eTropic: electronic journal of studies in the Tropics

"Muchakang Pangkalawakan": Queering Engagements with *Bakla* of the Philippine Tropics

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Abstract

The performance of participants in the Miss Gay Muchakang Pangkalawan [Miss Ugly Gay Universe] in Quiapo, Manila, reflects characteristics of the flamboyant and effeminate *bakla*. However, these stereotypical depictions may not always be consistent with how participants view themselves. This study argues that an introspective understanding of how participants make sense of their identity work engendered by ever-turning tropes reveals slippages that can liberate them from existing oppressive stereotypes. By utilizing personal narrative and ethnographic reflexivity, this study deconstructs the participants' performances, revealing identity-making that may reinforce or resist dominant discourses on the bakla under which these narratives are produced. Taking into consideration the deep affectional connections and intersubjectivity among bakla, the study contends that the obscure pageants of the "ugly" are not merely sites of gender self-discovery and contesting of local stereotypes but are also queer tropical arenas that resist hegemonic views.

Keywords: *bakla*, ethnographic reflexivity, personal narrative, identity-making, queer tropicality, queer Philippines

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Situating the Gaze

Maja-Kubrador[1] (Contestant):

> *Noong ipinanganak ako sa mundo,*
> *Binigyan ako ng kaakit-akit na mata,*
> *Matangos na ilong at kissable na mga labi*
> *Pero nung pinagsama-sama, nag away-away sila*
> *Kaya ganito ang naging resulta,*
> *Nagulat ba kayo?*
>
> [When I was born in the world,
> I was endowed with seductive eyes,
> A pointed nose, and kissable lips
> But when all of these combined, they fought each other
> That is why this is the result,
> Are you surprised?][2]

It was in Quiapo, Manila, that I saw the Miss Gay Muchakang Pangkalawakan pageant[3] [Miss Ugly Gay Universe]. The speech by Maja-Kubrador capitalized on his physical imperfections, making it comedic and over-the-top. Throughout the pageant, the comedy stints ranged from making fun of one's physical appearance to delivering double entendre jokes. As a self-identifying *bakla* witnessing the competition, I had conflicting feelings. In one moment, I was enchanted; at the next, I felt pity. The contestants' performances reinforced the hyperbolic, comedic, and effeminate lower-class bakla, the most marginalized among gay male identities—a problematic typification that may not always be consistent with the ways the participants come to define and experience their gendered selves. Due to the reinforcement of these stereotypes and corresponding notions of respectability, these performances are othered according to both heteronormative and queer cultural norms. My engagement in this study as a bakla aims then to explore the participants' self-understanding and the meaning-making of identity through their pageant performances.

[1] Maja-Kubrador is a name play derived from the combination of the name of the Filipina actress, Maja Salvador and the term *kubrador* that comes from the word *kubra*, which means to collect, particularly awards in the context of pageantry.
[2] Narratives are written in the language the participants used. All of them narrated in Filipino, with a mix of swardspeak or local gay language. An English translation is provided, however, the English may not aptly capture the essence of the words.
[3] *Muchakang Pangkalawakan* is gay slang. *Muchaka* combines two words: *mucha* from the word *mutya*, a Tagalog term for beautiful and an allusion perhaps to Mutya ng Pilipinas, a national pageant; and *chaka*, which is a gay lingo term for ugly. Meanwhile, *pangkalawakan* is a Filipino word that pertains to the universe. Combined, Miss Gay Muchakang Pangkalawakan translates to Miss Ugly Gay Universe. Further references to the Miss Gay Muchakang Pangkalawakan will use a shortened name, Muchakang Pangkalawakan.

In beauty pageants, the bakla has always been perceived as a great mimic (Perillo, 2011). Their performance is seen as a powerful way to access the imagined other, particularly, American ideals such as merit and individual self-worth. These colonial imbrications continue to inflict harm on bakla whenever their performances come into play. Most studies involving mimicry of the bakla are complicit with colonial attachments and have not utilized participant-centered approaches that can provide representation of bakla, especially of their marginalized embodiments. As such, traditional and Western-centric approaches serve to reinforce the subordinate positions of the bakla. A tropical lens thus emerges as necessary and relevant in this study. The term 'tropics' invokes a breaking away from the "idea of a geographically delimited nation or territory; here, it serves as a metaphor to designate the Global South" (Pereira, 2019). By bringing the voices of the othered Muchakang Pangkalawakan participants to the fore as "critical and indigenous thinkers, explorers of the imagination" (Lundberg, 2016, p. 1), these emerging sexualities counter hegemonic assumptions about the bakla.

The paper explores the self-transformation of the participants of Muchakang Pangkalawakan. First, it proceeds with the conceptual framework, discussing the constructions of the bakla, its transcendencies, and how bakla can be situated within queer tropicality. Second, I discuss the materiality of Muchakang Pangkalawakan. Third, I explicate personal narrative in conjunction with ethnographic reflexivity as a crucial methodology for queer tropicality. Fourth, I explore the participants' understanding of their gender and sexual identity interlaced with the complexities of self-making in relation to their tropic pageant performances. Lastly, I discuss how these bakla selves transcend wider postcolonial entanglements, and then proceed to the conclusion.

Being *Bakla* and One with Queers in the Tropics

The term bakla denotes a man with non-conforming gender and sexual identities (Baytan, 2008; Corpuz, 2010; Diaz, 2015; Garcia, 1996; Manalansan, 2003; Tan, 2020), conflating both gender identity and homosexuality. This conflation does not take into account the emerging fluidity of the categorical identities of bakla (such as transvestism, gay, bisexual, etc.) especially when it comes to sexuality. Therefore, it reduces the bakla into a homo/hetero dichotomy. Bakla is also commonly used synonymously with "gay" (Tan, 2013), which points at another complication: the former is a Tagalog term while the latter is a foreign term that does not have a precise local translation. From this, it becomes evident how Philippine colonial history, particularly that of American colonialism and neocolonialism, has significantly shaped the sexualization of the bakla. According to Garcia (2008, p. 167) this Western sexualization has solidified the homo/hetero distinction as the basis of the Filipinos'

understanding of bakla, suggesting that prevalent knowledge about sexuality is the product of Western constructs.

Tan (2013) asserts that Americans introduced the differentiated concepts of heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality to the Philippines. Their Western meanings, combined with latent pre-colonial constructs of gender, continue to be embraced by Filipinos and reinforced through schools, media, and other institutions. Such a linguistic and historical merger has shaped the contemporary understanding of the term bakla. For instance, in Tan's (1996) exploration on the perspectives of the general public, male sex workers, and bakla on bisexual identity,[4] their contradictory understandings on the latter, which reify the transgression of gender boundaries, are elusory to the biomedical and psychological definitions ascribed by American sexualization. As such, while bisexual identity is part of the bakla discourse, it also intersects with other gender ideologies. Meanwhile, Baytan (2008) notes that there are now bakla who seek other bakla who are not masculine, while Lee (2002) underscores the sexual engagements of bakla in heterosexual relationships. In the present study, the gendered experiences of the participants advance the existing literature on the bakla by slipping out of these rigid discursive constructs.

While previous definitions of the bakla emphasize their non-conforming gender and sexual identities, it can also be understood beyond identitarian constructs toward self-transformation (Campos, 2011; Diaz, 2018; Garcia, 2000; Johnson, 1996; Manalansan, 2003; Tan, 2013). The bakla has always been associated with creative performance in so far as identity work is a visible indexing of queer sensibilities. Identity work concerns transformational processes of the self in which it is created and recreated, freeing it from any stable category (Cannell, 1999; Johnson, 1996; Manalansan, 2003). As such, the beauty pageant is a common site for the bakla and continues to be an important field of study—as symbolic representations of cultural identities; as sites of articulating gender; as sites of sexual identity production; and as sites where local, national, and international values of beauty and identity are mediated, contested, and negotiated (Cannell, 1999; Cohen et al., 2013; Johnson, 1996).

Postcolonial discourses on queer subjectivity shed light on queer practices such as mimicry. The participants' deployment of global codes becomes an instance of queer cultural struggle because these performances are assumed to mimic Euro-American cultural images. Postcolonial studies is a "critical body of knowledge that questions the dominant ways through which the world is known and how this knowledge is defined"

[4] *Bisexuals* loosely translates to *silahis* in Filipino, which is used colloquially (Tan, 1996). Limited studies are available to trace the etymology of the term. As the least ventured queer identity, it still remains an understudied field in part due to the lack of informant's disclosure, given the Filipino matrix and the consequence of social expulsion.

(Coghlan & Miller, 2014, p.631). It critiques the continued colonial influence on peoples and cultures and raises questions regarding the interactions between formerly colonized societies and Euro-American imperial powers. It articulates how hegemonic knowledge production among Euro-American intellectuals has tended to misrepresent and silence the colonized, which is captured through Edward Said's (2003) notion of the Other, illustrating a binary way of thinking that created divisions between the Euro-American center and peripheral colonies. And in the case of the present study, the participants are othered precisely through the abstraction of their gender-making processes and the reinforcement of stereotypes such as bakla identity being a mere mimic of Euro-American images.

This othering takes on a different light within the discourse of tropicality, wherein the construction of the bakla is not merely one of a binary opposition. Coterminous with Orientalism as a discourse of power, David Arnold (2006) casts the term "tropicality," with the *tropics* here not only pertaining to a geographical zone (latitude 23–28 degrees north and south of the equator) but also to its constructions in European 'imaginations and experience' (Arnold, 2006, p. 110-111). Encompassing scientific and literary scopes, Arnold intuits the intra-tropical linkages among worldly tropical regions and the zone's continued mystification. Keeping "technical" and "sensible" differences, the linkages are invoked not in terms of absolute difference but more so through "inevitabl[e] areas of interpenetration, a blurring at the margins, enclaves of otherness within one or other generalized domain" (Arnold, 2006, p. 231). According to Lundberg et al. (2023), we need to be cautious about binary oppositions in decolonial/postcolonial theorizing because "such a dichotomy is at risk of (re)instituting (neo)colonial thought" (p. 4). This invites other epistemological and ontological stances that are not necessarily oppositional and conformist.

Pereira (2019) argues that when Western queer theory travels to the tropics, its "potency" and "limitation" are problematized, thereby decontextualizing local experiences from the "universe of enunciation" (p. 469). Pereira does not completely reject Western forms of knowledge such as queer theory; instead, he proposes that by looking into agencies, mediations, and subjectivities of the tropics, one will be able to escape the traps from distortions of translations (p. 44). In the case of the bakla, it has been subjected to media and literary texts in accordance with dominant discourses. Considering its textual production, for instance, "homosexuals (in the Philippines) have not been given an equal chance to explore, invent, and reproduce their subjectivities in their writings or whatever mode of expression they want" (Garcia, 1996, p. 10). In approaching its postcolonial attachments, the sensing of the bakla must therefore be perceived "as a 'locality of contests' between normative expectations and non-normative desires and contact" (Lim, 2016, p. 95); this, in turn, may destabilize the universality of Euro-American knowledge creation and encourage plural perspectives

that are grounded on the meaning-making of queers in the tropics. In the present study, the deployment of personal narratives thus gives bakla the power to represent themselves, counteracting the misrepresentations generated by the totalizing tendencies of traditional ways of inquiry and enabling them to partake in the research process. Furthermore, in recognizing their own meaning-making through their performances, the body becomes a privileged source of knowledge, thereby departing from traditional research inclinations (Jones, 2009, p. 65).

A review of literature on the bakla reveals particular ideations towards binary constructions (i.e., homo/hetero, core/periphery, essentialist/performative), images of progress, and alterity, to name a few. The narrativity of the idealized bakla continues to beset the participants in so far as perceptions of them allude to these attached stereotypes. Hayden White (1984) criticizes such a traditional historiography, at least since the middle of the nineteenth century, by pointing out positivistic employment of writing history. In this view, narrative is taken merely as a form of discourse, unrelated to the substantive quality of the referent. The historian's "dissertative" mode—what is thought to be a true story of events, phenomena, etc.—overshadows his "narration" of "what he [sic] took to be the real story" (White 1984, p. 3). This is problematic because when the former dominates the latter, the conception of "facts" is rendered objective. The question of whether historical events can be truthfully represented is at risk. White reifies the ambiguity of the term "history": for him, "it was neither narrative per se that distinguished historiography from other kinds of discourses nor the reality of the events recounted that distinguished historical from other kinds of narrative" (White 1984 p. 5). And so, White acknowledges the "literariness" of historiography through tropes and deemed cultural production paradigmatic to literary writing.

White characterizes tropes as "generate figures of speech or thoughts of deviations by their deviation from what is 'normally' expected, and by associations they establish between concepts normally felt not to be related or to be related in ways different from that suggested in the trope used" (White, 1986, p. 2). Drawing on White's *Tropics of Discourse*" (1985), and going beyond the mere geographic notion of tropicality, Christian Benitez's (2022) rereading of the unnamed folk poem "May Bagyo Ma't May Rilim" [There may be storm and dark] (1605) demonstrates the discursive play engendered by "tropes." A trope is "both a turn toward and away from particular ideations, the simultaneity of which only emphasizes on the specificity of a present discursive moment" (Benitez, 2022, p. 238). Discursive qualities articulated by way of the tropes constitute the very "simultaneity" of such movements.

Drawing from White (1986) and Benitez (2022), the "papangitan" or contest of ugliness in this study should thus not be understood in a logical fashion per se but as part and parcel of its heuristic qualities. Foregrounding the gender play of the participants, it

can be said that since articulations are in multi-related forms, the metadiscursive quality of the bakla can be apprehended. Here, the possibility of the participants reinforcing, resisting, or negotiating the idealized construction of the bakla and attached cultural normativities—far from being liberated from its colonial imbrications—is brought to the fore. According to Clayton and Bowd (2019), the "deeply ambivalent discourse" of the trope, "with positive and negative strains," is a reversal opportunity for the subaltern to "turn" against the colonial trappings through which the idealization of the bakla is implanted. By giving the participants the voice to individually represent themselves in knowledge production through personal narrative, the participants may not necessarily "turn" their representations toward the dominant traditional historiography of the bakla to potentially appease its idealized discursive figurations.

The Muchakang Pangkalawan Pageant

Muchakang Pangkalawakan starkly differs from typical gay beauty pageants, where participants appropriate glamorized femininity and other norms. According to the legendary figures of the pageant, the first Muchakang Pangkalawakan was organized during the 1990s in Tondo, Manila, the largest district in the city in terms of population and land area. (The passing of the founders of the pageant has made it difficult to trace its history afterwards.) Today, the growing visibility of the pageant across Metro Manila and nearby provinces, as well as its reproduction in television segments and online platforms, suggests that it has become a mobile spectacle. Unlike other gay beauty pageants in the Philippines which have communal roots, Muchakang Pangkalawakan is not tied exclusively to a specific locality, and so, the participants in the study have participated in cities in Metro Manila and even in nearby provinces such as Pampanga, Cavite, Nueva Ecija, and Bulacan. As such, the participants' geographical locations from the urban center of Metro Manila and from the provinces become blurred.

The looseness of the qualifications for the pageant, such as its lack of age requirement and non-conformity to beauty standards, accommodates diverse participants regardless of their gender identity, sexual orientation, ability, as well as facial and physical features. The subversion of pageantry norms is further made visible in the *papangitan* or intentional uglification of one's self in the pageant, which is marked with parodic renditions of popular culture from Hollywood personalities to local personalities to unusual codes. The papangitan is displayed across the different segments of the competition, namely, national costume, evening gown, talent competition, question-and-answer round, and crowning moment. Additionally, the stage personas of the contestants are not stable: these always change depending on the preference of the participants and as long as they correlate with their sense of self.

Methodology: The Participants of the Study and Reflexivity

Departing from work on queerness that analyzes literary texts, I explore the participants' pageant performances by utilizing personal narrative. Textual analysis alone might miss out on the complexities of lived experiences, and can reinforce othering, given homogenizing tendencies in representation. Meanwhile, personal narrative, when engaged with a sense of reflexivity, facilitates a co-sensing interview with the participants.

Personal narratives are sites "where the social is articulated, structured, and struggled" (Langellier, 1989, p. 128), and thus constitute identities. The cultural production and reproduction of identities are thus embedded in mundane practices that marginalize othering. Struggles are consequently inscribed in the discursive effects of narratives, making the method of considering personal narratives essential in looking at dimensions neglected by discourses that privilege dominant identities. Hence, understanding how each participant makes sense of their identity may challenge dominant discourses and liberate those minoritized by the discriminative characterization associated with the bakla. In exploring the participants' self-understanding of their identity, I do not intend to cement these to the categorization of identity per se. Instead, I aim to give them the power to provide descriptions without automatically resorting to a presumed view on the bakla.

Recognizing how our (mine as the researcher and being bakla and those of the selected Muchakang Pangkalawakan participants) "positions shift and mutate, as they are refracted through context-specific matrices of power and affect, is in itself a key aspect of 'doing' reflexivity" (Gore, 2018, p. 112). I recognize and am critical of my possible influence on the participants and the study. Through reflexivity, I acknowledge that I interpret identities and experiences not only as part of the *kabaklaan* or the queer community, but also as a researcher from the academy, knowledgeable of the larger discourse wherein queerness and queer identities are located—both of which are significant in data gathering and in the analysis of narratives. On the one hand, my position as a researcher has reinforced my understanding of how "social background, location, and assumptions affect my research practice" (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 17). On the other hand, my relationship with the participants as part of the kabaklaan has enriched the study and has become instrumental to my understanding and interpretation of the values inscribed in their performances. As much as I am aware and critical of these multiple aspects, I am "self-conscious with the interplay of my own and my subject's subjectivity, positionality, biases, and mindset in data gathering, and the shaping of the ethnographic text" (Canuday, 2009, p. 170). Reflexivity allows me to critically engage with, and deeply reflect on, my experiences and those of the participants.

Being a self-identifying bakla, I have endeavored to understand the extent to which my identity, and constructions thereof, diverge and converge with those of the participants, resulting in intersections that open critical reflections on the complexities of the participants' ways of living and experiences of identity. I was able to develop close relationships with other bakla because we speak the same gay language, share characteristics and values, and are of the same ethnicity. Gay language or "swardspeak" is a vital component of bakla culture (Manalansan, 2003). My ability to speak swardspeak was helpful in my engagement with the participants, who also used it in their performances and narratives. Being a bakla and a part of the kabaklaan afforded a site of similarities in our experiences, especially the struggles related to gender, sexuality, and other social matrices. As someone who performs being bakla within and without the beauty pageant culture, I am aware of the fluidity of bakla attributes. However, my experiences of identity and identity-formation are both similar and different from theirs.

In doing this study, due to the geographic spread of the participants and given the COVID-19 "new normal," I utilized online and phone interviews as modes of communication. The participants come from Metro Manila, Bulacan, Cavite, Pampanga, Zambales, and Northern Samar; their ages vary from 18 to 50 years old. The participants whose narratives are included in this study all come from low-income niches: Ernie is a factory worker; Barns, a rug sewer; Norman, a senior high school student who supplements his daily allowance through joining pageants; Bugoy and Jay, beauticians; Lester, Nestor, and Marvin, stand-up comedians; and Aaron, unemployed.[5] Most of them have considered joining pageants as a full-time career. Overall, the participants represent a polyvalent range of emerging sexualities that fracture the dominant characterization of the bakla, conflating gender identity and homosexuality. Some of them have experiences with heterosexual relationships and remain open to homosexual relationships. Others who are effeminate reveal attraction to other bakla. Their pageant performances transgress gender binary markers by shifting and mix-matching hyperfeminine and hypermasculine gender markers coupled with ungendered oddities which may be, at the onset, unintelligible.

Reconfiguring the Bakla: Fracturing the Stereotypes

Through my intersubjective interviews with the participants, their identity categories are observed to be entangled with their meaning-making in pageant performances. All of them affirm their identity as bakla but have distinctly contrasting descriptions of their gender and sexual identities and practices, fracturing the identity construction of the bakla itself.

[5] Non-stage names of the participants used in this study are pseudonyms.

Nestor is caught up in the interplay between heterosexual and homosexual borders. He had a wife, who passed away in 2019, and also considers himself as bakla.

> *Ako naman, simpleng tao lang, ano lang naman ako eh, mabait ako, wala akong bisyo, sa ngayon ok na ok naman. Actually, may asawa talaga ako, kaso namatay na siya [noong] 2019, kaya naiwan sa'kin 'yung dalawang anak namin, kaya ako lang nagtataguyod sa mga anak namin. Ako naman kasi, talagang as in bakla talaga, pero siyempre, nagkaroon ako ng anak. Para hindi na lang sila mabastos, hindi na 'ko lumalandi, hindi na 'ko nagpapahaba ng buhok. Sa entablado lang ako nag-iibang anyo, pero dito sa'min, ganito lang ako, 'yung parang—pa-men-pa-men, charing-charing, ganun! Pero pagdating sa entablado, bakla pa rin. Sa totoo lang, sa lalaki talaga ako attracted kasi bading talaga eh, naano lang, natukso lang sa babae.*
>
> [I am just a simple person, I am kind, I don't have any vice, so now I am all good. Actually, I had a wife but she died in 2019, so I was left with our two children and I'm the only one raising them. I am really, as in, bakla, but I had children. So for them not to be ashamed, I just don't flirt around, I don't grow my hair long. I only transform when I'm on the stage, but here in our place, I'm just like—pa-men-pa-men [discreet], charing-charing [horsing around], like that! But when I'm on stage, I am still a bakla. In all honesty, I'm really attracted to men because I am really a bading [bakla], I was just—I was just tempted by a woman.]

Nestor expresses his understanding of what it means to be bakla in terms of sexual object choice and comportment. Although his marriage was a heterosexual relationship, he still considers himself as bakla—or in his words, *bading*[6]—because he is also sexually attracted to "manly men." When asked about the degree of his attraction to his wife, he clarifies that he is more attracted to males. On a regular day, he does not act or dress effeminately; but when he is on stage, he takes on a different persona. He describes his comportment as "pa-men," meaning a bakla who acts like a man. Despite being aware that people know that he is bakla, he chooses to publicly present himself in a manner that does not explicitly show his effeminate side because of his social obligations to his children. As such, despite having been engaged in a heterosexual relationship, he still considers himself as a bakla because of his sexual desire for men and his public presentation as a straight male.

[6] *Bading* is used as another colloquial term for bakla.

Ernie has the same experience of being involved in a heterosexual relationship and how social obligations add a layer of tension to his queer identity. He recalls how one night his roommate sponsored a drinking party where he and a friend's female friend had an intimate encounter that resulted to pregnancy. Ernie's father took advantage of the situation and forced him to live with the female friend. Ernie agreed to live with her, as he felt pressured into cohabitating with a female partner; their relationship, however, did not last because of irresolvable conflicts. When asked if he would still engage in a heterosexual relationship, Ernie said that he promised himself he would never let himself be involved in one again.

Despite Ernie's resolution, he also expressed contradictory feelings. He said that if God would give him a female partner, maybe he could work on it. For him, it is hard being alone and not having someone to lean on. This present situation makes him rethink the possibility of entering into another heterosexual relationship. However, Ernie's openness to the idea of having a female partner is conditional:

> *Hindi na, kasi ipinangako ko sa sarili ko na 'yun na 'yung huli. Una't huli 'yun, kasi isa lang siyang pagkakamali kaya hindi ko na pwedeng ulitin, maliban na lang kung may magbigay sa'kin. Baka kasi sa sitwasyon kong ito, ang hirap kasi mag-isa ka, solo ko lahat. Kaya 'yung taong masasandalan mo, wala. Kung ibigay ni Lord na magkaroon ako ng partner, siguro kakayanin ko sa ngayon, pero 'yung buong pag-iisip ko, hindi ko man gusto. Pero 'yung kinakapitan ko kasi, 'yung may mapapakisamahan ako [sa] pagtanda. 'Yun 'yung kinakatakutan ko.*
>
> [Never again, because I promised myself that it was going to be the last. It was my first and last, because it was just a mistake, that is why I can't do it again, unless I would be given someone. Maybe because in my situation right now, it's hard being alone, I'm by myself in everything. So I have no one to lean on. If the Lord gives me a partner, I can probably endure it all now, even if my mind tells me I really don't want it. But what I'm holding on to is the possibility of having someone I can be with as I get older. That's what I'm afraid of.]

Even if Ernie is open to having a female partner, he still identifies as gay. While he has had sexual experiences with both females and males, he does not want to be romantically engaged with fellow effeminate gays because he himself is effeminate. He distinguishes himself from the pa-men gays because he does not try to act manly.

He does not cross-dress but would do so in events that require a dress code. He wears "half-feminine" clothes, which he describes as male clothing worn together with female clothing, such as a shirt paired with sexy women's shorts. Even if he labels himself as gay, he also identifies as bakla. When asked why this is so, he said that he is more attracted to males than to females. This means that gay and bakla for him are similar terms. Although there are traces of effeminacy in Ernie's daily self-presentation, his sexual preference is along the lines of his identification as both gay and bakla.

Unlike the cases of Nestor and Ernie, the traditional stereotype of bakla pertains to someone who is effeminate and attracted solely to masculine men. Norman is exclusively attracted to masculine men. He grew up surrounded by male friends and realized that he is bakla when he became involved in a five-year long undefined sexual relationship with a male teenage friend. While they both knew what was going on between them, they never asked why it was happening and neither of them asked if they were bakla. Eventually, his friend got married and had a child. Norman's case speaks for the other seven participants whose narratives are not included in this section.

Lester is attracted to straight and bisexual men. He rates his sexual desire for straight men at 100% and for bisexuals at 60%. This is based on his experience of sometimes being attracted to a man who appears to be straight but is, in fact, not. He is conscious of how bisexual men seamlessly appear to be like straight men. In this situation, a bakla who hooks up with a fellow bakla is likened to someone who is "poisoned" (*nalason*) because a bakla is perceived to be not sexually attracted to another bakla, based on the popular view of the bakla as someone who is only attracted to straight men. However, Lester is aware of the fact that there are baklas who act as straight men.

> *Ako talaga, [sa] straight ako attracted kasi lumaki ako dati[ng] long hair eh, nagdress-dress. Pumapasok ng school [nang] nakapalda. Sinasabi ko na lang, bagong tuli ako, haha. Ayun, nakikita ako ng mga kasama ko. "Hoy bakla!" Pero depende na rin kasi, 'di ba, iba-iba tayo ng pagdadala. Naa-attract ako sa bisexual pero hindi katulad sa straight na 100%. Pero, like bisexual, siguro mga 60%. Kasi sa ngayon, may mga bisexual na hindi mo malalaman kung bisexual talaga. Hindi mo alam, bumubula na 'yung bibig mo, pero malalason ka na pala.*
>
> [I really am attracted to straight guys because I grew up with long hair, wearing dresses. I would go to school in a skirt; I'd tell people I just got circumcised, haha. So there, my classmates would see me.

> They'd call out, "Hoy bakla!" But it also depends, right, because we carry ourselves in different ways. I'm attracted to bisexuals but unlike with straight guys, at 100%. But to the bisexuals, maybe around 60%. Because right now, there are bisexuals who you wouldn't know for sure if they're really bisexual. You don't know, you're already frothing at your mouth, but you'd be poisoned.]

Jay identifies himself as bisexual, which he only lately discovered. When asked why he labels his identity as such, he said that he is sexually attracted to his girlfriend but also to someone of the same sex. He emphasizes that he has engaged in sex with females before. His notion of same sex pertains to a person who is either a straight guy or someone who is bisexual and manly in comportment. He is not attracted to gays, whom he distinguishes by asserting that they are not attracted to females. Even though he sees his sexual orientation as bisexual, he still identifies himself as bakla.

For Jay, the term bakla is composed of various identity categories, and bisexuals are part of the spectrum. Although he acts manly on a daily basis, he can also do things that are stereotypical of the effeminate bakla, such as performing in beauty pageants.

> *Noong mga high school ako, I used to be called as a woman, pero lately I discovered na nagkakagusto ako sa babae, pero lately parang nagkakagusto rin ako sa lalaki. Lately, nagagawa ko na 'yung mga ginagawa ng mga—'yung kunyari, performing, 'yung mga ganun, mga parang pambakla na masaya, tapos nagagawa ko na siya both sides. Ang salitang bakla, iba-iba, kasi [may] iba-ibang uri ng bakla. Kasi ako, kina-category ko 'yung sarili ko bilang bisexual kasi may girlfriend ako and I am also attracted doon sa same sex ko.*
>
> [When I was in high school, I used to be called a woman, but lately, I discovered that I like women, but also lately I seem to like men too. Lately, I've been able to do the—like, for example, performing, things like that, like the gay happy things, and I've been able to do them, both sides. The word *bakla* has different meanings because there are different kinds of bakla. As for me, I categorize myself as bisexual because I have a girlfriend and I am also attracted to the same sex.]

Barns thought that she was a "straight guy" before she came out. Previously dressed up in a formal manner in daily life, she now sees herself as female. Barns's experience of coming out touches on the notion of gender transitivity. Despite her physical comportment alluding to transgenderism, she identifies as bakla.

> *Straight guy ako dati pero nagladlad ako. Sa ngayon, babae ang tingin ko sa sarili ko pero nakadepende 'yan sa nakalakihan mong kamalayan. Formal akong kumilos sa normal na pamumuhay kaya maraming nagtatanong kung ako nga ba talaga 'yung nasa video.*
>
> [I used to be a straight guy before, but I came out. As of now, I see myself as a woman but that depends on the consciousness you grew up with. I act formally in day-to-day life that is why many people ask me if I really am the one on the video.]

Nestor, Ernie, Lester, Jay, and Barns individually associate themselves with the term bakla. But there is a dissonance in how they define the term vis-à-vis how they see their identity as bakla and their actual experience of being one. While their views on the term are disparate, these also converge in some respects, namely in terms of. sexual object choice and gender presentation. Meanwhile, though effeminacy, homosexuality, and transvestism are observed to recur in the discourse of bakla, not all participants identifying as such also subscribe to all of these. Some participants possess these three latter markers, while others have only one or two.

In addition, the local bakla and global gay models are convoluted in terms of the meanings assigned with these terms. Some participants simultaneously identify themselves as gay and bakla but refuse to fully accommodate the Western model. Furthermore, the traditional perception of the bakla as attracted only to masculine men, or the heterosexist lalake (male), is refuted, considering that some participants have had sexual experiences with females and remain open to the possibility of engaging in relationships with them. The participants who are open to heterosexual relationships still perceive their sexuality within the bounds of homosexual identity markers. At the same time, there are also participants who are open to having other bakla as their sexual object choice, contradicting the historical image of the bakla as preferring only sexual partners who are masculine heterosexual men. Thus, the participants' narratives show that with regard to sexual object choice, the bakla is no longer confined to masculine men. The participants challenge the dominant and stereotypical bakla, articulating that this perception no longer solely defines it. In the succeeding section, I explore the meaning-making embedded in their identity work.

Unfurling the Self: Transcending Normativities

In all of the segments of the Muchakang Pangkalawakan pageant, the participants must be inventive and imaginative. To get ahead of others and eventually snatch the crown, they must be able to extemporize at any given moment of their performances. Contestants should be funny as soon as they enter the stage to surprise the audience and the judges. It must be *pasabog*, something surprising or even explosive that can

make an impact. And so, despite preparing for all the portions of the pageant beforehand, the participants often have to improvise in the course of their performances.

The participants' expression of their identity across the various segments of the pageant demonstrates how staged performance plays an essential role in their processes of self-making and assertion of creative agencies. For example, in his usual introduction, Barns makes sure to get the attention of the audience and the judges so as to leave a strong impression. He thinks that if the judges applaud him, he will be able to garner a high score as the competition progresses.

> *Sa introduction, dapat mag-isip ka ng nakakatawa, 'yung gugulatin mo sila, katulad ng, "O ano, nagulat ba kayo? Akala niyo tao ako, hayop kaya ako! Ako nga po pala si Bea Bunda, ang mananahing kontesera ng Rosario, Cavite, na naniniwala na ang taong mapagkumbaba katulad ko, mahaba ang baba. And I—thank you!"*
>
> [In the introduction, you would have to think of something funny, the kind that would surprise the audience. For example, "Oh, are you shocked? You thought I was human; I'm actually an animal! My name is Bea Bunda, the sewer and frequent pageant participant from Rosario, Cavite, who believes that a humble person like me has a long chin. And I thank you!"]

Mottos or sayings encapsulated in their self-introduction are playfully revised with paradoxes. In Barns's self-introduction, his motto has two rhyming words: *mapagkumbaba* (humility) and *baba* (chin). When read in the context of his introduction, they imply contrasting meanings: valuing humility but also making fun of his physical attributes (i.e., having a long chin).

Speeches loaded with sexual innuendos can effectively set the audience's mood and build rapport. This is the technique that Aaron employs in his sample speech for the introduction portion of the contest.

> *Kayong mga kababaihan, sagabal kayo sa'ming mga kabaklaan: isusubo na lang namin, inuupuan niyo pa. Huwag niyong hintayin na upuan muna namin bago niyo isubo nang sa ganun, matikman niyo ang aming paghihiganti!*

> [You women, you're all a hindrance to us bakla: you just had to sit on whatever we'll suck [pertaining to male's genitals]. Don't wait for us to sit on it first before you suck it, so that you'll taste our revenge!]

According to Aaron, the deployment of sexually-loaded speech and the gravity of how it is delivered depend on who the organizers are, the background of the judges, and where the pageant is staged. It is an "acquired taste." In some localities, speeches like these are more acceptable and the contestant is able to remain respectable, such as in more free-spirited places like the district of Tondo in Manila. However, the participants' comedic character remains a key regardless of locality and audience.

Stage names reflect characters that correlate with their sense of self. Stage names are a convolution of celebrity names, both local and international, as well as of ungendered sensibilities. In the case of Bugoy, his stage name Megan Yuck is adapted from Megan Young, a Filipino celebrity and beauty queen, who won the Miss World crown in 2013. When asked why he preferred this name:

> *Babae 'yung pinoportray ko dun. Kasi iba yung apelyido sa mga kasama ko. Ako, ang ginagamit ko is Megan Yuck. 'Yung mga kasama ko naman is mga Kylie Lapida. Ako kasi, Megan Yuck 'yung yung ginamit ko sa Suffer Sireyna. For example, "By the way, my name is Neneng Bagsik, a.k.a. Megan Yuck!" Kailangan may emote, 'yung parang nandiri.*
>
> [Babae [female] is what I'm portraying there. Because the last name is different from those of my fellow contestants. For me, I use Megan Yuck. While my fellow contestant's name is Kylie Lapida. Because for me, Megan Yuck is what I used when I joined Suffer Sireyna. For example, "By the way, my name is Neneng Bagsik, a.k.a. Megan Yuck!" You need to emote, as if you're disgusted.]

Instead of adapting the beauty queen's whole name, Bugoy chose to change the surname into something comedic. Using *Yuck* instead of *Young* implies disgust, and so, in using it as the last name of his persona, Bugoy also projects such a quality onto her, which becomes useful for his on-stage presentation.

Meanwhile, Ernie chose Bea Bunda as his stage name, combining the names of two local celebrities—the actress Bea Alonzo and the TV personality Boy Abunda.

> *'Yung Bea Bunda ay parang Boy Abunda kasi kalbo ako. 'Yun 'yung pinoportray ko, 'yung pagiging kalbo. Then iti-twist mo na lang din*

> *talaga siya para mas makilala ka as Bea Bunda. Dun na ko nakilala kaya minsan natatawa na lang ako kasi andami kong pangalan. Sa pabrika dati kasi, lumaki talaga akong kulot ang buhok, hanggang sa nagpa-girl ako, nagpa-straight, tapos accidentally na nakalbo na ko, hanggang sa binansagan akong Bea Bunda.*
>
> [Bea Bunda is like Boy Abunda because I am bald. It's what I really am portraying, having a bald head. Then you just really need to twist it more so you'd be more known as Bea Bunda. It's how people have come to know me, that's why sometimes I just laugh because I have many names. Before in the factory, I grew up with curly hair, until I became feminine, so I got my hair straightened, and then accidentally I went bald until I was nicknamed Bea Bunda.]

Ernie's stage name did not come out of thin air. Instead, it was fashioned from the different facets of his life and was crafted with the help of his workmates. More importantly, the name recalls daily scenes from his job as a factory worker and encapsulates a real-life defining trait—his bald head. As possibly rendering of stories that are part of their personal lives, stage names become a mechanism for the participants to express personal identities, making their stage personas blur the boundaries between private and personal domains.

Identity-making is not static, but rather an always ongoing process. The participants' identified personas are malleable, changing over time, contingent to their abilities, personal preferences, and relevance, among other factors. The participants not only destabilize normative identity markers but also disidentify from the traditionally respectable embodiment of femininity of the bakla. This act is not survival per se, but one of being and becoming, facilitating affect, intentionalities, and sensibilities. The quotidian self materializes in their bodily presentations, and so the latter permeates the former: the subordinal position of the participants, especially with regard to gender, sexuality, class, and relationality, brings forth a multiplicity of embodiments.

Queer Tropical Arena: Confronting the Image of the Other

The ongoing process of the transformation of the self is not simply a process of identity-making. It is a queer tropical arena where geopolitical entanglement concerning deployment of global images is implicated. There is a broader power structure where local and global forces interplay. Queer performances, especially those that intertwine with cultural production and quotidian struggles, are always inscribed within wider historical and cultural contexts. The participants' campy performances imitate local

personalities and icons more often than global ones, but in turn also refashion global codes.

In Nestor's talent performance, he mimics Shirley Bassey and Tina Turner, both Hollywood icons, as well as Lani Misalucha, a local Philippine icon. The appropriation of the imitated personas is not fully the same as the original; participants modify it to make it suitable for comedic acts. For example, he interjects derisive lines such as "Hahaha" to make his rendition funny.

> *Marami akong ginagaya sa stage, katulad nila Tina Turner, si Lani Misalucha—marami eh, andami kong costume na panggaya-gaya talaga kasi sumasali rin ako sa ganun. Kasi, ang partikular talaga na ginagaya ko ay si Shirley Bassey, kasi gusto ko 'yung mga kanta niya, mga luma na, 'yung mga "This is My Life," "I, Who Have Nothing," mga ganun-ganun. Marami siyang mga kantang [puwedeng] gawing comedy, lahat 'yan comedy. Pero sina Tina Turner, Lani Misalucha, ganyan-ganyan, hindi ko na ginagawang comedy. Kasi ineedit ko kasi 'yung mga songs. 'Yung mga edited kasi, mga nakakatawa, 'yung mga tawa, 'yung biglang may, "Hahaha," sinisingit mo 'yun para lang maiba, hindi lang 'yung buong kanta, as in inedit talaga, kaya aliw sa mga manonood naman.*
>
> [I have done a lot of impersonations on stage, like Tina Turner, Lani Misalucha—a lot, I have lots of costumes for impersonation because I also join contests for that. The celebrity I particularly impersonate is Shirley Bassey because I like her songs, old songs, like "This is My Life," "I, Who Have Nothing," songs like that. She has a lot of songs that can be used for comedy, all of them can be comedy. But for Tina Turner, Lani Misalucha, singers like that, I don't make their songs funny. Because I edit the songs. Because the edits are funny, the laughing tracks, the sudden "Hahaha" you insert to change it up, so it's not just the same song, as in it's edited, so the audience gets entertained.]

According to Nestor, parodic rendition is his signature talent, something he even performed when he competed at the "Gaya-Gaya Puto Maya" segment of the national noontime TV program Eat Bulaga. Aside from injecting comedy into the songs, he also copies and modifies a celebrity's defining nuances or mannerisms through exaggerations. This way, mimicry appears to be a copying that is primarily done in terms of the participant's own preference and individuality. Being so, it embodies a

certain affective modality, that is, a permeating of the character with the authentic aspects of the self.

Marvin's performance of a movie scene from *Anak* (The Child; dir. Rory Quintos, 2000) demonstrates a similar permeation.

> *'Yung Vilma Santos [sa] Anak. 'Yung Vilma Santos kasi, napaka-inspirable naman talaga ng kwento niyan, very sumikat [na] movie na 'yan. So ang ginawa ko, ine-exaggerate ko na habang nagdadrama kami sa entablado, nagba-basketball ako, nagvo-volleyball ako, tapos ine-exaggerate ko 'yung galaw. So ayun, nagustuhan ng mga tao. So importante 'yung gagalaw ka dun. Kung nagli-lipsync ka lang, hindi naman 'yun ma-appreciate 'yun ng tao.*
>
> [Vilma Santos in Anak. That Vilma Santos [work], that story is really inspiring, it became so popular. So what I did was I exaggerated that while we were acting on stage, I'd play basketball, I'd play volleyball, then I really exaggerate my gestures. So that's why the audience likes it. So it's important that you really move there [on stage]. If you're just lip-syncing, the audience doesn't really appreciate it as much.]

Marvin performs a transgressive gender play in doing a parody of Vilma Santos, a local female celebrity, through reenacting scenes from the movie scenes with exaggerations and the incorporation of random sport activities. His modifications thus invoke fluidity, blending the hyperfeminine and the hypermasculine, making his over-rendition incongruent with the sentiment of the original.

As the preceding sections show, participants possess autonomy in their self-making. The copying of global codes is only a part of their performance, and not commensurate to all other aspects of their pageant performance. Self-making exposes the multi-faceted and dynamic character of the gendered self and its construction as a continuous process. Being so, their significations should not be abstracted or exoticized, as being simply designated as an extension of their self or as vehicles for the imagined "Other." Instead, they must be recognized as active queer agency: in their varied expressions of their queer self, the participants embrace the beings and becomings of bakla, exposing its plurality. They assert their bakla selves against the conventions of bakla itself, along with the hegemonic structures of meaning that attempt to limit it.

Conclusion

Exploring the lived experiences of the participants through the configuration of personal narrative and reflexivity enables the marginalized participants to voice their narratives in affectionate, relational, and authentic meaning-making ways. Their narratives unveil dominant ideologies and move towards opening up the possibilities of reimagining the bakla, thereby complicating existing perceptions of bakla. The participants also fracture the stereotypical coherent conception of identities within the bakla: while some affirm these, others are open to engaging with a fellow effeminate bakla. In some cases, participants also express their identities in a plethora of possibilities: having been previously engaged in heterosexual relationships, some remain open to having a cis female partner in the future. These transgressions, to name only a few, expose the limits of heteronormative relationships and the expectations that burden the bakla when they engage in homosexual relationships.

In Muchakang Pangkalawakan, the contestants' notion of *papangitan,* which embodies their ever-turning tropes, is interlaced with their identity-making and thus transcends regimes of normativity. The participants' staged performances imply a complex identity-making; they embrace their identity as bakla and do not even see their transgressive enactments as subversive. The frameworks of class, ability, and age, among others, facilitate their dynamic subjectivities through active self-authorship—a proactive articulation of fluid identities, highlighting that these matrices are not merely for survival, but are potent parts of identity-making. The appropriation of images, icons, and codes in the participants' parodic renditions underpin this resistance to the homogenizing global gay culture.

The liminal position that bakla participants occupy can be ostracizing if the idealized construction of the bakla remains discursively predominant. Certainly, the normative frames of the bakla restrain us from understanding what lies behind the meaning-making of queer individuals in their everyday lives and campy performances. The varied constructions of bakla, as exemplified by the narratives included here, thereby invite a rethinking of the limits of dichotomous modalities and the rigid component required of gender, such as anatomical sex and desire. The transgressive enactments embody queer sensibilities and raise questions on identity-making that challenge hegemonic views on the bakla. More broadly, the liminality of bakla participants, a manifestation of their tropicality, demonstrates the inadequateness of Western paradigms of queerness. As such, these first-hand narratives contribute to the ethically grounded discursive formation of being bakla.

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Acknowledgements

The article is drawn from my master's thesis. I am immensely grateful to my supervisor, Jose Jowel P. Canuday, DPhil (*Oxon*), and my examiners: Jozon Lorenzana, PhD, Raul Pertierra, PhD, and Fernando Zialcita, PhD. Their expertise greatly guided me through my thesis journey. A rain of gratitude is also given to the participants for generously sharing their authentic life experiences. Our stories are worth knowing and can shed light on understanding gendered experiences. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their incommensurable efforts and expertise. Their feedback has not only improved the paper but also honed my research skills. Lastly, I thank Dr Anita Lundberg, Christian Jil Benitez, members of the editorial team, and the rest of *eTropic* for their kind assistance and support.

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