Mars Ravelo (Dacanay). Velasquez, who famously sang *Kastilyong Buhangin*, had also appeared as Darna in the 2003 remake of *Captain Barbell* (Dacanay), and sang the theme song of the 2005 television series, *Mars Ravelo's Darna* (Dacanay). Additionally, the source text of *Bituing Walang Ningning* is a komik published under *Pilipino Komiks* in the early 1980s (Pinoy Junk Items). The inexplicit nature of these connections further exemplifies the community-building behind queer Filipinx cultural productions, in that the implicit relationship drawn between Zaturnnah, Darna, and texts

of queer cultural importance is a signal to anyone who recognizes or may want to participate in the production of histories, communities, and cultural archives of queer Filipinx.

2.2.1 Considering Camp in *Zsazsa Zaturnnah*

In addition to *puro arte*, Western camp aesthetics provide a valuable perspective through which one can read the disruptive potential of *Zsazsa Zaturnnah*. Although Western camp cannot capture the specifically Filipinx context of *Zsazsa Zaturnnah* and queer Filipinx cultural productions, it can account for the “hybrid amalgamations of practices and beliefs” that are influenced by the Philippines’ ties with America and can be reflected in queer Filipinx self-formations (Manalansan 17). For instance, the camp aestheticization of melodrama emphasizes the social hierarchies that deny queer and female subjects any claim to serious consideration (Halperin 187). Halperin argues that the “dignity of tragedy” is afforded to the “aristocratic and masculine” while the sufferings of queer, female, and middle-class folk are not only marked as unserious, but “potentially laughable” through the genre of melodrama (291). Indeed, *Zaturnnah*’s reaction to the zombie horde appears to be trivial and even comical given that at this point in the komik, she has already proven that she possesses the strength to protect her town. However, as previously discussed, the triviality of *Zaturnnah*’s situation and response is merely aestheticized as such to challenge the naturalization of the roles that *bakla* are restricted to. Camp can reinscribe melodrama as deliberately performed by replaying the social violence directed at queer and femme subjects “on a ludicrously amplified scale” (Halperin 200). Through camp, the tragedies of erasure, failure, and

being limited to a caricature of feminine histrionics are made hypervisible within a shell of humour. *Zaturnnah*'s reference to *Bituing Walang Ningning* mirrors camp's purpose of legitimizing the feelings and experiences of those that are typically trivialized. Similarly to *puro arte*, camp aesthetics allow for an alternative reading of the scene's absurdly amplified seriousness: the comical "mockery" of social inequalities, specifically the case of *bakla* feeling pressured to achieve social acceptance by embodying nationalistic ideals, allows readers to recognize such systems of social degradation "without conceding to it the power to crush those whom it afflicts" (Halperin 200). By performing serious injustices to an absurd degree, the naturalization of social hierarchies that are built on denying queer and female subjects any claim to serious consideration is called into question (Halperin 187). In the context of *Zsazsa Zaturnnah*, Western camp helps to further illuminate the significance of queer Filipinx self-formation through exaggerated performance.

2.3 Mimicry as Survival

Distinct from *bakla* reconfigurations of surface appearances and *puro arte*, mimicry is a form of Filipinx performance that exceeds Filipinx society and can be engendered without the intention of the performer. The stereotype that Filipinxs are masters of mimicking American culture has a long and on-going history. During and around the time of Ferdinand Marcos' presidency and the Philippines' development as a globalized state, Filipinxs were recruited and marketed through roles that aimed to simultaneously emulate American culture and aestheticize the exceptionality of the Philippine people. For example, the rise of prostitution in the Philippines was sparked by

marketing Filipinas as both familiar and exotic—American and Filipina—to American soldiers (Burns 123). During the same era, the Philippine music industry also grew in popularity with foreign visitors and soldiers because of its mimicry of Western pop (De Kosnik 142). As Abigail De Kosnik discusses, many have theorized the perception that Filipinxs have an innate musicality while lacking the creativity of their American counterparts (139–140). It is only through the “near-perfect articulation of English” and “knowledge of and ease with ‘Western’ culture and ways” that Filipinxs are deemed to be exceptional (Burns 116).

The naturalization of Filipinxs as mimics runs parallel to the idealization of American modernity. That is, the belief that Filipinxs can be modernized through an Americanized culture affirms the exceptionality of being able to mimic American culture. There is, however, a gap between the internalization of American culture through assimilation and surface imitations. Homi Bhabha’s discussion of mimicry suggests that this gap is dictated by colonial power and its figuration of the “Other.” Bhabha argues that colonial mimicry “‘appropriates’ the Other,” marking it as a subject that is just similar enough to not be totally different—but, at the same time, colonial mimicry marks the “Other” as just different enough to not be “normal” (122). Colonial mimicry secures its power by authorizing versions of otherness while emphasizing “disturbances of cultural, racial and historical difference that menace the narcissistic demand of colonial authority” (Bhabha 126). The difference between accepted mimicry and mimicry as “menace” can be found in Issue 3 of *Mars Ravelo’s Darna*. During the final confrontation between Darna and the antagonist, Valentina, the komik compares their ability to embody human identities.

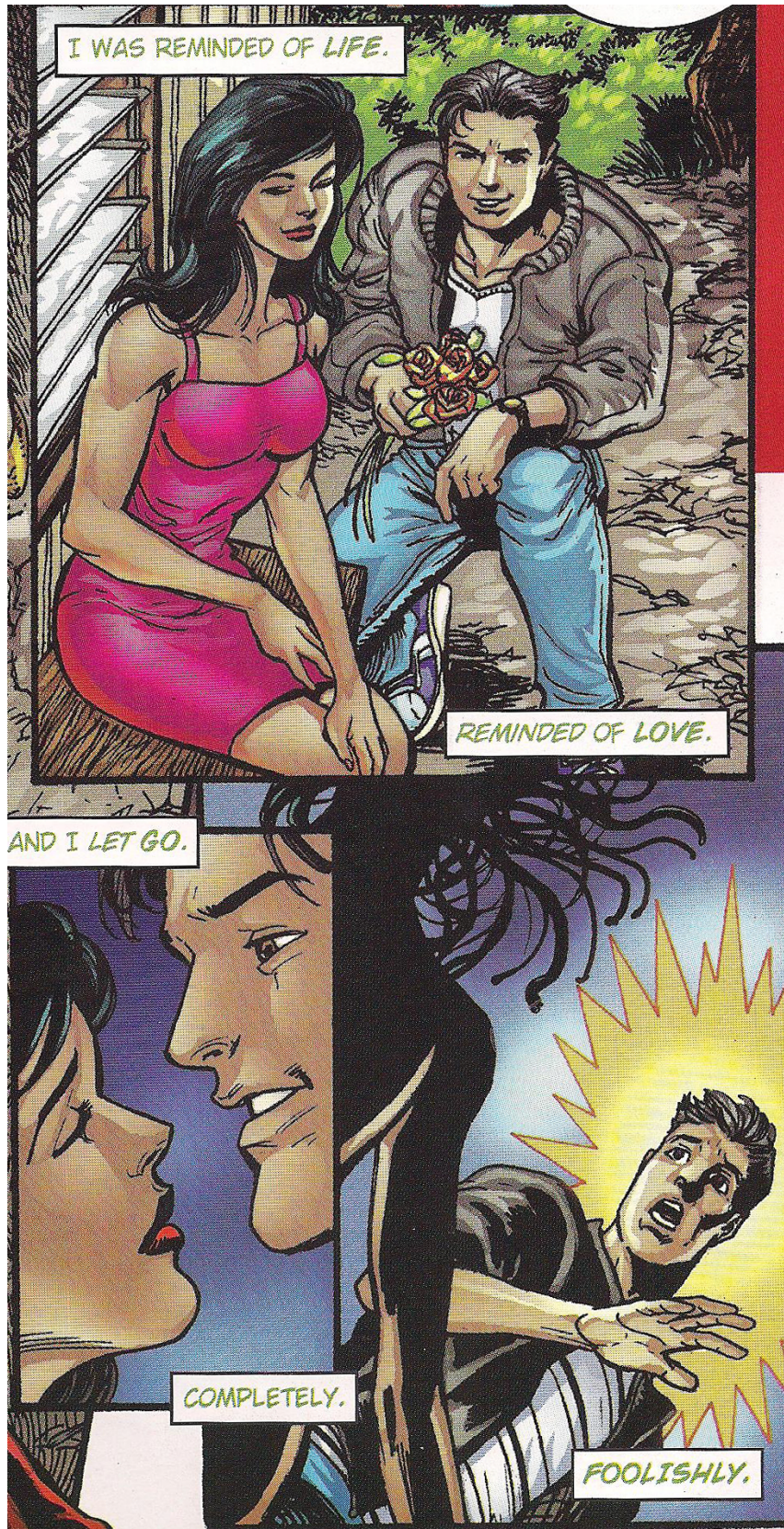


Figure 9: Valentina transforming from human to snake form.

In this scene, it is revealed that Valentina had inadvertently ruined her relationship with a human man by revealing the snake-like form underneath her constructed human body (see Figure 9), and it was only after the failure of this relationship that Valentina assumed her role as a villain on Earth (Yonzon and Monsanto). Whereas Valentina, whose natural form is snake-like and frightening, must reconfigure her body to become accepted in Philippine society, Darna can seamlessly embody a human form by transforming into Narda. Valentina is not marked as monstrous because of her need to mask her non-human form, since Darna is described to do precisely the same thing; rather, Valentina's monstrosity comes from an emphasized racial difference that "menaces" the perfect mimicry of human-ness that Darna demonstrates. While Valentina was once able to perfectly mimic a beautiful human form and develop a relationship with a human man, she is revealed to be incapable of true assimilation and shifts to using her ability to reconfigure her surface appearance to manipulate those around her.

On one hand, the comparison of Darna and Valentina's mimicry of human-ness might suggest the idealization of assimilative Filipinxs. Through this perspective, Darna is heroic because she presents the opposite of Valentina's monstrosity, in that she cannot be distinguished from humans because she *becomes* human. However, I argue that rather than visualizing the idealization of assimilative Filipinxs, Valentina's rejection from society due to her outed non-normativity approximates the rejection of the unacceptable *bakla* under hegemonic ideals of modern "gay globality." Though Darna and Valentina do not exemplify *bakla* formation, Valentina's failure to mimic human-ness and consequential rejection from society dramatizes the depreciation of *bakla* under the

idealization of American modernity. Bobby Benedicto discusses how the *bakla* has become an outdated expression of Filipinx queerness among queer circles in Manila as it has been categorized as a marker for “pre-modern” culture. Whereas diasporic Filipinx queers are entrenched in racial-economic politics and are thus motivated to recover *kabaklaan* as a form of reinserting Filipinx-ness into their environments and modes of self-formation, “globalized” expressions of male queerness—what Benedicto and Manalansan both mark as “gayness”—are “mimicked without the threat of nonbelonging, and mobilized as the alternative modernity” among queer Filipinx in the Philippines (Benedicto 323). Benedicto argues that “‘gay globality’ refers not to actual ‘global gay’ spaces or subjects but to a spatial imagination founded on claims and hegemonic representations driven by the market” (319). In the context of Philippine society, the “global gay” thus refers to an imagined figure based on American mainstream expressions of gayness and the idealization of “modernizing” the Philippines through Americanized culture. The mimicry of “modern gayness” in the Philippines is primarily intended to distance Filipinx male queers from the “femininity and lower-class status” that characterize the depreciated *bakla* (Benedicto 327). However, Benedicto observes that “*kabaklaan* persists, both in cultural memory and in its continued practice by other(ed) Filipino gay men,” as exemplified by the trope of the *parlorista* and other media representations of *kabaklaan* (326). Similarly narrativized as belonging to the past, Valentina’s inability to perfectly mimic human-ness confines her within her assigned role as ruler of a forgotten race. Valentina approximates the rejection of the *bakla* figure in that she describes herself as the queen and heir “of a dead world,” and although she arrived on Earth with the intention of moving on from her “desolate kingdom,” her failed

relationship and the arrival of Darna indicates that she cannot (Yonzon and Monsanto). Like the figure of the *bakla*, Valentina is confined “to a different space-time, to an elsewhere and an elsewhen” (Benedicto 318). If one compares Valentina’s abjection to Darna’s seamless integration into Philippine society through Narda, it becomes apparent that the komik emphasizes the classification of Filipinx based on their ability to resemble American culture. This becomes especially clear when considering that Darna and Valentina come from the same planet and yet are distinguished by a racialized difference: Valentina’s serpent race had become inexplicably consumed by greed, while Darna’s race remained virtuous heroes. With Darna as “resemblance” and Valentina as the “menace” of mimicry (Bhabha 123), *Mars Ravelo’s Darna* personifies a racialized classification of acceptable Filipinx-ness.

However, rather than simply moralizing the difference between Valentina and Darna, the komik narrativizes a mutual fracturing of culture that occurs in the racialized fissure between them. At the end of Issue 3, Darna attempts to call a truce by extending her hand to Valentina, who Darna addresses as “sister” (Yonzon and Monsanto). After Valentina rejects Darna’s gesture of peace, the sheer force of their battle causes the building to collapse, and Darna attempts to pull Valentina out of harm’s way (Yonzon and Monsanto). Unable to save her, *Mars Ravelo’s Darna* ends with a full-page illustration of Darna bowing her head and holding Valentina’s golden broad collar—which was all she could pull out from the building—in defeat. The narrator concludes by stating that Narda, independently from Darna, sees no victors in war, and while the battle ends, the war goes on (Yonzon and Monsanto). In light of this conclusion, the relationship between Valentina and Darna narrativizes the futility of conceptualizing

Philippine “modernity” by rejecting other forms of Filipinx formation. The centrality of American culture in the Philippines’ conceptualization of modernity depreciates all Filipinxs, as when Filipinxs attempt “to eliminate the distance between ‘here’ and ‘there’,” they will only encounter “the impossibility of belonging” and the otherness that continues to be projected onto Filipinxs by the colonial gaze (Benedicto 332).

Expanding the discussion of colonial mimicry in context of the Philippines and komiks, one might consider that it is also through the performance of otherness that Filipinxs can take charge of and possibly exceed the roles that they were assigned to by colonial powers. As mentioned in my brief retelling of the emergence of komiks as a genre, many komiks creators were inspired by the highly successful comics that American soldiers brought over during WWII (“The Philippines” 5), and some, like Tony Velasquez, had to advocate for the originality of their artwork in light of suspicions that they merely echoed Western cartoonists (“Philippine Komiks” 48). Considering Darna’s debut during a time when the Philippines still heavily relied on the US, the stereotype of Filipinxs as masters of mimicking American culture becomes relevant to the discussion of Ravelo’s representation of Filipinxs. According to Ravelo, Darna’s presentation of femininity was inspired by the pin-up illustrations, colloquially deemed “Varga Girls,” that American soldiers would use to boost morale during WWII. Named after Joaquin Alberto Vargas, the artist who popularized the pin-up art style in a 1940s *Esquire* magazine, “Varga Girls” not only influenced Darna’s iconic hyperfeminine stylization but also her identity. Ravelo had originally published komiks that revolved around a superhero named Varga—who was, for all intents and purposes, the first iteration of Darna, but due to a conflict of intellectual property with his initial editor, Ravelo was

forced to rename the character for *Pilipino Komiks*, and thus created Darna (“The Untold True Beginning of Darna”). While it may seem as though Ravelo’s inspiration was predicated on the superficial, voyeuristic value of the “Varga Girls” and the idealization of American-style illustrations, I argue that mimicking “Varga Girls” and American comics can be read as a strategy in gaining control of one’s position within the hierarchy and transcending differences in race and class (Manalansan 42–43). Filipina and queer Filipinxs, in their ability to shift between various inflections of gender, race, and sexuality, achieve economic and social mobility not through assimilation but by simulation. It is by constructing a gap between interiority and exteriority that Filipinxs are able to make space in the social hierarchies that would otherwise reject them. For example, Lea Salonga’s international recognition as the star of *Miss Saigon* was interpreted by Filipinxs as the recognition of the Philippines (Burns 132). Salonga’s success is “extended to that of the nation,” and the performativity that she utilized in order to gain success is valorized as a strategy “to be emulated by the rest of the Filipino people” (Burns 132). Mimicry thus puts a foot in the door, so to speak, or at least enables survival within systems of marginalization. In Ravelo’s case, Varga exemplifies the importance of mimicry within the process of determining a route through which Filipinxs can transcend their inscribed role as America’s dependent. Burns, citing Fenella Cannell’s studies in Bicolano culture and queer practices of mimicry, discusses how empowerment can be generated by the ability to mimic American idioms that are typically coded as too distant or powerful (12). To apply “an intimacy with the object that one is mimicking” is to “overturn the equation of who mimics and who is mimicked,” or level the hierarchy between the oppressive and the oppressed (Burns 12). In this light,

Varga can be understood as mimicry that introduced an opportunity to generate narratives that emphasize Filipinx self-formation—to “push beyond the desire for respectability” and reimagine more positive modes of self representation (Burns 137).

In opposition to hegemonic figurations of Filipinas and queer Filipinxs which work to confine them within roles of depreciated social dignity, *Zsazsa Zaturannah* and *Mars Ravelo's Darna* visualize the conscious and continuous configurations of gender, race, sexuality, and class that Filipinas and queer Filipinxs use to mobilize themselves within social hierarchies. Furthermore, the komiks' hypervisualization of performativity and mimicry destabilizes the concept of essential identities which are used to overwrite Filipina and queer Filipinx subjectivities and mobilized in the hegemonic movement toward American modernity. Through the hypervisualization of performance, komiks can contribute to the knowledge production and cultural histories which sustain the representation of Filipina and queer Filipinx subjectivities and thus present an alternative, pluralistic modernity which resists their erasure.

Conclusion

Robert Diaz discusses queer archives and their incongruence with heteronormative organizing systems, stating that queer knowledge and cultural production exists “in many flashpoints, stories, acts, and emotions that constitute quotidian counter-publics and that confound, even as they expand, processes that have attempted to organize their meanings” (xx). Diaz also states that queer archives need not exist for political use (xx), as queer experiences of inequality do not dictate the possibility of queer imaginaries, performances, and world-making (xviii). With their colourful illustrations, unrealistic plots, and non-sensical cartoon faces, superhero komiks do not readily offer any political, cultural, or historical value to the mainstream public. However, as with queer archives, komiks can be found in many forms, circulated within many communities, and reflect a large plurality of experiences and perspectives. Komiks do not depend on institutional documentation to exist nor do they need capitalistic models of consumption to proliferate; rather, they can be created by anyone and are easily accessible. They can visualize the invisible and narrativize the unsaid, and so, in the representation of Filipinas and queer Filipinxs whose subjectivities are often overwritten by hegemonic narratives and contained within essential identities, komiks can provide an alternative form of knowledge production and generating cultural histories. Playing between time and space, sequence and stillness, komiks’ form creates its own temporalities and thus allows its subjects and readers to assemble a version of reality according to their personal imaginaries, aesthetic tastes, and practices in world-making (Chute 21).

Komiks also allow its subjects and readers to make sense of environments and situations which reject their subjectivities. At the same time that they provide playful imaginings that can serve as an escape, komiks are not devoid of political, cultural, or historical meaning. As I discussed in the Introduction, komiks reflect the same historical and cultural intersections with America, Japan, and Spain as Filipinx subjectivities. The emergence and development of the komik as a medium is attached to the development of the Philippines and Filipinxs, in that it is centered around the process of finding ways to visualize and understand Filipinx experiences and formation. Darna and Zaturannah are highly distinct characters that achieve a similar resonance among their Filipina and queer readership, in that they visualize how hegemonic expectations surrounding Filipina and queer Filipinx identities can mix, overlap, and conflict with their own beliefs and practices of self-formation. Beyond the komiks' playful qualities, I believe that Darna and Zaturannah gained and maintained their iconicism by narrativizing the historical and on-going systems that seek to delegitimize Filipina and queer Filipinx subjectivities while visualizing the joy, power, and extravagance of femme and queer transformations. *Mars Ravelo's Darna* and *Zsazsa Zaturannah* at once name systems of social degradation and resist circumscription within them, through complex interconnections of form and representations of self-formation.

I examined the interconnections of form and self-formation by looking at how komik sequentiality can be used to emphasize non-hegemonic history and how the hypervisualization of performance can emphasize the construction rather than inherence of Filipina and queer Filipinx selves. In Chapter 1, I discussed the representation of Narda and Darna's intersubjectivity through non-linear sequentiality, and how this calls

attention to the racial hierarchies that idealize approximations to whiteness, and Filipinas who fulfill their assigned role as caregiver for their family and the nation. I also discussed the use of sequentiality in *Zsazsa Zaturannah* to visualize the depreciated social dignity of *bakla*, as represented by Ada's essentialized role as a low-class beautician. As opposed to more comical articulations of the *parlorista* which caricature the social relegation of *bakla* (Benedicto 318), the relationship between Ada and Zaturannah enables readers to consider that the aesthetic practices of *bakla* are not inherent to their identity, but rather constructed through performances that modulate expressions of gender, sexuality, class, and race. In Chapter 2, I furthered my analysis of the komiks' representation of Filipina and queer Filipinx subjectivities by identifying visualizations of performance. In opposition to essentialist images of Filipinas and *bakla* which naturalize their emotionality and thus render their struggles unserious, Darna and Zaturannah demonstrate the reinscription of femme and queer performativity as a method of navigating social hierarchies and exceeding or surviving their assigned roles. In the case of *Zsazsa Zaturannah* and its visualization of *puro arte*, I also identified komiks' ability to index other queer texts and uniquely capture their distinct flair and frivolity, as well as komiks' potential to function as queer texts themselves.

What becomes apparent throughout my reading of *Mars Ravelo's Darna* and *Zsazsa Zaturannah* is that the idealization of American modernity engenders the marginalization of Filipinxs based on gender, sexuality, race, and class. Ethnic appearance, gender expression, and articulation of queerness are gauges that colonial powers and the Philippine hegemon use to differentiate "acceptable" and "pre-modern" Filipinxs. Narda and Ada demonstrate that shifting between "acceptable" and

“unacceptable” selves requires performance and the transformation of surface appearances. Concurrently, Narda and Ada also demonstrate that the appearance of acceptability is just that—appearance. Colonial mimicry, as it is projected onto the colonized by the colonizer, “must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” in order to be an effective strategy of control (Bhabha 122). To believe that one can close the gap between “same” and “different” by rejecting certain formations of Filipinx-ness is to overlook the fact that *all* formations of Filipinx-ness are “other” under the colonial gaze. The rejection of Filipinx formations within Philippine society therefore recreates rather than eliminates colonial otherness. Conversely, Narda and Ada visualize the possibility of recognizing the complex mixture of histories and cultures that give shape to Filipinx formations as Filipinx modernity.

Unlike hegemonic narratives and essentialist images, komiks do not seek to singularize Filipina and queer Filipinx subjectivities. The fact that komiks do not invest in singular production might be key to the medium’s ability to emphasize Filipinx plurality, as it invites a wide variety of interpretations. In *Mars Ravelo’s Darna* and *Zsazsa Zaturannah*, this is evident in the galleries of related events and artist interpretations that are interspersed between pauses of the main story. Pictures of fans and entertainers sporting Darna and Valentina costumes can be found in Issue 3 of *Mars Ravelo’s Darna*. In Issues 1 and 2, readers are invited to a “digital creativity competition” for which they can win a cash prize. Participants are prompted to choose an existing photograph of a female celebrity and digitally manipulate it so that the celebrity appears to be dressed up as Darna. The results of the competition are displayed in Issue 3. In a similar integration of the fan community, *Zsazsa Zaturannah* includes a collection of

digital art pieces that reimagine Zaturannah through the artists' individual styles and interpretations of her character. Some of the digital art images include a note from the artist that expresses their appreciation for the komik. By incorporating evidence of the komiks' readership inside the komiks themselves, *Mars Ravelo's Darna* and *Zsazsa Zaturannah* emphasize the importance of community in komik culture. It shows that the formation of Darna and Zaturannah as heroes and icons for Filipinas and queer Filipinx is a collaborative effort between the *komikistas* and the readers. In light of this, further investigation into networks of komik readership and fan-made (re)productions may illuminate the deployment of komik representations of Filipinx self-formation in everyday life. Particularly in regard to international komik communities and the incorporation of non-Philippine art styles in komiks (e.g., Philippine manga), a larger space can be made for the pluralities of Filipinx self-formation that explore the porousness of geographic, racial, and cultural borders.

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