"Pig's Nest" in an Even Bigger Pen: *Pugad Baboy* as a Case of Subversion and Renegotiation in Philippine Comedy

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses Pol Medina, Jr.'s contemporary comic strip Pugad Baboy *as a case of subversion and renegotiation undergone by Philippine comedy. This paper posits that Medina's innovation by way of the "novelization" of the comic strip, as exemplified here by "Ang Hiwaga ng Dueñas" ("The Dueñas Mystery") from* Pugad Baboy 4*, illustrates and inscribes what can be deemed as comic interpretations of the gaps, distortions, and juxtapositions within Philippine culture. The reading of this contemporary Philippine comic strip leads us to examine abnormality, incongruity, inversions, and hyperreality as manifestations of current Philippine comedy, one that may be socially corrective, or culturally liminal, which now moves towards a depiction of comic postmodernity.*

WHY "PUGAD BABOY"?

To write about a comic strip that appears in a national daily six times a week, together with 12 other strips, 52 weeks a year seems to be an act that makes permanent the fleeting. There seems to be a dual reality hovering over this seemingly innocuous reading fare (or, for some, reading staple). It is true that its daily publication and its very popularity has made it so visible as to render it "tame," seen now as "naturally-occurring" in a mediascape that the average Philippine reader takes on as casually as coffee and *pan de sal* for breakfast. The comics' ephemeral nature is attributable to the fact that its three-to four-panel narrative is one that changes daily, its continuity (and

survival) depending on this quotidian development; hence this very change adumbrates, too, the value of its story line. By the next release of this narrative production, the stories that have been read previously go by the board—they are forgotten; only the characters remain.

The temporariness of comics also rests on the perception that it is "a low brow form of entertainment" (Inge 35), "mass culture . . . that is a *hopelessly commercial culture,* produced for mass consumption, its audience . . . a mass of *non-discriminating* consumers . . . *formulaic* . . . a culture associated with *brain-numbed, and brain-numbing* passivity" (Storey 10; my italics). Because of this, it becomes reasonable that one's attention be caught only fleetingly by comics' presence only as one is actually reading it, and it becomes acceptable that this be conveniently relegated to the background of a million other messages pushed forward by media and by popular culture as soon as contact with it ceases.

It is this "popularity" that makes for the other half of this reality. The fact is that this comic strip is not only a daily strip now. It has, like most of its Western counterparts, spawned the requisite consumer merchandise—t-shirts, mugs, figurines, comic digests—not only making it ubiquitous, but also engraving its presence within the culture that created it. More than the peripheral merchandising which extenuates the representations of *Pugad Baboy*, a more significant gauge of the popularity of the strip is its compilation into book form, which at present is already on its twelfth collection. These compilations signal several implications unto the strip.

First, it obviously marks the success of *Pugad Baboy* as an accessible comic form, now made even more so by the fact that its publication makes it wholly memorable. Strips that had been previously read in the comics page are re-released. Strips that were otherwise missed by the reader, as their presence is dependent on the consumption of another reading matter (the newspaper), are now made available, "virtually" for the first time. This, again, impinges on the innocuous nature of this collectivization. We appreciate the humor in the strip by way of several entries into it. For those for whom it is part of a daily reading fare, the collection is—as I earlier indicated it to be—an exercise in memory, and the *pleasure* of recapturing this memory of the text, in addition to the pleasure of recommencing or recasting the moment of laughter, the moment of the comic. A "strange

impulse" here is that the collection *as merchandise* also depends on the cache of the name/title to evoke the comic, which leads probable readers to purchase each collection, which for many become their introduction to this text. Even if initially serialized, the collection of strips into book form (now divided into chapters) influence, too, the narrativization of the form. What were once viewed as individual strips, complete in themselves as a daily text, have now become part of a larger plot, its daily encapsulation glossed over.

It is against this backdrop that I am reckoning with the creation of comedy in the Philippines, and comedy that is Filipino, as presented by this strip. I am taking a chapter from *Pugad Baboy 4* (1993), "Ang Hiwaga ng Dueñas" ("The Dueñas Mystery"), which is the highlight of this collection. The decision to work on this particular chapter springs from the fact that the popularity—and the novelty—of this contemporary comic strip owes a lot to the author/artist's adoption of innovative story-telling techniques, such as this "novelization," which, while sustaining reader interest over a period of time, not normally employed by other Philippine strips that may deal with similar domestic settings, succeeds too in its sustenance of the joke encoded in the daily strips. Another reason for the choice of this text is Pol Medina's own citation of this story as his best, in a list he compiled for *Pugad Baboy X*, in celebration of the tenth year of *Pugad Baboy*'s publication (45). The phenomenal rise in the popularity of Medina's strip over the past twelve years could be traced to the comic devices he employs in it, which ranges from low humor to the employment of wit and satire.

The concern of this paper is to take note of the interstices of the creation of comic strip comedy in the Philippines, as well as the nature of the comedy inscribed in it, in which Medina's work is seen not only as a contemporary example but is considered to be one whose narrativization offers new and compelling insights into the aspects of comedy that is Filipino. The question may well be "What makes this comedy Filipino?" or, "Is it truly Filipino?" More significantly, although the examination of *Pugad Baboy* as contemporary comedy is relevant, so too is the interpretation of its gaps, distortions, anticipations, and juxtapositions that invest it with its comic value, as much as these clarify the value of this discourse as "specific point-of-impact text in the form of a social practice or media message through which the culture expresses itself and from which we create interpretations" (Real 21).

THE PIG'S NEST

Pugad Baboy by Pol Medina, Jr. is a daily comic strip that has appeared in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* since 1988. Larry Alcala, a veteran Philippine cartoonist, says: "Pol belongs to a new breed of cartoonists but whose meteoric rise to popularity has to be matched. This can be attributed to his distinctive style of drawing and down-to-earth *Filipino* humor, with a dash of sophistication"(*PB 4*). We note here, certainly, the presence of other cartoon strips that have made an impact on the cultural landscape of the Filipinos—continuing strips which center on personalities, such as Alcala's own *Asiong Aksaya*, *Siopawman*, or *Kalabog* (which later became *Kalabog en Bosyo*); Tony Velasquez's *Ponyang Halobaybay*, *Nanong Pandak*, or the better-known *Mga Kabalbalan ni Kenkoy* (*The Antics of Kenkoy*), his classic portraiture of the sporting, English-"spokening" Filipino; Roni Santiago's comic depiction of office relations in *Baltic and Co.*, or Nonoy Marcelo's satirical take on Marcos-era politics in *Tisoy* and later in *Ikabod Bubuwit* were also landmark works. However, earlier strips that focused on family and community life in the Philippines, as Medina's *Pugad Baboy* does, based its humor mainly on illustrations of comic grimaces and facial distortions that accompanied depictions of physical or verbal putdowns, or were responses to situational chiding and chivvying in a domestic setting, as seen in Mars Ravelo's *Buhay Pilipino* and later in his *Gorio at Tekla* and *Rita* (later known as *Rita Okay* and *Rita Rits*). (See Roxas and Arevalo.)

In *Pugad Baboy 4*, Jess Abrera, editorial cartoonist of the *Inquirer*, who is credited with the acceptance of Medina's work in the *Inquirer*, refers to Medina's humor as "fresh." In the second collection (actually the first, entitled *The Best of Pugad Baboy*), Abrera had already elaborated on the quality of this "freshness": "we enjoy *Pugad Baboy* because we recognize in its characters, if not ourselves, then our siblings, neighbors, friends, offspring, and—*patay kang baboy ka*—our politicians. In *Pugad Baboy,* the irritating, the vexing, the horrifying among the people we know encounter each other, and their meeting is always hilarious" (Medina 3; my translation). Indeed, what Alcala and Abrera are citing is Medina's unflinchingly direct assault on Filipino quirks and faults, the hilarity of his observations and depictions often masking the incongruous and the almost surreal aspects of Filipino traditions, relationships, politics, or culture. In stretching his story-telling technique to include long-running comic

"novels" based on complex plots and subplots, he gives us a medium that is able to sustain these characterizations beyond the constraint of the three to four panel strip. Again, Medina is by no means the first to explore or comically depict these aspects of the Filipino psyche. Indeed, Soledad Reyes in her essay on Philippine *komiks* cited how the "foibles of the age, its fashion and lifestyle, and the inevitable clash between tradition and modernity" were exhibited by earlier *komiks* writers in their works (48). However, she too assents to the fact that these early *komiks* were a "purveyor of *halakhak,* or raucous laughter and down-to-earth humor" (48). Daisy Cukingnan and Agnes Go in their essay entitled "*Komiks: Isang Pagsusuri*" cited Bandenada's (1955) attempt to classify Filipino *komiks*, stating that these fall under two categories: the first, which possesses plot, and the second, which aims merely to evoke laughter (125; my translation). It is this second point that was expanded by Florendo when he asserts the following:

> *Mababa ang lebel ng pagpapatawa ng mga Pilipino komiks. Hindi na tayo kailangang mag-isip pa upang makuha ang katatawanan* [sic] *ibig ipahayag ng sumulat, hindi tayo nahihikayat gamitin ang ating natatagong kaalaman . . . dahil dito sa atin nadapa ka na ay pagtatawanan ka pa* . . . (qtd. in Cukingnan and Go 125)
>
> (There is a low level of comedy in Philippine *komiks*. We are not required to think to get the humor intended by the writer, [and so] we are not moved to use our latent knowledge . . . for here, even falling flat on one's face is an occasion for laughter.)

And this is where I believe Medina's strip moves away from simple depictions of universalized comic situations, marked by the low humor of pratfalls. While he does not shun the use of this, his consistent chronicle of the daily life of the Philippine middle/lower middle class and the juxtapositions he creates vis-à-vis certain facets of existing microcultures, for example, make *Pugad Baboy* not only readable but cutting-edge relevant. Where the earlier comics writers (whether in newspapers or in magazines) were seen to retain this level of low humor in the comedy they created because of their fear that the ordinary reader would not comprehend anything more complex (Cukingnan and Go 125), Medina in *Pugad Baboy* is able to address wide-ranging cultural issues precisely because he assumes in his readers a more than cursory knowledge of science, popular culture, local and international politics, economics,

language, or current events. Such knowledge is appended too to the medium whereby we have access to his texts or to the socioeconomic imperatives of the production of this text.

"Pugad Baboy" refers to a fictional urban middle class subdivision whose inhabitants are, for the most part, fat people; hence the reference to *baboy* (pig). Even their names bear references to "piggishness" or to girth—the Sungcal family (*sungkal*: a Filipino word meaning "to root around," to use one's snout to look for food in the mud, as pigs do): Mang Dagul (Adagulfo), his wife Cecilia (Sweet Ham), their children Kules (for Hercules), Tiny, and Utoy, and lest we forget, their "talking" dog Polgas, later known as Wisedog/Dobermaxx/Robin Hound/Aqua Pol, his hidden personas, around whom Medina chose to develop several others of his "novelizations." Their household help, Brosia, is the only regular character who is skinny in this strip, her role being that of the comic antithesis, the provider of that particular form of Filipino humor called *"asar,"* which may be seen as a form of truly personalistic comedy, which indeed Brosia provides in these strips, her quips and one-liners often focusing on the emphasis on the Sungcals' size and weight or on puncturing Bab's ego by harping on his indolence and lack of looks. Their neighbors/friends are colorfully named: Sgt. Sabaybunot (Quick Draw), a soldier, his wife Barbie, and their son Paltik (meaning a small, inferiorly made gun); Ka Noli, an urban NPA guerilla, and his son Joma; Bab, who is the resident laggard and who is aptly surnamed Lamon (Tagalog word meaning to snarf, to wolf food down). They even have the token mechanic Joboy, the Chinese storekeeper Mao (as in Mauricio Tang) who has a gay son named Pao (for Paulino), and the corrupt Senator Cabalfin, whose overblown wife insists on being called "Madame."

Reading the chapter "Ang Hiwaga ng Dueñas" is to enter a reassembly of 52 strips (nearly nine weeks of daily publication), which now appear as a comic narrative. "Jokes are a form of narrative," J. Hillis Miller avers, and "narratives are a relatively safe or innocuous place in which the reigning assumptions of a given culture can be criticized (66, 69). Admittedly, the valuation we assign here is not on the narrative itself, which remains pretty simple, and is at most a contrivance of subplots. Narrative here is at the service of comedy, and beyond the funny, our attempt too is to focus on the "criticism of culture" that Hillis Miller advances.

In these strips, we find the *Pugad Baboy* characters on a vacation trip to Dueñas. They stay with Mang Danilo, a faith healer whom we learn cured Bab of his dependence on marijuana. While in Dueñas, the characters meet with rural adventures, mostly related to the presence of supernatural beings. They get into a tussle with these beings, culminating in Pao's abduction and his rescue by the whole Pugad Baboy who vanquish the monsters. They find out that Mang Danilo, far from being a genial host, is the culprit, and he is punished accordingly. The chapter ends with their return to their "normal" life in Manila.

A rough categorization of the strips according to topics may aid in cross-referencing our discussion of its humor later on. These are certainly not strict categories in that there are strips which may be appropriately slotted under one or more classifications; in the same manner, there are strips whose topics are not as clearly marked or stated, and which largely function to continue the narrative or to link the strip to the next narrative installment. In our delineation of these topics, we are presenting, too, topics about or against which the comedy in this text revolves or is created. This classification is mainly a thematic one, but such themes are considered in terms of discussions of aspects of abnormality and incongruity as major comic devices in this specific text and in Medina's daily comic strips. They are contextualized within the realm of the communal. The utilization of the supernatural in the story is more than just a narrative ploy; the juxtaposition of tradition and technology, of urban/rural, metropolis/country dichotomies is a dizzying underpinning of the textual and contextual hyperreality found in the strip, a condition that is evident in Medina's narrative as it is a precluded assumption of his work.

Topics	**Strip Number References**
Abnormality	
Odor, appearance, etc.	2, 5, 16, 29, 33
Drug dependency	3
Sexuality	23, 44, 29, 43
Incongruity	
Word Play	11, 12, 34, 44-7, 49
Slapstick	9, 26, 44
Politics	1, 4, 6, 10, 31, 47
Economics/Finances	7, 22, 23, 24

Religion	32, 42
Urban/Rural disparity	8, 11, 39, 40
Unexpectedness/Inversions	12, 21, 29, 34, 35, 48, 50
Conflict	41, 42, 50
Hyperreality	13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19, 25, 36, 41, 52
Social Practices	28, 42, 30
Supernatural vs. Real	13, 14, 17, 18, 19, 20, 26, 27, 36, 37

We have, so far, made a case for the narrative of the comic strip. M. Thomas Inge avers that we should not forget that "the story is told or the daily joke made through the balance of narrative text and *visual action* with a proper aesthetic balance between the two, that is, *both the picture and the words* are essential to a full understanding of the meaning" (35). This dual nature of comics certainly furthers the humor of the text, but in this case, we, for the most part, specifically refer to the dialogue and depend on the narrative as keys to a sedimented discourse that is Philippine culture, as it also becomes explanatory of the "ambiguous" comedy that we find difficult to categorize. Our dependence on the strip's illustrations is limited to a characterization of these as adjuncts to the comic implications of the workings of the dialogue or the narrative and should not be seen as an evaluation of the merit of these as "art." Arthur Asa Berger commented on this same predicament of relegating popular culture forms to mere "documents" that are scrutinized for their social or political content with no view to their aesthetic form or conventions. But while emphasizing this, neither did he resort to a commentary on the aesthetics of drawing; instead, he construes "artistic dimension" as an amalgam of "graphic elements, use of language, and narrative structure" (155).

We should not construe this, conversely, to be an absence of the text vis-à-vis the presence of the image.

> [I]mages rarely appear without the accompaniment of a linguistic text of one kind or another . . . the text loads the image, burdening it with culture, a moral, an imagination . . .. The connotations is now experienced only as the natural resonance of the fundamental denotation constituted by the photographic analogy and we are thus confronted with a typical process of naturalization of the culture. (Roland Barthes qtd. in Storey 82)

Indeed, what we are looking for in *Pugad Baboy* are resonances of Philippine culture, or what seem to be Filipino, as revealed by comedy, embedded in the language and the narrative of the comic strip, illuminated by its image.

THE HUMOR OF THE COMMUNAL

Perhaps another way to support the study of specific comic texts such as Medina's *Pugad Baboy* is to start with what Michael Real asserts in *Culture, Media and Identity*, that the "popular" is now as seriously studied in the same manner that high culture was analyzed previously. Quoting David Rowe, he defines popular culture as "an ensemble of pleasurable forms, meanings, and practices, whose constituents are neither static nor unambiguous, and which cannot be insulated from the social processes and structures in which they are imbedded" (31). Discovering these junctures at which these "processes and structures" work, or influence the text is tricky.

> [T]raditional ways of studying high culture give high value to the concept of "distance". One dimension of this is the critical distance between text and reader which is claimed to be essential if the critic is to analyze the text objectively. To be objective, critical readers have to distance themselves from their specific social identities and become ideal, or universal readers. In the analysis of popular culture, this approach works well in *uncovering the ideological norms embedded in the text*, and in identifying its unrealized potentials, but it *needs complementing by "insider" readings that are not distanced,* but that *trace the intimacy between a reading and the social conditions* in which it is performed. (Fiske 333; my italics)

It is this balancing act between distance and intimacy that we preserve when we try to analyze any text, but I think much more so when we interpret the processes and provenances of comedy, for as Henri Bergson puts it "the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly human" (62), and it is this that makes it possible for us to penetrate, and indeed, appreciate, the vagaries of humor. The "human" here is obviously referent not only to the species but to the agglomeration of practices and institutions, relations, concepts, and forms that we deem part of our culture, as the tendencies of comedy

already refer to its social matrices. A criticism of contemporary popular texts like *Pugad Baboy*, hitherto read only as "low brow" and expendable fare, tries to "rescue" these texts from such ephemeral and inferior status, and attempts to recontextualize these as revelatory of aspects of comedy that is Filipino by way of a comprehension, too, of the logic (or, in this case, the illogic) of the comic world laid down by the writer/artist.

The intimacy that John Fiske refers to in this definition of high and low culture we parallel to Raymond Williams' concept of "structure of feeling."

> . . . refer[ring] to what it feels like to be a member of a particular culture, or to live in a particular society at a particular time . . . it stretches seamlessly from the realm of the spirit to that of the social order . . . encompass[ing] the formal political processes and institutions of a society as well as its more informal ones . . . includ[ing] the arts and cultural industries . . . , and at the microlevel, the ordinary ways of talking, thinking, doing, and believing . . .. (Fiske 8-9; my italics)

The Filipino reader of Medina's strip is able to stand both as the object of this comic jesting as s/he engages in the same kind of humor, or as the observer/judge of the efficacy of this comic rendering because s/he is assumed to be *that* member that Williams delineates, one who comprehends, and enters, the same social/cultural/political/personal dynamics within a marked geography, one that is made mythical by Medina, both in Pugad Baboy, and now in Dueñas, as imaginative and "imaged" topography that both thrives in , and belies, Philippine society.

At the same time, Bergson also states that "to produce the whole of its effect, the comic demands something like a momentary anaesthesia of the heart. Its appeal is to intelligence, pure and simple" (64), hence anchoring "distance" on what earlier on, Freud had asserted in his *Jokes and the Unconscious*:

> the need to see combined into an organic whole . . . [the] criteria and characteristics of jokes [to] activity, relation, to the *content of our thoughts*, the characteristic of playful judgement [sic], the coupling of dissimilar things, contrasting ideas, 'sense in nonsense', the succession of bewilderment and enlightenment, the bringing forward of what is hidden, and the peculiar brevity of wit . . .. (14)

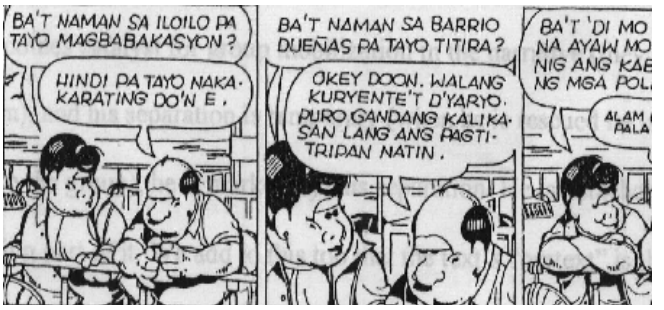
Freud here laid down the very aspects of the comic that we ought to track in this strip as comic text, and given these virtually paradoxical paradigms, we evaluate the comic functions of *Pugad Baboy* first in terms of what I see as its communal nature. The title itself refers to the collective and is already humorous. The *"pugad"* (nest) is composed not only of characters who interact by way of their role within the narrative; these are no casual participants—they are linked by their familial, personal, and communal bonds, which operate not only on the level of the emotional but work by way of enforcing and reinforcing the norms and concerns that "give and get clues and hints about their group membership, attitudes, and background knowledge. Much of this exchange of social data occurs through talk: not just what they say, but how they say it" (Norrick 17). The volley of exchanges depends upon assumed knowledge of their meanings within the Pugad Baboy community among the *Pugad Baboy* characters, but the exchanges include us, the readers, too. "Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo, no matter how spontaneous it seems, laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary . . . our laughter is always the laughter of the group" (Bergson 64).

We note that the characters themselves are *not* laughing when they engage in conversation; the conversation itself is not the joke. It is when we the readers read the exchange within the context of a multiple world—our world, the *Pugad Baboy* world, and global culture—do we "get the joke." The suspension at the end of a strip is the unseen panel reserved for the observer/reader's laughter. This is our complicity in the humor of the strip. We laugh because we ourselves are part of the *pugad*; we are ourselves inhabitants of the "nest."

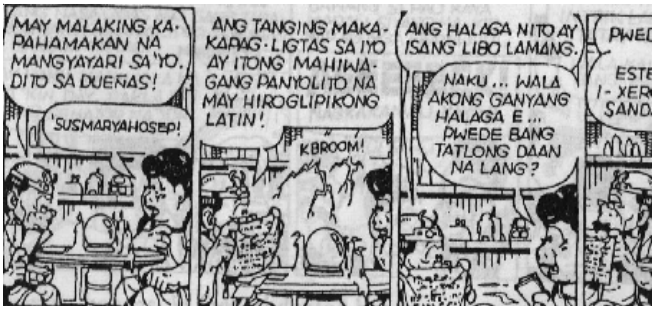
This brings us, therefore, to the problem of identity within the "group membership." Who are the *"baboys"* (pigs/piglets/swine) of the Pugad? They are basically urban, middle class, educated, working people—Dagul Sungcal is a hotel chef who has a son working as a draftsman in Saudi Arabia (Kules), a daughter in college (Tiny), and a "techie"-genius son (Utoy); Sabaybunot is an army soldier; the Tangs (Mao and Pao) are merchants; Senator Cabalfin is a legislator who really does nothing but play with toys, literally, and wait for "kickbacks." There are other characters we recognize as part of this middle/lower-middle class: the spinster/elementary teacher

(Miss Nobatos), the corrupt policeman (Patrolman Durugas), and the ignorant doctor (Doc Sebo); and those who almost defy the boundaries of this class, the "unemployable" Bab and the NPA soldier Ka Noli. These characters subscribe to general Filipino beliefs and customs as seen, for example, in their knowledge of the supernatural folk belief in this chapter, and to institutionalized beliefs (vide the function of Catholicism and Catholic beliefs in the resolution of this narrative's conflict, however perverted/subverted). The *Pugad Baboy* characters are held by the ideology of the Philippine middle class, and what they consciously or unconsciously articulate are the concerns of this class: that they are helpless/apathetic politically, hence this group's "retreat" to Duenas, presumably for a vacation, (see strip 1)

Strip 1



Strips 7 and 8



that they are not economically empowered (see strips 7 and 8), that their "virtue" or strength is in the "goodness" they uphold by way of *community* and their *subscription to communal beliefs.* Here we see the manifestations of the Filipino middle class ideology. Politically and economically mobile, the consciousness of belonging, seen either

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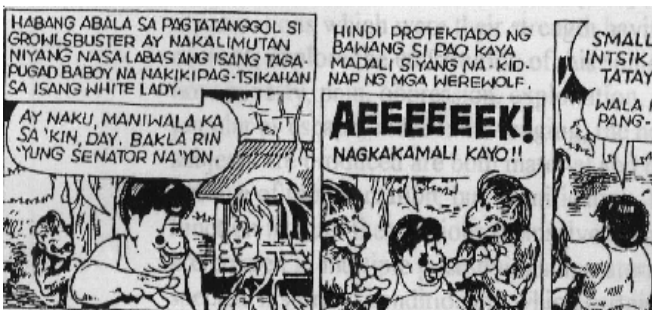
as camaraderie or conformity, is set as a premium here. To deviate from this belonging is to merit punishment, which is what happens to Mang Danilo, who turns out to be Devlino, the leader of the *aswangs*, and the minion of "Lady Lucy" [Lucifer/the devil]. He is punished twice and physically, too: first by Wisedog (Polgas, the Sungcals' pet dog), now assuming superheroic qualities, (a parody of the agent/hero of a now-defunct American TV series *Wiseguy*), and by his master (mistress?) and turned into a poisonous mushroom later on (see 41 and 46). It is noteworthy, too, that it is Pao, among the Pugad Baboy gang, who gets abducted by the werewolves in this narrative's complication. I think Pao becomes expendable here not only because it is guaranteed more laughs but because he himself is considered deviant. Because he is gay, his separation from the group is made justifiable, albeit presented as comic, and though he becomes catalyst for group mobilization in the narrative (they all pull together to save him), and his separation is temporary (when he is rescued he is once more "reabsorbed" into the group), he is marked by this separation. He is detached from the group while still being part of it. We add to this too that the text's "pretext" is that he is *Chinese*; he makes a case for his own abduction by making himself equal to a ransom, but the racist connotations of this are all too clearly comprehensible (see strip 22).

Strip 22



However, he was, in fact, abducted because he was thought to be a *pregnant* woman, fit for the *aswang*'s version of human "La Paz *batchoy*"! The implications here are multifarious: the operating ideology becomes darker by the frame—it is homophobic, racist, anti-women, and anti-fat, all at the same time. The humor that surfaces, and that we appreciate here, echoes too the definitions Raymond Williams gives to the term *masses:*

> Yet, masses was a new word for mob, and the traditional characteristics of the mob were retained in its significance: *gullibility*, *fickleness*, *herd-prejudice*, *lowness of taste and habit*. . . it is necessary to ask again: who are the masses? In practice, in our society, and in this context, they can hardly be other than the working people . . .. But if this is so, it is clear that what is in question is not only gullibility, fickleness, or lowness of taste and habit [but] as from the open record, *the declared intention of the working people to alter society*, in many of its aspects, in ways by which those to whom the franchise was formerly restricted deeply disapprove . . .. (191; my italics)

The humor that the text uses overtly presents ridiculous situations that "emphasize the *incongruity* of . . . life as a paradox—the simultaneous existence of a mutually contradictory *fundamental* truth" (Collins 6). However, the "fundamental truth" to which we desire to subscribe, we usually deem innocuous, but is just as ambiguous. What emerge here, as in reality, are the "metanarrative/[s] that describe and define away the *respectable* . . . working class"(Walkerdine 111; my italics). If Bergson can speak of "social signification" in laughter, Valerie Walkerdine furthers this sense of the "social" in terms of the following:

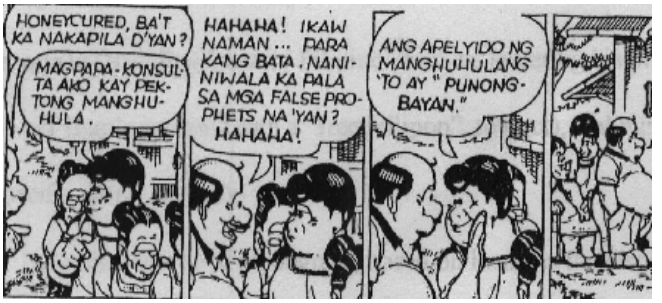
> imaginary communities created . . . the [real] communities and organizations which were their strength having been crushed . . . we can [not] explore the constitution of this subjectivity without examining how poverty, pain, oppression, exploitation, are made to signify. The popular as escape, indeed: the longing, the hope . . .. The practices in which subjects are produced are both material and discursive, but the relation is not one of representation, but signification. Indeed, if fictions can function in truth then fictions themselves can have real effects. Subjects are created in multiple positionings in material and discursive practices, in specific historical conditions in which certain apparatuses of social regulation become techniques of self-production. (111)

Pugad Baboy, being this imaginary community, subverts the framing of Philippine realities by way of its humor, which becomes the medium by which we are able to examine the "poverty, pain, oppression, exploitation" that Walkerdine cites as primary characteristics of the real, parallel society ascribed to by this comic strip. We laugh at and with this community because our interests

and identities are also inscribed within it. The variables of age affinity, racial grouping, gender identity, class lines (cf. Real 31) are at one and the same time expressed and abrogated within the matrix of this community, where "community refers to the entirely informal network constituted by fellow feeling, and joking is especially apt to express this since it both mirrors the subversion of established patterns and is based on pleasure . . . attack[ing] classification and hierarchy" (Palmer 17). This attack, though, does not necessarily end in the change in hierarchy or authority; at least, this is not what we see in *Pugad Baboy*. In this specific chapter, there is a created hierarchy, the "class structure" within the supernaturals' enclave, where there are minions under Devlino's leadership. We find funny the discovery of Devlino/ Danilo's plot and its overthrow by the "good" Pugad Baboy visitors. The truth, though, is that the hierarchy to which the visitors belong remains unchanged. A further source of the comic here is that the Pugad Baboy "heroes" are no heroes they are really just middle class urban vacationers who, by happenstance, were embroiled in this conflict. We see here too that the comic insults, the gross incongruities and manipulations of one character of another, of the author of his material, of the text over us, in one sense reclaims for the Pugad Baboy folks a sense of power and control that they do not have in their normal milieu.

Our Pugad Baboy inhabitants are rendered even more comic because of the supplantation of their locale from Pugad Baboy in the city to Dueñas in the country, from familiarity to strangeness (and how!), from presence to anonymity. This is perhaps why they needed to be embroiled in an adventure in this provincial setting. What is apparent here is the underscore of their "middle-class-ness." They are ridiculously comic because the source of comedy is real incongruity, "variations from the norm . . . and changes in normalcy"(Collins 7). These are actually deviations and perversions that we run into in reading the text, faced with juxtapositions of the normal—*Pugad Baboy* characters and their inherent characteristics—and their transport of these characteristics to an unknown milieu, in which they do not really belong. Nevertheless, the humor that is created arises from bringing their own milieu, and its subjectivities, and their concerns in it, to this new locale. They are urbanites aware of what the small town has to offer but, now and again, run into situations where they bring their urban culture to this rural context, with unexpected results. Strip 6 is a great example of this.

Strip 6



Pektong Manghuhula (fortuneteller) is dismissed by Mang Dagul as a fake as Sweet Ham, his wife, queues to avail of his service. Dagul's disbelief likely stems from the commonly held belief that there *are* fortunetellers who are either impostors or who may genuinely be gifted but choose to use these gifts as money-making schemes. However, take note of what Sweet Ham whispers: "His surname is *Punongbayan,*" and in the last frame, we find Dagul in line even before Sweet Ham. This joke would fall flat unless one knows that "Punongbayan" refers to the respected volcanologist whose honesty and directness as head of the Philippine Institute of Volcanology restored confidence and authority in government at the height of the Pinatubo eruption in 1991. Yet this strip, in assuming the readers' knowledge of these complex facts and relations, is able to do so because it assumes, too, the urbanization of our knowledge, as this rests on our access to media channels, in the same manner that in presenting Dagul to be as "gullible" as Sweet Ham, makes him doubly so: first, in believing the hype (true or otherwise) about Punongbayan, and, secondly, in transposing this belief, simplistically, on to Pektong Manghuhula. An even more ludicrous aspect of this comes in strips 7 and 8: the unsaid accusations about the fakery of fortunetellers, which we earlier delineated, turn out to be true! Pektong Manghuhula is as inclined to business as we had earlier assumed, so much so that he resorts to "haggling," a very Filipino practice:

> Dagul: *"Magkano ba ang magpahula sa 'yo?"* ("How much to have my fortune told?")
> Pekto: "Eight hundred *lang*." ("Only 800 bucks.")
> Dagul: "Eight hundred pesos?! . . . *Ang mahal naman*! ("800 pesos? . . . That's so expensive!")
> Pekto: *"Mahal na rin ang baterya ng* crystal ball *ko e."* ("Well, my crystal ball's batteries are expensive too.") (my translation)

In the strip, we see Dagul stand up and prepare to leave, obviously dismayed and unconvinced by such exorbitant rates set by Pekto. The third panel sets up the punchline of this joke, with Pekto amending his offer: *"Hinde . . . sige 400 na lang . . . 200 . . . 100?"* as Dagul walks away. In the last panel, Pekto catches up with Dagul and stops him from leaving by holding on to Dagul's leg, fawningly stating his final come-on: *"Singkuwenta pesos na lang. May libre pang lollipop."* Lowering his price to get Dagul's and Sweet Ham's custom (with a "free lollipop" to boot) makes mockery the staple of these specific strips' comedy. The visual aspect of the strip is not lost on us either. Pekto's status as a possible fake healer/fortuneteller is emphasized by his weird toga-like costume, "accessorized" with a tiara and a pendant, perhaps to make him appear the possessor of magical powers. His actions, however, belie such "mysticism" and actually revert him to the status no better than a snake-oil peddler.

Another source of incongruity based on locale is the disparity between the urban and the rural, and this is where we find humor "aris[ing] in discrepant relationship between the two parts of perception" (Palmer 95). The Schopenhauerian definition of *incongruity* is also applicable here:

> the mismatch between a concept and some empirical entity in the world: concepts are necessarily universalizing, in the sense that a concept groups together all the empirical instances that fall under it in the world . . . when some empirical entity in the world fails to behave according to the expectations set up by the relevant concept, incongruity occurs. (95)

The rural here is itself a paradigm, which carries its connotations of backwardness by virtue of *absence*: what is *not in* the city and what is *not the* city. However, what is incongruous is either the play between the unexpected presence of objects/ideas in it or the failure of the paradigm to behave in the expected manner. Again, good examples to cite here are strips 8 and 11. In strip 8, the last thing we would expect to find in a rural medicine man's hut is a photocopying machine, much less to have it used to make reproductions of an amulet, again playing with the "haggling" theme so familiar in a Philippine wet market setting, now applied to the "business" of the mystical. Pekto plays on Sweet Ham's gullibility by "predicting" a misfortune that would happen to her in Dueñas, only to be able to

ply his bogus wares: *"Ang tanging makapagliligtas sa iyo ay itong mahiwagang panyolito na may hiroglipikong Latin!"* ("The only thing that could save you is this magical handkerchief with Latin hieroglyphs!") (my translation), this pronouncement accompanied by an illustration of lightning sizzling in the background, an obvious parody of the formula of third-rate horror movies. Pekto quotes a price of a thousand pesos for such an amulet, but Sweet Ham pleads that she has only three hundred pesos. Pekto agrees to this, but we find that Sweet Ham's money can buy only a *photocopy* of the "magic handkerchief." An even bigger comic milieu here is Pekto's fortune-telling run as though it were a legitimate "corporate" concern, complete with an "office assistant" ("Gorya, *I-xerox mo nga sandali ito*." ["Gorya, will you come and have this "xeroxed"?]).

Strip 11's humor is by way of word play mainly, but is an interesting set-up to this: Dagul and his dog Polgas are having a drink in a Dueñas bar, and Dagul orders a "77" (Seagrams'7 with 7-up [ginger ale]). Polgas is naturally surprised: *"Meron pala sila dito niyan?"* And Dagul explicitly says that "just because it's a small town is no reason for them not to know what a 77 is" (my translation). Once served, Dagul spits out the concoction, having been served the Filipino herbal tea *pito-pito* (7-7).

I think the question here is not so much why these are comic but why we should assume such disparity in the first place. So they have a xerox machine, *why shouldn't they?* Why should Polgas be "naturally" surprised at finding an imported liquor brand being served in the province or that rural folk know what this drink is? We laugh because we, as Filipino readers, share as much of this contradictory expectation. By laughing at the humor presented here, we articulate in much the same way our agreement with the manner by which this "microuniverse" is imaged, agreeing to consign the rural to a permanent condition of lack.

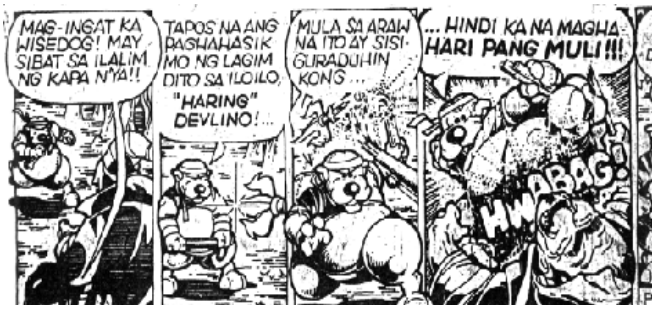
Perhaps we should note here that a very significant aspect of the presentation of these incongruities is based on the use (or misuse) of language by Medina. We have previously encountered an aspect of this language use in the very names given to the characters who inhabit Pugad Baboy, appellations which hint at clearly descriptive attributes they possess, primarily hinting at size and weight, setting these characters' comic aspects (e.g., Dagul, Sweet Ham, Kules, Bab), or clueing us in on the work they do (Sabaybunot, Patrolman Durugas,

or Doc Sebo), while others are rendered humorous because these are names that rely on a knowledge of Philippine realities (e.g., Ka Noli: the title a usual form of respect and "Noli" hinting at the title of Rizal's novel, *Noli Me Tangere*; or Joma, Noli's son, obviously a takeoff on the Communist Party of the Philippines' leader Joma Sison). There are names, too, that figure in the ordinary life of the Filipino, however stereotypically: Joboy, or Mao and Pao. Also, wit is seen in the exchanges that mark the way Pugad Baboy folk deal with each other, characteristic too of the way Filipinos forge humorous situations: that is, the rendering of *every* situation as a comic one by way of deflating the seriousness of an episode by adding a quip or a rejoinder that moves the situation away from its pathetic possibilities and highlighting the incongruous or the ridiculous in the scene. In strip 3, for instance, we find Mang Danilo, the faith healer, explaining to the Pugad Baboy group that he knew Bab as a hippie teenager whom he cured of his LSD and marijuana addiction. Tiny, Dagul's daughter, asks him when this happened. Mang Danilo replies—"*Noong* late sixties . . . *panahon ng* Woodst . . . umf!"—but is unable to finish his statement as Bab claps his hand over Mang Danilo's mouth. Tiny, Pao, and even Polgas, however, do not allow the occasion to rib Bab to pass and, instead of focusing on the revelation of Bab's former addiction, concentrate on the humor of Bab's age:

> Tiny: "Bab! Teenager *ka na pala noongpanahon ng* 'Woodstock'?"
> Polgas: "*Woooow. Pehips.*"
> Pao (with accompanying swoon and peace sign with his fingers): "Peace, man."

Another way by which a conversation departs from its sobering possibilities is for the characters to exhibit and to verbalize a conscious awareness of the dramatic (or melodramatic) exaggerations of the text, and makes the reader aware of this too, not unlike the consciousness of the actor who speaks to the camera, showing an awareness that s/he is merely acting. This reflexivity, again, may be seen as a very Filipino way of dealing with harsh realities, or with unpalatable truths, being as it is an avoidance of seriousness and, therefore, of the primary impact of what is difficult to accept or what is overtly unacceptable, thus making way for the stereotype that Filipinos laugh at everything. Witness this in strip 41:

Strip 41



The gravity of Polgas/Wisedog's vanquishment of Danilo/Devlino has awful implications. Not only does this reveal Devlino's role in the plot to decimate the Pugad Baboy folk, it is also a revelation of Mang Danilo's betrayal of the group and the group's trust. Polgas' formulaic pronouncement in the third and fourth panels—"From this day on, I will make sure that your reign ceases!" (my translation), while delivering a jaw-cracking kick at Devlino/Danilo—is reduced to that self-aware interior gaze that includes us in the last panel—Polgas: "What a dialogue!," Danilo: "Applause, people!," where neither Polgas nor Danilo show any sign of fatigue or pain—showing too the unconnectedness of this panel to the previous ones, approximating perhaps the disconnection from reality that humor offers the characters, or the persons involved, in a potentially grave situation diffused by the introduction of the comic.

Medina's use of language as a vehicle of his strip's humor is seen, too, in his use of very contemporary forms of address and emotions, (*bru* for *bruha, bebe* for *baby, day* for *inday*), the employment of "swardspeak" in Lady Lucy's (Lucifer's) spiel: *"imbiyerna ka talaga Devlino . . . napilitan tuloy akong um-appear dito kahit na luma itong gown koh!"* ("You are such an annoying pest, Devlino . . . [because of you] I was forced to appear even if all I have on is a really old gown!") (my translation), *tsugi-tsugi* (die!), *baboo* (goodbye), *wa* for *wala* (no/none). Medina's linguistic assumptions of his readers in this strip range from the nearly vulgar to the sophisticated, but more than this, Medina's comic strip attempts to use language as a real medium for humor that presents the quick repartee based on the formulations of knowledge upon cultural realities, not now as a mere medium for the logic or the continuity of the narrativized text that earlier *komiks* are wont to employ, where conversational humor may be based on

the singular breakage of language (*Kenkoy*, *Barok*, *Kalabog en Bosyo*, or even *Ikabod Bubuwit*, for example), but where the punch line relies either on the literal or metaphorical pratfall, or on a "last panel" humor that employs no language but usually uses the "surprised silence" technique, where the joke is met by the character who falls down in exasperation, or in stupefaction.

THE SUPER-NATURAL AND THE HYPERREAL

Another area of humor in this text is the presentation of the abnormal, and a major part of this lies in the narrative's assignment of the folk belief in supernatural beings as the source of conflict. This appears to echo the "Filipino" milieu, but what I wish to raise is that the supernatural here becomes fluidly interspersed with elements that are not Filipino at all or that its presence as conflict is juxtaposed against a solution that is not only urban but Western. This is precisely the point of its humor: that the reader is painfully aware of this text as pastiche and, therefore, postmodern.

In strip 9, we start seeing the entry of the rural "supernatural" motif when Bab meets a pretty girl whom he finds out has never had a boyfriend. This piques Bab's interest, only to find out that this is so because the girl's mother is a *mangkukulam* (witch). Bab beats a (truly) hasty retreat, leaving the girl by going through the hut's flimsy wall. In strip 13, the same structure occurs, except that now it is Noli and Sarge who meet a girl in a bar and are told that they could have her company for half the price. They invite her to sit with them in the apparent manner of gentlemen, again only to be told that she would rather "float"—as she is a *manananggal*. Strip 14 presupposes the easy camaraderie among Filipinos—an exceptionally tall man asks Dagul and Bab for a light for his cigarette. They tell him to join the PBA (Philippine Basketball Association, the professional league in the Philippines), setting ball players who are multimillion earners as comparison. The punch line is a revelation that the man is a *kapre*. In these preceding strips, the supernatural characters start off as being no different from the Pugad Baboy characters. They, too, operate within the same codes, but highlighting their difference (they are not humans) not only provides the incongruity within the text, it also signals the fact that they cease to share the codes to which they earlier were privy. This is one implication of abnormality: that

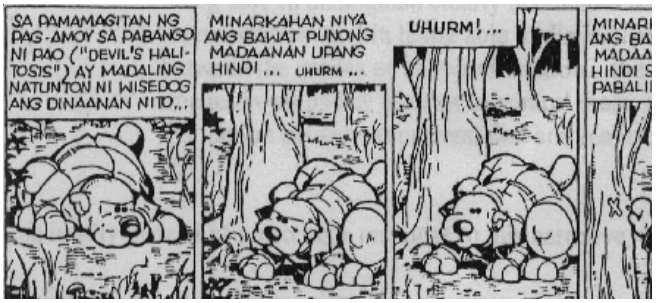
exclusion is the price one pays for being different, no matter how far an entity has entered the realm of the dominant.

Another aspect of abnormality presented here is the supernatural as a perversion of the body. We have seen this in strips 13 and 14, and strip 16 is an even more bizarre instance of this. Tiny, Dagul's daughter, and Pao, her gay friend, are excited over the arrival of what they think is a really handsome young man, whose picture they were given. They were told that this young man has an identical twin, and when they did arrive, the "twins" turn out to be a body with two heads. This humor is almost farcical, as is Bab's hasty retreat discussed earlier, as is the "floating" woman. The reference to the near-scatological is part of this perversion; examples of these are strip 5's depiction of Bab's socks used as "improvised *katol"* (mosquito coil) to kill the "mosquitoes as big as dragonflies in Iloilo," now "bloatedly" feasting on the guests from Pugad Baboy (note the "burp" issuing from one tiny mosquito in the first panel as it flies away after having bitten Pao). The stink of Bab's socks is so potent that by the last panel, not only were the mosquitoes killed, we see Dueñas folk, their animals, even pests and rodents driven out of their homes and lairs because of the odoriferous smell. Strip 26 features urination humor, albeit an "arrested" one, as Polgas/Wisedog, the "hero/savior" now trying to track the kidnapped Pao, reverts back to his canine ways by marking the trees with his scent. This abruptly ceases as Polgas/Wisedog, who raises his hind leg preparing to mark the trees with his urine, realizes that we the readers are also marking him with our gaze—a decidedly human, normative one. And so, in the end, such an animalistic, "perverted" act is corrected by redoing the marking, this time with Polgas blushing and drawing an "X" mark on the tree trunks instead. The humor here is a play not only on word meanings (*minarkahan*—marked) but also on the attribution of such meanings to human contexts, one decidedly bodily and the other evidently social in nature.

The humor issuing from the presentation of the perverted, grotesque body may be explained by this fact:

> the basic indignities of farce contradict some commonplace expectation held by society for which farce is produced; in our culture such an expectation would be closely related to the traditional belief that the human body is the locus of dignity, the dignity which is immanent to the human species, and that

Strip 26



> it ought to be treated in a way that is consistent with that sense of dignity. Pratfalls, custard pies in the face, etc. all contradict such a belief. (Palmer 45)

The conquest of the supernatural beings and their eventual banishment is superficially funny because it mobilizes the Pugad Baboy folks to act as (super) heroes, a point we earlier raised. Their fatness is part of the farce here; the fact is that we see them as the least likely heroes because their figure/s do not conform to the stereotypical athletically-built strong-man/woman type, and we undoubtedly expect them to fail because of this. But by conquering the monsters, they have themselves become the *super-natural*: they have exceeded their prescribed circumstances, however unlikely or impossible this is, and have taken on the nature of winners, both in the sense of triumphing over the Dueñas evil and in the sense of being empowered, of being more than the suburban dwellers that they are.

I contend, too, that the basis of the humor in this conflict is the presentation of this battle as hyperreality. John Fiske clarifies the term:

> Postmodern sense of the real . . . accounts for our loss of certainty in being able to distinguish clearly and hierarchically between reality and its representation, and in being able to distinguish clearly and hierarchically between the modes of its representation . . . the postmodern promiscuity of images swamps any attempt to control them; it overwhelms any neat distinction between representation and reality, between fact and fiction. (*Media Matters* 62)

This is why instead of horror as a response to this narrative, we return a reply of laughter—either in amusement or in a knowing mockery of the spectacle of the text. The way envisioned by Pugad Baboy characters to overcome the "evil" enemies is to assume yet other fictive characters (this time from film/cartoons), the Ghostbusters, now called "Growlsbuster" as they are led by Polgas the dog. Their weapons are an urban perversion of folk antidotes and remedies: garlic powder, vitamin E capsules with garlic oil, Shakee's [sic] garlic and cheese pizza, all hinting at the artificiality of urban existence, the commodification of the natural, as these are the forms in which the natural is made available, or is recognizable, in the city.

A more interesting aspect of the presentation of the supernatural here lies in the fragmented media multiplicities and Western concepts interfacing with local beliefs, all creating a pastiche of a unified "supernatural" image. Local *aswangs* and *tikbalangs* exist side by side with werewolves, gorgons, and zombies. The encounters between the "good" Pugad Baboy folks and the horrible monsters are rendered incongruous because of references to films, animation, politics, gossip magazines, homosexuality, sports, cuisine, and ecological practices. Let me focus on two or three strips here, specifically. Strips 15 and 34 do very little to advance the development of this text's narrative, but their comedy stand as individual daily plots because of references to the Count (of *Sesame Street*, a popular American children's show) and to the Ninja Turtles (from an animated cartoon show). In strip 15, the presence of the Count is a superficial reminder of the supernatural battle in the text, but it is on many levels rendered ridiculous: the vampire is *not* a Filipino concept; the Count as visually depicted takes off from his role in the children's program—whose function is *to count*; he is not part of the actual tussle in the text, and what he is counting is truly trivial, if not disgusting: five armpit hairs. Here we see that this juxtaposition again assumes knowledge of all these levels by the audience/reader as it does, too, of the characters in the comic strip. Yet the presentation of this plot elicits laughter without the verbalization of these points. Strip 34 relies on the *piggabangga* scream for its humor. The Ninja Turtles, who are mutant turtle heroes, shout "Cowabunga!" right before they enter the fray. *Piggabanga* rests on this parallelism, but the term is self-reflexive, too, to the fact that they are from Pugad Baboy (therefore *pigs*) and this becomes a shout acknowledging, indeed celebrating, their difference, while

appropriating the heroic stance of the cartoon heroes from whom they borrowed this now perverted call-to-arms (in an orthographic sense too). In strip 31, Mang Danilo purportedly saves Polgas from the werewolves by waving what appears to Polgas as a white hanky, which Polgas construes to be a protective amulet, only to be terrified himself (as the werewolves earlier were) because the "amulet" is not now one; instead, it is revealed to be a political banner with "Danding for the country" on it. Again, this strip obviously pokes fun at the current melee of election advertising, which in turn devalues politics and turns it into a media circus, as it is a personal stab against Danding Cojuangco's eligibility as president (being a corporate taipan, and perceived to have practiced crony capitalism). This "ill" choice is juxtaposed against the expected "good" magic inherent in the presupposed magical object. An even more ludicrous turn here is that the named political candidate does not appear acceptable even to dogs or that all he is good for is to scare folk away. The weapons seen to conquer evil are a weird mixture of the homemade, the modern, the folk, and the apocryphal, recast into weapons of near-apocalyptic proportions. The *garapata* (tick) gun loaded with holy water, silver forks against the werewolves, slingshots loaded with barbecue sticks (*after* Polgas has eaten the barbecue), the horse's jawbone that becomes a boomerang that is a virtual homage to Batman are a comic arsenal created as an amalgamation of the folk and the pop, therefore illustrating what Lawrence Grossberg asserts about texts.

> [Texts] are not added on to already existing contexts (inter-texts); rather texts and contexts are articulated to each other, each inserted into the other as it were . . . involv[ing] the production of contexts, the ongoing effort by which particular practices are removed from and inserted into different structures of relationships, the construction of one set of relations out of another, the continuous struggle to reposition practices within a shifting field of forces. (43)

I see the prevalence of the hyperreal here as an attempt at subversion, as it is an articulation of the disparate, even conflicting realities in Philippine culture. The resultant comedy here sublimates societal concerns, and cultural constructions (now neo-constructions?) offer a distancing gaze, on the one hand diffusing either the focus of these concerns or trivializing them altogether. But this distancing gaze turns itself to the valorization of the Pugad Baboy folks, who continue

the negotiation between the hyperreal world, carrying in themselves and in the milieu in which they are "this excess of high-speed information . . . the superfluidity of information" (Morley 63). But instead of a Baudrillardian refusal to arrive at meaning, Pugad Baboy is still at that juncture where social reality is definable and limnable from and by the text, thus this society's concerns are continually undermined, perverted, "its confusions and distortions encapsulated, accentuated, reflected . . . " (Strinati 424).

For what is the solution in this narrative? The Pugad Baboy characters triumph over the evil Devlino, and ultimately over "Lady Lucy" (Lucifer is portrayed as gay here)—who outrightly admits that "she" has no power over them, not because of their weapons but because of their "return to God." This reversal back to the realm of the spiritual seems to signal the "Filipino" belief, in this case, in a Christian-Catholic concept of God. Problematized here is the comic portrayal of a *gay* devil, who is "tamed" and who becomes a trivialized evil. His resort to preying on politicking electoral candidates establishes this "real" social evil but, at the same time, strips it of any terrible national or personal consequence, its morality accompanied only by "an absence of feeling which usually accompanies laughter . . .. Indifference is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion" (Bergson 63). Comedy works not by expecting a direct examination of the discrepancies it raises but by "confronting one relevant structure by another less clearly relevant, one well-differentiated view by another independent one to which it does not apply" (Douglas 303). Therefore, the "serious themes" which run through this comic narrative will continue to surface but will remain in the drift, hoping that it produces the catch later on, not by bludgeoning the reader on the head with it but by luring it into the seeming familiarity of the waters, as though the net were not present.

CONCLUSION

In our analysis of *Pugad Baboy*, the answer to "what makes for Filipino here?" is still without a definite answer. We have partly succeeded in identifying certain realms of culture and society inscribed within the matrix of its humor and the cultural form it takes. This indefiniteness is *not* ambiguity. Comedy transfixes culture while relying on constantly moving elisions, "the signifying elements . . . perpetually being recombined and played off each other" (Nowell Smith 77).

On the one hand, the "Filipino" that is inscribed in *Pugad Baboy* refers to a dominant culture that appears now to have reworked what Reyes cites as " the complex mixture of the folk and popular culture that shapes and structures the *komiks*" (in her case, the *komiks*-magazine; here, the comic strip) (48). I refer to a reworking here, first, because the milieu of this dominant Philippine culture, as seen in Pugad Baboy as an imaginary setting and in the popularity of *Pugad Baboy* as contemporary popular text in the Philippines, is decidedly middle-class in its assumptions and in its trappings, in contrast with either more rustic or lower-class affinities that earlier Philippine comics that dealt with the familial/communal depicted (*Buhay Pilipino* or even *Tisoy,* for example), or more amorphous settings not clearly indicative of class definitions, or which elide such characterizations invested by economic or class distinctions but hint at it (*Kalabog en Bosyo* or *Barok*, for instance). We laugh at the antics and adventures of the *Pugad Baboy* characters because of the fleeting acknowledgment of the occasions and implications of the strips: politics, religion, workaday vexations, relationships, daily ironies, class struggles, gender issues, racist stereotypes—not as these are born out of generalized concerns but as these are rooted in, and emerge out of, middle-class sensibilities. We recognize the twists in the *Pugad Baboy* characters as seen by way of a Filipino valuation of fatness, for example. Medina's take on corpulence is to subvert its apparent inferiority to make for a centering and, indeed, a celebration of this in the text, by allotting for these characters a definite place in which belonging, nominally and communally, becomes central to the text. And even when, as in "Hiwaga ng Duenas," the *Pugad Baboy* characters are literally transplanted on to another locale, they end up triumphant over the conflicts in this new setting by bringing with them their urban or urbanized sensibilities.

This attempt at centering, though, does not come as straightforwardly as it should. Because these characters are made to navigate the vagaries of Filipino society, the humor engendered by the text comes, too, at the expense of more politically correct sensibilities. The humor of the strip, however, is mined by way of juxtapositions of expectations of the reader's familiarity with Filipino customs still applicable even among urban folk, national or local concerns, whether political or economic, pastimes which make for cultural practices in the Philippines—basketball, drinking, fortune-telling—and a knowledge not only of the language but the connotative inflections inherent in it to signal contrary and contradictory meanings, and a more fragmentary knowledge of a collage of technology- or media-engineered realities that

form the backdrop of these. The familiarity with such cultural background and the knowledge of its more hyperreal roots and implications is based on assumptions, I think, of the dominance and the range of such a discourse in the Philippines. However, the use of humor to affirm this middle-class/*popular* discourse, on the one hand, and the comic depiction to subvert the very real pathos of the impact of such postmodern disjunctures, on the other, serves to reframe the *Pugad Baboy* folk as representations of the contemporary Filipino and to defamiliarize Filipino spiritual and cultural beliefs, political disempowerment, and economic dislocations. If we look at these too closely, however, the laughter is lost.

We find ourselves asking more and more what this comedy is, for in the Philippine context "to problematize . . . folk and postmodernist metaphors is to chart the finely graded distinctions and hierarchies that map popular culture . . . to negotiate difference and belonging" (McLuskie 492). *Pugad Baboy* has found a way to show and to veil these differences:

> It is a hilarious and maddening commentary on the state of our society: the *trapos, magnanakaws, manlolokos, mayabangs, sinungalings, switiks, walang-hiyas, gagos, tangas, tarantados, bastos, siga-sigas, walang pinag-aralans, and the kapal-mukhas* who constitute its hard crust, and the long-suffering simple folk who constitute its soft core. (Henares 3)

And the *Pugad Baboy* characters end up as the tricksters—and the tricked. They are, in Henares' terms, both the simple folk and the evil elements that prey on them. But these characters do not stand still. Despite their bulk, or because of it, they embody "the people negotiating their readings, reworking and interpreting culture" (Webster 227). *Pugad Baboy* becomes a very potent locus for the presentation, the study, the reapplications of the dynamics within a cultural hegemony, and the peripheral problems that confront, challenge, or elide this. Medina's *Pugad Baboy* characters, whom we find on the one hand to be embodiments of the same negotiations that we go through in a real cultural/traditional milieu, are also characters who redefine the responses to this culture by way of the intentionality, the contextual specificities of the humor in the strip.

Though we, the readers, who laugh at this daily renegotiation and "play with culture and non-culture" (Spinks 191), are ourselves part of this "play of identification between the knowing subject of cultural

studies, and a collective subject: 'the people'" (Webster 227), we nevertheless realize that humor, while used as a device that recontextualizes culture or at least follows its gaps or its appropriations, may itself be construed as a "distancing" mode. Whether in terms of cultural practices, language, daily realities, or personality, the Filipino in Pugad Baboy is recognizable, but *Pugad Baboy* also re-presents Philippine culture in a way that we can never really enter, as its depiction of these realities and cultural constructions (or reconstructions) are threaded through, modified, or fragmented by humor as an operative constant, which we may be privy to and which we may ourselves employ, but *not at all times*. Our own engagement with Philippine culture becomes, then, an utile vantage point from which we can critique *Pugad Baboy* as text, but it is its presentation of humor, and humor segueing from the complexities of these experiences within proscribed Filipino culture, that becomes the medium for this "play with/within culture," tracking the advent not only of fragmentation or disjuncture within Philippine social or cultural realms, so palpably depicted in this strip, but of multiplicities piled into hyperrealities that is at the center of this text.

We have moved our analysis of *Pugad Baboy*, the comic strip, from being an artifact of popular culture to the sign of the collective trickster: "the cultural vortex which allows the very process of transformation . . . see[n] as the basic driver of cultural change." The trickster does this by "embody[ing] the processing of cultural material from a state of non-culture to a state of cultural use . . . a semiotic generator of forms, language, cultural concepts and context" (Spinks 177-8). What we see as the comic postmodernity of and in *Pugad Baboy,* whether socially corrective or culturally liminal, is a manifestation of this simultaneous generation of multiple signs of culture. Will this provide an answer to how it is Filipino or what is Filipino in it?

Perhaps it has already begun to do so.

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