Capitalist Gimmickry in Selected Postmodern Bikol Fiction*

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Abstract

The Bicol Region contributes to the complex definition of Filipino identity amidst globalization and transnational capitalism. Its literature reveals how capitalism has affected the people, who participate in it as members of the global workforce. Sianne Ngai's Theory of the Gimmick is applied to a postmodern reading of the Bikol short story (*osipon*) "Cinarding" by Jay Salvosa, and of selected flash fiction in the chapbook *#WeHealAswang* by Dennis Gonzaga. Gimmick devices, endemic to late capitalist societies, indicate ambivalence and exploitation. This research shows that the selected postmodern texts are also sites for gimmicks, revealing capitalist mechanisms in a setting outside Ngai's original scope. Unraveled are both the ordinariness and the extraordinariness of life within a capitalist system and all its ploys, as well as the Bikolnon way of interacting with and responding to them.

Keywords: Theory of the Gimmick, Bicol, Bikol, capitalism, flash fiction, *osipon*

The Bicol Region [henceforth, Bicol for the place; Bikol for the people, language, and culture] in the Philippines is distinct, but it contributes to the complex definition of Filipino identity, a contentious concept, especially in the face of persistent waves of globalization and transnational capitalism. Despite having opened its industries to the world economy, Bicol, much like the other regions in the Philippines, has yet to become a model of mature capitalism. However, Bikolnon esthetic forms, particularly literature, reveal the distinct ways in

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which capitalism has affected the lives of people, who, wittingly or unwittingly, participate in it as members of the global workforce.

The region, lying at the southeastern part of Luzon, is composed of six provinces, with main industries as tourism, agriculture, fisheries, and mining (Ateneo Social Science Research Center, 2020). Despite the material challenges of political and environmental issues which hamper its steady economic development, the region conforms to the national movement towards transnational capitalism fueled by globalization. With its industries thrust into the global economy, Bicol contributes to the global accumulation of capital (Robinson, 2008). Its participation in the global market through its industries is further indicated by the presence of transnational commercial establishments such as big malls in its key cities (Robinson, 2008).

Capitalism, with its influence on individual and cumulative experience, even in this small part of the Philippines, is difficult to ignore, since it permeates different dimensions of personal and societal consciousness in the 21st century. Since the time of Marx, capitalism has been morphing in response to the intricacies of socioeconomic activities, which no longer occur only within isolated societies, but have become interconnected through globalization. This phase is described by Robinson (2008), a sociology professor at the University of California, as "a qualitatively new transnational stage in the ongoing evolution of world capitalism" (p. 2).

In the status quo, mature capitalist societies, mostly in the Global North like the United States, are key players in global or transnational capitalism. In this set up, labor and the value systems inherent to capitalism are magnified to a scale never before conceived: Its processes are further complicated by the widening web of relationships and subsidiaries between the global working class and the transnational capitalists, each group being on opposite poles (Robinson, 2008).

Such is the context in which literary critic Sianne Ngai (2020) situates her theorizing on the existence of gimmicks, devices which, she argues, are endemic to and are indicators of ambivalence and exploitation in late capitalist societies, such as those in the Global North, described as "crisis-prone" societies (p.33). Gimmicks arise from doubts and speculations on the aesthetic form of the gimmicky objects. Thus, assessments are made of their value and role in relationships and interactions among different social classes. While Ngai specifies mature capitalist societies as the setting of gimmicks, she mentions, in an online discussion with Tina Post and Kaushik Sunder Rajan (October 06, 2021), that gimmicks also exist in countries or societies which do not necessarily or fully subscribe to late capitalism as their mode of production. She adds that since the global market subsumes different kinds of economies across the world, dynamics in the Global North affect those in the Global South. Also, even as more research is still needed to fully describe how global capitalism reinforces inequality, already, "winners and losers" are expected. Among the losers are those in the "small and medium categories in agriculture, [and] sunset industries and labour-intensive firms" (Guinigundo, 2018, p. 266). The Bicol Region and its enterprises could be at the losing end, if its working classes in the various sectors remain oblivious to their function and position in the global market.

This paper argues that the selected Bikol postmodern texts—Jay Salvosa's "Cinarding" and Dennis Gonzaga's *#WeHealAswang*—are sites for gimmicks which reveal capitalist mechanisms in a setting outside Ngai's original scope. These texts describe and approximate Bikol society's position, in terms of its literary productions, within the global capitalist system. With the postmodern aesthetics-capitalism link established (Jameson, 1991), the researcher then chose these two works for their overt postmodern style which is distinct from that of other contemporary Bikol fiction, and for their urban setting where capitalist gimmicks thrive. The question explored is: How is capitalist gimmickry demonstrated and used by the selected Bikol postmodern literary texts? To address this, specific questions were formulated:

1. What postmodern literary devices, used as gimmicks, expose and obscure the workings of capitalism?
2. How are the devices of gimmickry appropriated in the texts, to the advantage of the subjugated class in a capitalist society?

The analysis relies on Ngai's examples and her implicit procedure for arriving at her conclusion as to the inextricable relationship between aesthetic form and capitalist mechanism. Taking off from Ngai's definition of the gimmick as an instrument of capitalism, this paper argues how gimmicky devices are exploited by the Bikolnons themselves, in their struggle to survive amidst oppressive socioeconomic realities aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Capitalist Gimmickry and Its Manifestations in Postmodern Literary Devices

In its classical iteration, capitalism, according to Marx (1867/1976), has ways of extracting surplus value from workers' labor, in an unequal exchange to earn profit, and thus continually reinforces capital (Harvey, 2013), to the advantage of capitalists. This happens as a masked process, facilitated deliberately or indirectly by social systems set in place with the promises and ideals of capitalism. Marx (1867/1976) lays bare this masked process by revealing the intentions of capitalists who take control of production and lengthen the labor process, so as to earn profit by paying the unknowing worker the same wage they would have obtained for a shorter time. Ngai (2020) also uncovers such a mask by defining the gimmick as an index of "the fundamental contradictions of capitalism: proliferation of labor-saving devices in tandem with intensification of human labor in the immediate production process; increase of labor productivity in tandem with lesser availability of secure work" (p.73). In addition, she describes the gimmick in a series of paradoxes:

it saves labor, but also intensifies it;
it works too hard, but also does too little;
it is outdated, but is also futuristic;
it is dynamic, but is also static;
it is a one-time invention, but is also used almost every time;
it makes capitalism transparent, but also makes it obscure (Ngai, 2020);

Despite this disclosure of a mask, the same capitalist mechanisms continue to control global economy in the 21st century, resulting in further inequality between the small group of transnational capitalists and the majority group of the working class who "face insecurity, weak bargaining power, and a shredded social contract" (Harris, 2016, p. 18). A subgroup of the global workforce is the poor in the labor sector—known as the "precariat," those who "lack a secure work-based identity, always facing temporary job status, and lacking social or work based benefits" (Harris, 2016, p. 24). This group is partly located in the Bicol Region, earlier identified as having been inevitably swept by the tide of globalization, being a region of a country in the Global South.

Why has this masking and unequal condition persisted, despite Marxist critique and evolution through years of active theorizing and praxis? Ngai's articulation of the gimmick is traced back to Marx's (1867/1976) speculation on the "mysterious character of the commodity-form" (p. 164). Such a mysteriousness of the gimmick/commodity-form is at the core of understanding why the veiled workings of capitalism and its exploitation of the working class are perpetuated. In his discussion, Marx (1867/1976) uses the term "fetishism" (p. 164) to characterize the enchantment that commodities have over those to whom they are made accessible.

Ngai (2020), in examining a mix of literary and non-literary texts, provides evidence for this fascination over commodities, the gimmicks themselves. Their existence and ubiquity have convinced other critics of their potency and presumed nature as capitalism's "progenitor and twin" (Koenig, 2020). Although the meticulous and

sporadic style of unraveling the mechanisms and antinomies of gimmicks makes them elusive objects of study, Ngai's consistent and iterative position on the presence of gimmicks does arouse suspicion on all contemporary productions in this age of postmodern thought.

In the fourth chapter of Ngai's book, for example, finance as the ultimate gimmick is explored. Using two texts (the short story "The Bottle Imp," 1819, by Robert Louis Stevenson, and the movie thriller *It Follows*, 2014), she discusses how both works, seen in the context of specific economic turbulences like the Barings crisis in Stevenson's work, and the 2007-2008 subprime debacle in the film (Ngai, 2020, p. 14), are allegories employing financial devices to depict the "financialization of daily life" (Ngai, 2020, 160). She explains how finance becomes part of the perception of labor, value, and time, but also complicates the perception itself. In particular, credit is presented as a curse that is circulated with financial collection deferred—but nevertheless imminent.

Ngai's analysis of literary forms and everyday gadgets to uncover gimmicks hints at the pervasiveness of gimmicks in capitalist society. The ambivalence and contradictions of gimmicks illustrate Marx's (1867/1976) idea of "commodity fetishism" (p.164): All art and utility products are made attractive with their promise of practicality, novelty, ingenuity, and every kind of appeal to curiosity and popular values, needs, and wants. Such attractions lead consumers into conflict when confronting gimmickry (Ngai, 2020): Gimmicks in products parallel the capitalism promise of a better life, especially for the new global middle class (Harris, 2016).

Yet, this gimmickry in products reveals the desperate attempt of capitalism to be relevant and thus sustain both production and the use of labor for profit. Gimmickry also carries with it the failure and deceit of capitalism, which ruthlessly concerns itself with financial capital, more than with the social and economic conditions of laborers. Gimmickry thus indicates the ongoing, intensifying commodification and complicated relationships that it creates between the consumer and the product, the product and the labor process, and the capitalist

and the laborer—all within the context of global capitalism across its diverse environs.

Thus are products of any kind of labor commodified, be they artistic or mundane. Marxist critic Fredric Jameson (1991) underscores the inextricable relation and synchronicity between postmodernist aesthetics and the capitalist preoccupation with commodity production. While the term is difficult to pin down, Jameson (1991) associates postmodernism with the removal of the sharp boundary between high modernist culture and mass commercial culture, which results in the emergence of new text forms. Despite its suggestion of a stage after modernism, the term *postmodernism* establishes the complex concept as a "cultural dominant" (p. 4), instead of as a distinct periodic style to avoid the problematic totalizing tendency of historicity. Jameson positions postmodernism as an indicator of the capitalist processes implied by Ngai (2020).

Postmodern literature is characterized by the use of irony, playfulness, and dark humor (Sharma & Chaudhary, 2011). Also used are intertextuality and self-reflexivity (Nicol, 2009), associated with metafiction and evidenced by the use of parody and pastiche. Temporal distortion which subsumes fragmentation and nonlinear narration is also a notable postmodern literary technique, along with magic realism, technoculture, and hyperreality (Sharma & Chaudhary, 2011). In particular, Jameson (1991) describes the pastiche as a "blank parody" (p. 17) devoid of clear historical references, yet instigating scattered allusions to the past. Pastiche is presented as part again of the experiences in capitalist societies, where there is an "addiction" to "spectacles" (Jameson, 1991, p. 18), and where the use value has been deliberately forgotten in favor of generalizing the exchange value. Similarly, the readers of pastiche are presented with a plot that weaves intertextual elements which are inscribed, but whose meanings are elusive.

Contemporary Bikol writers have also explored postmodernism in their literary experimentation. Bikol literary critic Paz Verdades M. Santos ("personal communication," June 24, 2022) remarks that postmodernism is an observable trend among established writers, despite the long-standing focus of Bikol literature on social realism and folklore. Moreover, she notes that postmodernist elements are increasingly popular among Bikol writers because of the readers' growing interest in speculative fiction and fantasy.

Postmodern Devices as Capitalist Gimmicks: Handyong's Mall Tour

Despite the antinomistic features of the gimmick, a form saturating societies under the global capitalist regime, its ramifications and distinct realizations are expected, when taking into account societies which participate and react to the world political economy. In the two postmodern Bikol prose texts under examination, gimmicks blend with the reimagining of folklore to capture the present desires, preoccupations, and struggles of the Bikol working class and their consumerist culture—also a legacy of American colonization and of capitalist dominance.

According to Bikol scholar Maria Lilia Realubit (2001), the earliest Bikol short stories were focused on folklore. She cites religiosity as part of Bikolnon nature, having pious observance of ancient folk beliefs and rituals. This piety was redirected to Christian worship under the Spanish colonizers. The deference to heroes of old has been infused with the capitalist agenda in "Cinarding," a postmodern short story or *osipon* written in Bikol-Naga. It garnered first prize for the short story category in the 2012 *Premio Tomas Arejola* for Bikol Literature, a prestigious regional award. This incentive for Bikol writers was initiated in 2004 by descendants of Bikol propagandist Tomas Arejola (Santos, 2006).

The title of the *osipon* is derived from the name of the main character in the story, Carding, who witnesses absurd events after his wife Melay eats *hinandyong*, a sweetened rice-based delicacy sold in

Naga along the city streets. The skies grow dark, and from the fissure on the ground emerges a man who introduces himself as *Handyong*, one of the ancient heroes from the Bikol epic *Ibalong*. Handyong then transforms Melay into Oryol, the mythical half-woman, half-serpent enemy-turned-companion of the hero in the Bikol epic. The story follows the tracking by Carding of Handyong and of the former's transformed wife, as all three make their way from Carding's residence in Brgy. Dayangdang to SM City-Naga. Simultaneously, Handyong announces a discount sale.

For its content, "Cinarding" is an example of the pastiche. It alludes to Handyong and Oryol, central mythical figures in the epic *Ibalong,* although the pastiche characters have a weak connection to the original characterization (Felluga, n.d.). Bikol literary scholar Merito Espinas (1996a) provides the Bikol, English, and Spanish versions of the 60-stanza epic with a discussion of the origins of the manuscript. There are also detailed annotations on the central characters (the heroes Baltog, Handyong, and Bantong); the other mythical creatures like Oryol; and the ancient but extant sites in the Bikol region (for example, Libmanan in Camarines Sur and Ligñon Hill in Legazpi City). According to Espinas, the epic originally did not bear a title; he chose *Ibalong* over the other popular title, *Handyong*, so as to encompass the adventures of all three heroes. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that Handyong is the main hero, whose achievements in defeating monsters and in establishing ancient Bikol civilization (its laws and livelihoods like farming and weaving), were better emphasized in the epic, compared to those of the other two.

True to its form as a pastiche, the story resurrects and recreates the Ibalong hero Handyong as a modern-day celebrity. With the protagonist's wife Melay (transformed into ancient enemy-turned-ally, the serpent-woman Oryol), Handyong parades the streets of Naga City to herald the good news: There will be a 30% discount sale at SM, and he will be on a mall tour.

This postmodern short story parodies the commodification of folkloric elements, as well as mirrors the realities in its actual setting. The narration follows the movements of the two folkloric characters, while the main protagonist, Carding, cast to the side and confused, tails along helplessly with his own sidekicks, the seemingly indifferent Mang Boonie and the former's pet dog Bornok. The parade and the festivities around Handyong and Oryol resemble the Feast of Our Lady of Peñafrancia. It is a widely known civic and religious celebration, observed usually every third week of September, with devotees from across the country flocking to Naga City. Prior to the pandemic, the feast had been one of the busiest seasons for businesses in the city, where various marketing strategies were devised to lure potential buyers. The most common strategies were discount sales, which rivaled religious gatherings in their power to assemble crowds, especially when celebrities like popular actors and idols were invited. As the churches, particularly Naga Cathedral and Peñafrancia Basilica, became the foci of religious worship during the fiesta, so did the malls become the center of capitalist devotion.

While malls, globally, are waning in popularity due to the rise of online shopping, the case is the opposite in the Philippines, as malls continue to "provide a mirage of comfort, security, and affluence" (Rico & de Leon, 2017, p. 7). They offer a temporary escape from the dire reality of poverty, while also serving as concrete proofs and symbols of the huge disparity between the rich and the poor, specifically between the capitalists on one hand, and on the other, mere workers and consumers playing interchangeable roles. Malls are sites of contradictions, much like Ngai's gimmicks. But malls are also actual sites of gimmicks and are gimmicks themselves.

In the story, the beginning of the end (Salvosa, 2012, p. 148) happens in the mall. It is the site where the characters converge and the narration reaches its climax: Returning to his senses, Carding decides to take back Melay, but a riot ensues as a result of his attempt. It is also the point at which the story works too hard to get the reader's attention, only to be dissipated by the senselessness of the scenes,

indicative of the story's failure to labor adequately, as well as of the capitalist hype:

> *May mga natamaan. May mga napikon. Nagkaribok na sa mall. Digdi na nagpoon ang katapusan.*
> *—Haen na an thirty percent discount sale?! Kurahaw kan nagkapirang mga tawo. Haen na ta habo ming malugi!*
> *—Ubos na ang generic brief sa may men's section!*
> *—Halabaon an pila sa may cinema 4! Abang mahal pa kan 3D!*
> *—Bilog an kinaban!*
>
> [Some got hurt. Some were provoked. It became chaotic inside the mall. This is where the beginning of the end took place.
> —Where is the 30% discount sale?! shouted some of the people. Where is it? We don't want to miss out on any of the bargains!
> —There are no more generic briefs at the men's section!
> —The queue at cinema 4 is too long! The ticket for 3D is too expensive!
> —The earth is round!]
> (Salvosa, 2012, pp. 148-149)

Fragmentation as a characteristic of the pastiche and of postmodernism in general is shown in the preceding excerpts. Jameson (1991) refers to the disorientation brought about by the deliberate random "spectacles" (p. 18) as a product of the capitalist preoccupation with profit, and not as much with the commodities produced and the labor entailed. In this sense, the labor of Handyong and Oryol/Melay are regarded as the commodities exploited, for they receive no clear gains from the attention they generate. Instead, along with Carding, both eventually end up in jail. Also, the use of these fantastic characters as gimmicks in the story, while initially showing potential in carrying the narrative along their procession, requires more literary work as their expected development at the end of the story builds up. But providentially, the nature of postmodern texts, with their abrupt culmination devoid of enlightenment and moralizing, is a valid excuse for the lack of deeper characterization. Handyong and Oryol, as remnants of an outdated imagination, are likewise used to glimpse at

the possible future of Bikol storytelling. Realubit (2001) remarks that Bikol writers are going back to their heritage to find their impetus for expression—but Bikol culture is steeped in the commodifying influence of the global capitalist market, channeled and reinforced by the craze of the prevailing mall culture that also competes for the Bikolnon's piety. The product of this expression is a "compromised form" that is "gimmick-prone," as Ngai posits (Emre, 2020).

In her discussion of the contradictions of the gimmick, Ngai (2020) points out how gimmicks expose, and at the same time obscure, the workings of capitalism. "Cinarding" captures the frenzy over discount sales and celebrity endorsements—common capitalist strategies, unapologetic and straightforward gimmicks to lure in consumers. The story reveals how the capitalist system promotes itself, attracting both laborers and buyers who make the mall a chaotic marketplace. The same craze over these gimmicks also covers up the intentions of capitalism, which were not given attention in the plot nor by the characters, despite its subtle presence in the story, as though it were an inevitable part of the reality that it pictures.

Each time it intends to reinforce capital, capitalism markets itself in novel and contextualized ways, as in the revival of ancient folkloric characters in the story. As stated, Handyong and Oryol take the spotlight, prompting awe and admiration, unwittingly generating profit for the capitalist system through the fanatical crowd they bring to the mall. This gimmick in the story is a "one-time invention" (Ngai, 2020, p. 72). It is a strategy that has not been used before to attract customers. It is also a gimmick of the author. Such inclusion of folkloric characters for capitalist purposes is rather new to readers. But attracting attention through novelty is a time-tested strategy that has been used countless times (Ngai, 2020).

Appropriating and Exploiting Capitalist Gimmicks: The Aswang's New Gig

In #*WeHealAswang*, the intentional revival and appropriation of the *aswang* as a character and metaphor reflects not only capitalist realities but also the potential use by the labor force of capitalist gimmicks to their advantage. It is a chapbook composed of forty (40) flash fictions written in 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic first hit the Philippines and caused prolonged lockdowns and community quarantines. Some of these were originally Facebook posts of the author, a writer and illustrator who was a former Humanities teacher at the Ateneo de Naga University. These posts gained popularity for their comical appeal and witty wordplay, aside from their brevity. The title is a parody of the government slogan, "We Heal as One" which was part of its campaign against the COVID-19 pandemic. The hashtag and the lack of spacing between the words also allude to the popular format used to write and search for content in social media.

One central element that binds each micro story together, as well as all micro stories in the collection, is the mention or presence of an *aswang* as a character. Regional lores across the country have various references to and descriptions of the *aswang* (Clark, 2016). In Bikol mythology, the supernatural world is divided, based on allegiance either to *Gugurang* (the highest ranking god whom the colonizing Spaniards likened to the Christian God), or to *Aswang* (the god of evil). Espinas (1996b) distinguishes another *aswang* (spelled with a small "a")—described as the human follower of the god *Aswang*—similar to the conception about European witches. In this collection, the *aswang* lives among humans, and also experiences familiar problems and inconveniences arising from imposed restrictions on account of the pandemic. The persona in each story, assumed to be the same one throughout the chapbook, encounters the *aswang* within the ordinariness of life. Although the persona shows signs of fear in some instances, she/he treats the *aswang* as a regular part of the reality of life.

Three short texts from the chapbook are analyzed in this paper. These were selected for their stronger capitalist commentary.

The first one tells of an encounter with a secret online group of *aswangs* on Facebook. From the the person's inquiries, information is extracted on how *aswangs* lure their prey by using the online platform to buy products such as alcohol sanitizers and alcoholic drinks – products high in demand during the pandemic.

The second story is a conversation with an *aswang* who reveals that instead of the usual mystical but expensive oil that *aswangs* apply on their bodies, cheaper alternatives such as crude oil and gasoline are being tried, although the smell and effect on the skin are not pleasant.

The last one is a story about the persona's former classmate who contacts the persona in order to share her discovery of herself as an *aswang,* and her use of the aromatic oil that enabled her to find her husband.

The texts, aside from being examples of flash fiction with magic realist elements, are also samples of the pastiche with the anachronistic inclusion of *aswangs* in the narratives. According to Alex Zukas (2020), Marx himself made use of monster metaphors in his critique of capitalism. Specifically, Marx used the blood-sucking vampire as a metaphor of capital, feeding on human labor for its subsistence (Malone, 2018). Zukas (2020) designed an undergraduate course which centers on the comparison between capitalism and horrifying creatures preying on the working class. The course situates these grotesque characters within the history of capitalism, as it dominated parts of the globe like England, Africa, the United States, and Japan.

Upon initial analysis based on the antinomies of the gimmick, one perceives the *aswang* characters in the stories as dangerous but also harmless. They prey on humans but also fear the *tanod* (barangay police) and the shamans:

> *Sabi kadtong saro, dakol na daa man sainda an nagpupuon nin online presence. Kaipuhan lang daa na sensitibo ka sa demand kan mga tawo. Mas dikit daa an disgrasya pag online ta madali nindang maiiwasan an mga nagraralapag saindang mga tanod, parabulong, asin mga partidaryo kan mga kinakakan nindang tawo.*
>
> [One told me many of them are starting to establish an online presence. You just have to be sensitive to the demands of people. There is little trouble if it's online because they can avoid their pursuers like the barangay police, shamans, and the relatives of the victims they ate.] (Gonzaga, 2021a, p. 1)

Moreover, the *aswang* is powerful but also powerless in the face of the pandemic and the capitalist system. The *aswang* can still shape-shift or divide its upper and lower limbs, but it also needs to devise new strategies for catching prey or buying needed commodities such as the mystical oil for sustaining powers. The *aswang* is noticeable but also negligible. It kills people and is behind disappearances, but it is also a part of the ordinariness of life even during the pandemic. Likewise, the *aswang* can be a small-scale capitalist selling commodities, but also a consumer susceptible to making false estimates of the value of a product. The *aswang* despairs over the limited supply of necessities due to the pandemic:

> *Napag-ulayan mi an inaapod na "new normal." Hinapot ko siya kun ano man para saiya an mga pagbabago na kaipuhan atubangon kan mga aswang. Sabi niya, dai man daa sinda apektado kan virus, alagad apektado sindang marhay sa posibleng epekto kan pandemya sa kinaban kan mga tawo. Nag-abot si urulay mi sa presyo kan krudo asin gasolina. Taga-Bagumbayan Norte kaya daa siya kaya pirmi niyang naaagihan si gasolinahan sa may lugar ninda.*
>
> *May mga aswang daa na nag-pupurbar na gasolina an ilahid sa hawak ninda imbes na lana. Barato na kaya daa na marhay an gasolina asin krudo. Mas barato pa daa sa mga lana na*

> *inoorder ninda sa mga parabarang sa Polangui. Mas kaskas daa asin mas harayo an inaabot ninda sa paglayog, lalo na kun premium an tiglahid ninda. An problema lang daa ta an kadaklan sa mga aswang, sensitibo an balat. Madali tablan nin allergy. Krudo kuta daa, pwede na. Kaya lang, nagbabad ka na daa nin tolong aldaw sa sarong banyera nin baking soda asin sabon panlaba, yaon pa giraray an parong asin kolor na malain.*
>
> [We talked about the so-called "new normal." I asked them what they thought to be changes that *aswangs* needed to deal with. The person said that while they are not affected by the virus itself, they are, like non-*aswangs*, also perturbed by the consequences of the pandemic for humanity. Our discussion led to the price of crude oil and gasoline. This person said they are from Bagumbayan Norte, so they always pass by the gasoline station there.
>
> [There are *aswangs* who apply gasoline or crude oil on their bodies, because it is cheaper than the expensive mystical oil or the one they order from shamans in Polangui. They could even fly faster and farther, especially when they apply the premium ones. The only problem is that most *aswangs* have sensitive skin prone to allergies. Crude oil would be ok but even if you soak yourself for three days in a concoction of baking soda and laundry soap, the odd smell and color linger on.] (Gonzaga, 2021a, p. 6) [translation slightly reworded]

The selected texts show *aswangs* as creatures of need just like other consumers, but at the same time, they are also creatures of profit. They are like small capitalists who take advantage of what the free market offers, since anyone having capital can participate in the system; but they also remain at the mercy of more powerful forces with more money: transnational capitalists, who are always the bigger predators.

The "gig economy" (Harris, 2016, p. 47) has created a new kind of working class—an offshoot of the mobility afforded by terms of contract which are unbound and unlimited by the nation-state and by employer-employee transactions which are facilitated by an internet unmindful of geographic positioning:

Freelancing is the new gimmick.

Necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic that has kept people indoors, freelancing is the indispensable and possibly optimal source of livelihood. While showing what transnational capitalism can offer, the online opportunity, however, reveals the superficiality of its capitalist freelancing mechanism—lacking the nation-state constraints of a taxing bureaucracy and of a fixed employment policy, freelancing conceals its darker implications, which, ironically, are in plain sight: The enchantment of independent labor and self-employment within the global market, run by capitalist giants, does not offer the safety net of job security and labor benefits—hard-won victories in the historical struggles against national capitalism (Harris, 2016).

The uncertainty of the pandemic times and the instability of the global labor market are captured in the *aswang's* amorphous identity and reinscription in the flash fiction narratives. The author (December 03, 2021), in an online international conference on Bikol studies, spoke of how the *aswangs* "reside in the ramblings of the economically displaced laborers," and how the *aswang* as a "narrative frame is inspired by the verbiage of the marginalized. . . who shed the skin of the prey and assume the mantle and temper of a predator." These insights from the author, aside from throwing light on the gimmickry in the use of the *aswang* as a postmodern device, likewise open up its potential departure from Ngai's conception of the gimmick. Ngai (2020) conceives of the gimmick as "capitalism's most successful aesthetic category but also its biggest embarrassment" (p. 2). However, she has not speculated on how the same gimmick could be seized by those on the opposite end of the pole, the subjugated class in the economic struggle. The oversight could have been due to the formidability of the capitalist megastructure in its current state.

Nevertheless, the *aswang*, while indeed a creature of the "gig economy," is a case for this exploration, as it signals a new kind of class resistance. Despite engaging with contemporary society to survive like the humans in the micro stories, *aswangs* persistently assert their roles as small-scale capitalists themselves.

The *aswang* as a gimmick is likewise revived within the flash fiction gimmick, so that it may reclaim its place in Bikol contemporary consciousness, and excite possibilities of transformation within the local political economy. Flash fiction as a medium has similarly regained popularity in the 21st century, because it suits "the generation's fast-paced lifestyle and an increasingly fragmented sense of modern life" (Cultural Center of the Philippines, 2017). Gonzaga (2021b) favors flash fiction as the appropriate medium for fusing traditional narrative techniques with available new media platforms, so as to enhance the stories' accessibility. These complex workings of gimmicks, as literary devices within Bikol prose forms in the postmodern style, demonstrate the ways by which societies under the control of transnational structures attempt to appropriate gimmickry to their advantage, if such be the dominant forms of expression and engagement shaping the complex realities of the 21st century.

Conclusion

The discussions show how postmodern devices and capitalist gimmicks converge in the literary texts. Taken together, "Cinarding" and *#WeHealAswang* are also gimmicks representing the attempt of contemporary Bikol literature to compete for readership in the attention economy of the 21st century. True to the postmodern tradition, both stories reimagine folkloric characters in present day Bikol society, through engagements representing the inner workings of global capitalism, and through reinforcements of local mall culture and the freelance industry. These texts use their own gimmicks to establish relevance amidst the strong influence of mainstream media, which have diverted attention to popular culture productions long departed from the printed form. "Cinarding " labors to introduce a novel kind of storytelling with its non-traditional plot structure and

intertextuality. Yet its efforts may not be enough to gain and sustain readership across generations of Bikol patrons because of the challenges and limitations of publication as well as the dominance of transnational media.

On the other hand, the textual strategies of *#WeHealAswang* (word play, comical tone, cultural allusions, and brevity), along with its initial availability in social media, have gained for the story a wider readership, leading to its eventual sale as a chapbook. The production of this literary work provides insights on the labor and the devices that literary texts must engage in, so as to gain attention in a capitalist-oriented society.

Both texts are gimmicks to the extent that they work for attention-getting and reveal how capitalism influences not only aesthetic judgment but also aesthetic production. But gimmicky labors might be inadequate in competing with other more popular literary productions. Thus, a closer and more critical examination of the machinations of capitalism and its effects on local literary creations is necessary to elucidate the extent of influence, either of capitalism or gimmickry.

In synthesis, postmodern Bikol prose, as represented by these two similar samples, reveals the ubiquity of gimmicks in contemporary Bikol society. Both texts demonstrate how detached allusions to mythical characters can be sites for gimmicks, which exhibit Bikolnon exposure to commodification. On the other end, Bikol literary production within the context of a capitalist-oriented society, must resort to gimmicks, in order to compete for attention. Technology and appeal to the masses are important factors in increasing text value. Ambivalence in judging gimmicks role and value results in the normalization of gimmickry, similar to that of people's acceptance of the reality of the pandemic or of their more personal circumstances.

The value of commodities is obscured by these gimmicks which can be meaningful but also meaningless. Like Handyong, Oryol, or the *aswang*, gimmicks can be old concepts but also ones given new

meanings; and they can be harmful but also harmless. Inevitably, gimmicks are normalized and received with resigned restlessness. However, such an acceptance of gimmicks is not a dead end, as there is a struggle to reimagine and transform them, so that just as old folk beliefs are revived and reinscribed, gimmicks can also serve the purpose of the Bikolnon, inspiring a unique kind of lobbying for rights and space in the new and multidimensional terrain of the global capitalist economy.

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