

Flogging Freakery: Manix Abrera's *Kikomachine* and Humor and Everyday Life in Philippine Youth Culture

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines youth culture in the Philippine context by way of Manix Abrera's nonconformist academics in the college-themed strip *Kikomachine*. Abrera's *Kikomachine* is the Philippines' current comic narrative that specializes in the depiction of youth within Filipino life and culture, and the visual texts in it are seen as a successful presentation of how humor is activated as a way for young people to craft youth identity/ies within a university/study milieu.

This paper will discuss how, in these comic strips' narratives, visual structuring, and intertextual codes, the deployment of the humor of incongruity, of the carnivalesque, the use of linguistic humor, and the comic reframing of the rhetorics of shared purposes and familiar traditions, serve to redefine the functions and operations of youth communities in the Philippines. This paper posits that Abrera's comic strip *Kikomachine* documents the way youth culture/subculture carves strategic positions of resistance and spaces of negotiation and "practice nonnormative actions," looking at the ways by which the guises of humor show how Filipino youth culture within the university reclassifies and defamiliarizes the "taken-for-granted-ness" of the Filipino lived experience in everyday life.

Keywords: youth, youth culture, everyday life, Manix Abrera, *Kikomachine*, humor and incongruity, semantic distancing

The “cult of Kikomachine”

The appeal of Manix Abrera's comic strip *Kikomachine* is so aptly described by journalist Ruel de Vera when he referred to it as having a cult following in contemporary Philippine popular culture. The use of the term “cult” seems to be operative and complementary to this paper's examination of Abrera's comics as a graphic narrative that not only focuses on a very proscribed fictional population of university students and their experiences, but a narrative that in fact defines salient and revealing aspects of contemporary youth culture in the Philippines.

In reading Abrera's cartoons from among his published *Kikomachine* collections, this work wishes to examine the ways by which youth practices, beliefs, quirks, and inventions negotiate and inscribe the frenetic aspects of youth culture in the Philippines. Abrera's comic strip is set in a university campus, and the joke cycles he employs in these visual narratives underscore the emergence not just of the difference with which young campus students are marked, thus emphasizing their belonging to a distinct subculture. In these strips, Abrera presents ways by which the young characters enact alternative experiences [or the pursuit of these], use new scripts of social reality, and depict repudiations of tradition and accepted values.

In these representations, the depiction of this subculture engages readers to understand this fluid creation of youth identity by articulating this within a distinctly Filipino culture, one that is largely contemporary and urban. The use of humor in these strips ranges from linguistic wordplay to the presentation of incongruous situations, bodily and communal deviance, mining parody, burlesque, and satire.

Incongruity-based humor, which is largely the basis of the analysis of the *Kikomachine* strips that we shall be examining here, is seen as a conceptual shift that lies in the “violation of a pattern in someone's picture of how things should be” (Morreall, *Taking* 60-61). The humor of incongruity is “an experience of a cognitive shift—a rapid change in our perception or thoughts” (Morreall, *Comic* 50). It is the discrepancy between “what one expects, and what one gets, a lack of consistency and harmony” (Berger). This is premised on the reality of order in our world, and our expectation of the normative—that there are patterns in things, that objects are imbued with characteristics (*Taking* 15-16). Arthur Schopenhauer affirmed this early on, in his book *The World as Will and Idea (Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung)* (1818/1844) stating that the cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity (qtd. in Morreall, *Taking* 17).

James Beattie, however, raises a significant point about incongruity, noting that not all incongruity provokes laughter, and nonhumorous laughter (what he called “animal laughter”) is triggered “not by any sentiment, or perception of ludicrous ideas, but [by] some bodily feeling, or sudden impulse, on what is called animal spirits” (qtd. in Morreall, *Taking* 18-19).

In order to differentiate the laughter engendered by incongruity from situations that provoke “nonrisible” or “nonhumorous” laughter (such as tickling, babies laughing at being tossed and caught, looking forward to some pleasurable activity, hysteria, inhaling nitrous oxide, among many other examples) (*Taking* 1-2), John Morreall provides an operating basic pattern in humor:

1. We experience a *cognitive shift*—a rapid change in our perceptions or thoughts.
2. We are in a *play mode* rather than a serious mode, disengaged from conceptual and practical concerns.
3. Instead of responding to the cognitive shift with shock, confusion, puzzlement, fear, anger, or negative emotions, we *enjoy* it.
4. Our pleasure at the cognitive shift is expressed in *laughter*, which signals to others that they can relax and play too. (*Comic* 50)

While Morreall avers the need for a “play mode rather than a serious mode [that] disengage[s] us from conceptual and practical concerns” and the prerequisite of a state of enjoyment inherent in the response to the experience of a cognitive shift (instead of shock, confusion, puzzlement, fear, anger, or other negative emotions)” (*Comic* 50), he also notes that it is possible to link “that out-of-placeness, that incongruity” with other aesthetic modes in which we also appreciate cognitive shifts—categories of the tragic, the grotesque, the macabre, the bizarre, and the fantastic (73). These aesthetic modes do not engage us in laughter, on which the truly humorous is based, and, in fact, may “evoke unpleasant, even a negative emotional state” (73).

Because the emphasis of the incongruity theory of humor is the cognitive turn away from the normal to the ridiculous, the ludicrous, the abnormal, the figuration of what this incongruity takes is “everywhere produced from the matter of dominant cultural assumptions and commonplaces. The question of how or why things come to be funny is similarly determined by culture” (Stott 8). Mahadev L. Apte supports this when he states that “because humor is a contextual phenomenon, we need to see how given jokes function in particular situations” (qtd. in Lewis 39). This

is echoed in Ludwig Wittgenstein's point about language games, "that to share a language-game is to share a form of life." This is also applicable to humor—in this case, "to share humor with someone we need to share a form of life with him" (qtd. in Morreall, *Taking* 61). This becomes our pivot in reading this text that specifically chronicles Filipino youth culture, discussing how Abrera's strip resonates with subterranean values that form a new, collective identity as it negotiates local, national, and even global environments.

At the same time, this paper will attempt to examine how humor as a major operating device narrativizes resistance. As acknowledged by Daniel Wickberg, the consideration of popular humor by contemporary cultural studies as "'transgressive' or 'subversive' expression of 'resistance'" (119) is among the areas in which the revival of enthusiasm or humor and laughter in contemporary culture is sited.

Kikomachine and Its Provenance

To understand the place that *Kikomachine* has gained in contemporary Philippine readership, we need first to see its provenance. Manix Abrera, *Kikomachine's* creator, graduated with a degree in fine arts from the University of the Philippines in 2005 (de Vera, "Cult"), and this will evidently be a significant influence in crafting the tone and the themes that appear in his strip. "Kikomachine" is a daily comic strip that has been published in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, the Philippines' foremost daily newspaper since 2000, and the strip's title is taken from the name of Manix Abrera's own college band, Kiko Machine, although Abrera says he decided to "... [call] it 'Kikomachine,' one word, to differentiate it from the two-word Kiko Machine, the band" (de Vera, "Cult"). Aside from being named after Abrera's band, the history of the comic strip itself is marked by Abrera's cartooning experience, as the earlier versions of *Kikomachine* came from a comic strip called "Garapata Blood," also published by the *Inquirer*, in which he shared authorship with fellow artists and Kiko Machine band mates John Paul Cuison and Bheng Densing, all of them "[taking] turns writing about college life at UP" (de Vera, "Cult").

Abrera himself narrates how applying for this cartooning job at a national newspaper was itself very challenging—they were asked, as part of the application process, to work on different cartooning pieces for editorials, news article illustrations, and later on, to create their own comics strip ("Komikrazy"). When "Garapata Blood" was published, a new slot opened at the *Inquirer's* comics section, and Abrera went solo with his own strip "Kikomachine" ("Komikrazy").

Abrera also speaks of the difficulty of churning out strips daily. He states that “talk[ing] about everyday Pinoy life six times a week” was hard on him.

“Kikomachine” had a broader view than what “Garapata Blood” talked about. Recalls the cartoonist: “I had a hard time writing the strip every day, so the other komikeros and my dad told me to choose just one topic and stick to it for the whole week... My father suggested I write about things close to my heart, so I wrote about stuff that happened to me and my friends... For example, the topic of commuting. For the whole week, the strips would be about that. (de Vera, “Cult”)

The thematic run of the strips weekly publication was born of this, which may also be seen in the classification used in the series compilations themselves that comprise Abrera’s published books.

Abrera as cartoonist also notes the roots of this strip as an artifact of youth culture when he avers that he realized the broad readership that being published in a national paper has brought his cartoon, that these would be read by “young people, [even by] grandparents and parents,” when his initial intended audience were “his classmates... [or] the people of his generation” (“Komikrazy”). This intended readership resonates in the context and the literal setting of *Kikomachine*, which is so identifiably the university or the school, and more specifically, identifies with a University of the Philippines subculture, given the many references marked by UP campus practices and sociolects. A UP campus subculture becomes the recognizable aggregate of other Philippine universities, and other university youth experiences.

Ruel de Vera, writing about Manix Abrera in 2018, affirms this:

On the surface, “Kikomachine” was about the travails of a group of students (clearly from UP Diliman) as they toiled toward the end of semesters. It was based heavily on Abrera’s personal experiences and those of his friends. But “Kikomachine,” cerebral and kooky, with the densest word balloons in the business, became about so much more than that. Both “bizarro” and “jeproks,” metaphysical and practical—with nameless recurring characters ---“Kikomachine” really is about a state of mind about the universe, one that proved very popular with readers. (“*Kikomachine*’ to the Max”).

Nida Gatus-Ramirez of Visprint, which publishes Abrera’s comics compilations, emphasizes this when she states that “[she] became an instant fan after reading his first compilation, but from a ‘masa’ standpoint... his drawing styles, characters and stories are uniquely his... it was a young version of *Pugad Baboy*, set in the university” (qtd. in de Vera, “Cult”).

De Vera writes:

at the beginning, Manix says the characters were somewhat random, but developed personalities as he went along. In most of the strips, we find the young, unnamed characters of the strip, identifiable only by their appearance and their demeanor. Today, he identifies eight regular characters, though they all do not have names. There's the guy with the spiky hair, the female with the shaved head, the guy who looks like Manix and so on. ("Cult")

The recurring characters are the spiky-haired young man, who is the resident smart-aleck and fool/trickster, his girlfriend who is identifiable as the spectacled girl sporting bangs, her best friend the ponytailed girl, the curly-haired dormitory mate of ponytailed girl, the longish-haired young man wearing a bull cap that obscures his face, the bald girl who ends up being a university instructor, the young man sporting an Afro whose eyes we never see, the young man who look like Abrera himself with regular clean-cut hair and glasses, and the Goth-girl.

Writer Budjette Tan of the award-winning *Trese* series tells us why Abrera's cartoon is so appealing:

I think Manix was able to find and point out certain Filipino quirks in his cartoons. He puts the spotlight on these Pinoy qualities and exaggerates them, making them fun to read. They are typical situations we've all encountered during our college days or in the workforce and he presents them in an absurd way.

As an artist, he creates these quirky looking characters. They might have a trademark hairstyle that makes them memorable, or they could be drawn in a simple way. And that's why it feels so easy to identify with them. (qtd. in de Vera, "Cult")

While this namelessness of Abrera's characters appears to be a conscious choice sustained during the run of *Kikomachine*, we can also look at this deliberate namelessness as an extrapolation of the concept of abstraction in comics. Lambert Wiesing states that the use of abstraction disputes the usually prevalent aspects of comics, primarily by allowing us to rethink and question the narrative dimension of the graphic medium (qtd. in Baetens 104). This narrative dimension relies upon the "language used by iconic texts," whether these texts refer to the graphic novel, the comic strip, the single-panel cartoon, or the comic book (Romero-Jodar 119). Scott McCloud's discussion of the iconicity of images in comics in his paramount work *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1993) emphasizes the "icon" as "any image

used to represent any person, place, thing, or idea” (26). Rocco Versaci supports this as he, too, points to the “graphic” or “illustrated”, visual aspect of comic books and graphic novels as referring to the “iconical nature of the language” employed in these texts (qtd. in Romero-Jodar 121). More importantly, McCloud proffers that “in pictures... *meaning is fluid and variable* according to appearance... differ[ing] from real life in varying degrees” (27; my emphasis).

This ambiguity of meaning of graphic language is deployed by Abrera in his decision not to name his characters. While in one sense, unlike other comic strips that engender familiarity (and eventual popularity) on memorable characters and perhaps even more remarkable names for them, the namelessness of Abrera’s characters allows the strip series to deploy these characters at will, and at the service of the narrative being built up for a period, usually a week’s worth of strips. Namelessness becomes an actual tactic that encourages a general identification with these characters. This sense of abstraction is seen in Abrera’s *Kikomachine* strips, not only in terms of nominalization, but even at times to the point of actually blurring figuration and maintaining the barest possible representation of human figures. Groupe Mu’s proposition about the semiotic distinction between “iconic” and “plastic” signs is a useful explanation here:

In their treatise on visual semiotics, the members of the group propose to distinguish two inextricably intertwined dimensions or aspects of the visual signifier, both of which are linked with specific signifieds: on the one hand the “iconic” dimension, which is the part of the image that can be lexically identified and labelled (the representational side of the image) and on the other hand the “plastic” dimension, which escapes lexical labelling (it is, the authors argue, the non-representational or abstract side of the image, and it has to do with colors, patterning, and form). (qtd. in Baetens 97)

We can see in Abrera’s conscious forays into “plasticity”¹ this lexical defiance in the namelessness of his characters and in the many attempts to actually erode figurative elements in many other strips (Baetens 97), as we shall see in later examples. This, in itself, is a form of resistance that interweaves with the humor of the strip, as well as its examination of quotidian life in the Philippines, and more specifically, in university life whose roots are templated in the University of the Philippines, becoming now a Philippine university youth subculture, as its narrative impetus. As Baetens puts it, the use of “abstract elements can play many narrative elements as well...,” making prominent the need to solve the enigmatic (106). The opposite of “abstract,” Baetens continues, is not only “figurative” or “representational” but also “narrative.” Abstraction seems to be what resists narrativization, and conversely narrativization seems to be what dissolves abstraction. Abstract comics melt in the air when narrative walks in—and vice versa (95).

Youth Culture as/and Subculture

The generation that Abrera speaks of as his primary audience is one that is defined not only as being of university age, but also one that shares his own age and orientation. That Abrera is himself in his thirties, and that he spoke so directly of his own peers as his audience (see de Vera) narrows down and specifies for us the definition of what we shall refer to in terms of the youth culture operative in this visual narrative.

The term “youth” technically refers to individuals aged 16 to 25 (James in Valentine et. al 5), making this “a natural and inevitable marker of a biologically determined age” (Barker, *Cultural* 407). Stanley Cohen avers the characteristic of youth as being marked by psychological and social needs specific to this age group, and as a period of formation in which attitudes and values are anchored to ideologies (qtd. in Barker 405). Gill Valentine, Tracey Skelton, and Deborah Chambers speak of the “universal” concept of childhood as one that was affirmed by the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in which “childhood” is deemed “a time of innocence and freedom from the responsibilities of adulthood” and the child “temporarily set apart from the adult world” (3). Earlier conceptions of childhood were based on the belief that beyond infancy, children “were treated as miniature adults, rather than as conceptually different” from them (3). The focus on the young as having particular needs that distinguished them from adults only came as a consequence of the development of formal education as preparation to undertake adult roles and responsibilities (3). Talcott Parsons supports this view, adding that youth as a transition from childhood to adulthood, a transition marked by rites of passage, did not include a period in which children transitioned to adulthood. Youth or adolescence, he explained, only came as part of “the emergence of specialized, universalized, and rationalized occupational and adult roles in capitalist society,” which provided a rupture between the family and society, hence necessitating a “cultural space of transition, training, and socializing for young people” (qtd. in Barker, *Cultural* 407).

There is a mythical aspect to this universalized view of childhood, in that not all children experience this period of preparation or social development that allies itself with the child's physical development. Similarly, Allison James states that basing age on physical development “to control, define, and order the actions of the social body... is largely ineffective, representing ...unsuccessful attempts to tame time by chopping it up into manageable slices” (qtd. in Valentine et al. 5). Tracey Solberg expounds on the ambiguity of the concept of youth as “children may ‘grow’ or ‘shrink’ in age as negotiations [with parents about what they are deemed responsible to do around the home] take place” (qtd. in Valentine et al. 5). There

are young people who may physically be seen as being older than their age, in the same guise that there are adults who may perform identity in ways younger than they really are. Parsons, therefore, offers this view of youth, stating that it is “not a universal category of biology. Rather, it is a changing social and cultural construct that appeared at a particular moment of time under definitive conditions” (qtd. in Barker, *Cultural* 407). David Sibley adds that “the boundary separating child and adult is a decidedly fuzzy one. Adolescence is an ambiguous zone...adolescents are denied access to the adult world, but they attempt to distance themselves from the world of the child. At the same time... retain[ing] some links with childhood...” (qtd. in Valentine et al. 5). Youth is positioned between childhood dependence and adult responsibility, a time of preparation for leaving the home and engaging with the world of adults (Barker, *Cultural* 407). This view of adolescence as a transitory state is judged by Ronald Frankenberg as being rather unfair, as “it suggests that young people do not have value in their own right” and are “valued only to the extent that they are in the ‘process of becoming’ an adult,” a state that is marked always by “formlessness” – “lost in between, belonging nowhere, being no one” (James qtd. in Valentine et al. 6).

Youth is also seen as an exclusionary period, whereby teenage years are defined by way of the boundaries of exclusion, “for example, the age at which young people can drink alcohol, earn money, join the armed forces or consent to sexual intercourse,” exhibiting how “variable, context-specific and gendered these definitions of where childhood ends and adulthood begins are” (Valentine et. al 5). Another aspect of this exclusion lies in the idea that adolescence is a period of detachment and independence from parents as primary caregivers, even while this admits new bonds made with other attachment figures, allowing the youth to “experience trust, acceptance, understanding, and respect for individuality” (Cotterell 6).

While these definitions of youth appear to have definite boundaries, we have earlier established that this is also an age that is marked by ambiguity and liminality. Youth is seen as a state of transition, and Dick Hebdige points out that the construction of youth is seen in terms of this sense of difference, inscribed “within and across the discourses of ‘trouble’ (youth-as-trouble; youth-in-trouble) and/or ‘fun’... associated with crime, violence, and delinquency” (qtd. in Barker, *Cultural* 409-10). On the other hand, youth is also seen as the “playful consumer of fashion, style and a range of leisure activities” (410), thus creating representations of the partygoer, the fashion stylist, and the “consuming teenager” (410), who follows fads and trends. Hence youth is also seen as a “moratorium of ‘structured irresponsibility’ between childhood and adulthood,” and the emergence of youth culture arises at this point (407). Youth culture has also been seen as an anti-culture in opposition to the adult culture (Nel qtd. in Cloete). Stephen Miles adds that “youth subculture offers

young people a sense of identity which is ascribed to them by school, work and class environments," thus "offer[ing] them the opportunity to experience a sense of social reality that is independent and different from the adult world and culture into which they are born" (qtd. in Cloete).

In this paper, we are looking at Abrera's depiction of youth in his comic strips as a way of defining a microculture within Filipino society, a subculture that, in many senses, creates its own distinct identity based on ways by which it negotiates with everyday life practices that are not only based on literal geographies, but on that which allows us to see how this space between childhood and adulthood delineates difference and play. Barker notes that "culture" in the term "subculture" refers to "a whole way of life" or "maps of meaning" that allows the world to be comprehensible to its members, and the prefix "sub" connotes "notion of distinctiveness and difference from the dominant and mainstream society" (410). This fissure between a specific cultural/social group and the larger/culture and society emphasizes the distinction between the "normal, average, dominant" collectivity and the subculture that is "condemned to and/or enjoy a consciousness of 'otherness' or difference" (Thornton qtd. in Barker 410).

A major aspect of Abrera's *Kikomachine* is its contextualization of its characters within a university setting. While school becomes a literal setting and nexus of much of the joke work of this comics series, we have first to understand how it is moved from being a mainstream cultural site to being one that is a repository of the subculture's resistance.

We earlier noted how adolescent development is characterized as a period during which processes of attachment and identity are resolved (Cotterell 5). Barbara M. Newman and Philip R. Newman suggest that the period of adolescence is the age during which major psychosocial tasks of "resolving the crisis of group identity versus alienation" and "questions of individual identity and future goals become more central" (qtd. in Cotterell 5). They add that bonds with peer groups and one's place within a group identity are focused on by adolescents, especially those from the age of 18 and older, before the definition of familial relations or the achievement of a personal identity (5). Given this, one way by which schools are seen is as a supportive environment whereby "students in the school are linked to its organization, to groups of fellow students, and to a variety of roles and relations with others through activities available at school" (205).

R. Rausch extends Newman and Newman's view of peer groups as influential to the definition of personal identity in adolescents, noting that "'youth' is understood as the developmental phase from . . . childhood up to adulthood..." (qtd. in Sunker 30), marked by the sudden shifts from close familial relationships to the

“de-emotionalized” connections within the working world regulated by structural and institutional actions. The departure of young people from the parental home signifies, too, that behavior learned in the family may not be acceptable in the society outside it, and thus, this period may be characterized by “antisocial” attitudes as a way of negotiating “misse[d] continuance and . . . goal orientation in order to be able to be social” (Rausch qtd. in Sunker 31). It is in this sense that peer groups aid in the personality integration that the family is unable to realize (Sunker 32).

Klaus Hurrelmann posits that peer groups commence these socializing roles early in adolescence, as peer groups are recognized as providing participative opportunities and critical experiences in social contexts, “thus, the peer group, whose spectrum ranges from spontaneously formed cliques up to tight social groups such as ‘juvenile gangs,’ is to be considered an important instance of socialization in adolescence” (qtd. in Sunker 32). Gerhard Wurtzbacher, in a similar manner, looks at peer groups as “age-homogeneous relationships” that both protect and provide a balance for the young person in the face of the influence of large social groups, facilitating and assuring the transition to adulthood (qtd. in Sunker 34).

It is also necessary, however, to understand that schools are repositories of resistance that is often conflated with misbehavior (Alpert 351). Schools function to replicate systems of societal dominance, its modes of knowledge, as well as the circulation of skills that maintain the social division of labor (Giroux qtd. in Alpert 351). In this sense, misbehavior as resistance is recognized as a “student skill” (Metz qtd. in Alpert 351), and is a particular response of students, demonstrated by inattention, or with difficulties with crowd control and management, and with the completion of assigned classwork, seeing schooling as a site of conflict between the students’ desire to fraternize with their peers while spending the least amount of time to accomplishing schoolwork (Cusick qtd. in Alpert 351). Resistance and misbehavior go beyond these usual overt manifestations that usually occur in “nonelite groups.” Henry A. Giroux cites the reality of less evident proofs of resistance among students, such as minimiz[ing] their participation in routine school practices while simultaneously displaying outward conformity to the school’s ideology, opting for modes of resistance that are quietly subversive in the most immediate sense, but have the potential to be progressive in the long run (qtd. in Alpert 352).

Reading *Kikomachine*: School Becomes a Subculture

Abrera creates a preponderance of strips about students negotiating study. The samples used for discussion here were mainly chosen with the view of identifying iconic school tasks that evince study both as a routine practice and as a bonding activity. The discussions of the many instances of joke work in this paper focus on

exam-taking, group work, university research, which includes thesis writing. The seriousness and sobriety that are an expected hallmark of university life are not only set side by side the incongruous interpretations by the comic strips' many characters, but school also becomes the site of instantiating resistance by way of humor. In a similar guise, the strips featured other quotidian aspects of students' lives in the university, such as dormitory life, dealing with fellow students and the more obscure, unpalatable communal practices and beliefs within the university, and the local cultures attached to and interwoven in it. The actual strips chosen to support these texts are taken from a cross-section of Abrera's "Kikomachine" compilations from issues 1 to 9 (*Blg. 1: Mga Tagpong Mukhang Ewan at Kung Anu-Ano Pang Kababalaghan!*, *Blg. 5: Alab ng Puso*. *Blg. 7: Sorrowful, Sorrowful Mysteries*, *Blg. 9: Ilayo Mo Kami Sa Apoy ng Impyerno!*), choosing those strips that are most resonant in terms of the humor these strips manifest, as well as attempting to cover the breadth of Abrera's comics strip compilations (from 2005 to 2013),² to show the development of characters and the narrative maturity of the text. Many of the strips feature these school tasks recurrently in many different compilations, and these strips could as well have examined many other sets and instances of joke work in the Kikomachine universe, which this paper's analyses advance.

Expectedly, a set of strips have to do with exam-taking as part of studies, and it is the characters' absurd reactions to what is supposed to be a sobering requirement that allows us to note how this collective creates an incongruous local culture. Gary Alan Fine defines local culture as "those sets of meaning that are tied to a recognizable interaction scene and its routine participants" ("Sociology"). Citing Edward Lawler, Fine extends this, saying that "particular circumstances provide opportunity structures that allow for developing meanings and structures, and that these meanings and structures reverberate beyond group boundaries. This approach is based on the recognition that commitment to a group and its local culture produces standards for action, which then shape the group and are radiated outward" ("Sociology"). In the strips dedicated to exam-taking as a university task, the joke work that the reader comprehends depends on what is commonly assumed or expected about the task as a serious requirement. But in much the same manner, the joke reverberates because even the comic situations set up here have references to what the group—both the characters in the strips, and the readers themselves—define in terms of "funniness."

In a series of strips dedicated to examinations, one particular set of examples is almost stereotypical as it shows the extreme difficulty of exam-taking. In one strip, one particular difficulty that is a mark of Philippine state universities is juxtaposed against this exam-taking and becomes the inevitable signifier of this extreme duress. The character in reggae braids is bleeding, and when asked by his friend in

the Afro hairdo what happened to him, reveals that he was wounded in a political rally. “Reggae Braids” asks “Afro Hair” to help him, but where the latter begins to bring him to the infirmary, the former actually meant that he needs help going to his examination room. And so in the next strip, Reggae Braids takes the exam while bleeding all along, and his teacher makes this remark: “Putik! Kelangan ko na ‘ata talaga bawasan hardcore factor ng exams ko...” (“Darn it! I think I need to lessen the hardcore factor of my exams...”; Abrera, V: 8; my trans.).³

This “hardcore factor” is magnified in another strip, with the same professor making the same resolution, as she encounters escalating complaints from her students: one asks for an extra exam paper because her paper has been ruined by erasures, the next [Reggae Braids] asks for a new paper because his has been bled over, and the last student asks for extra exam sheets because his paper has been smudged by his exploding brain. This prompts the teacher to remark: “Yes na nga Lord... Yees! Dadalian ko na exams ko next sem!” (“Yes, Lord, I promise to come up with easier exams next semester!”; Abrera, V: 8).

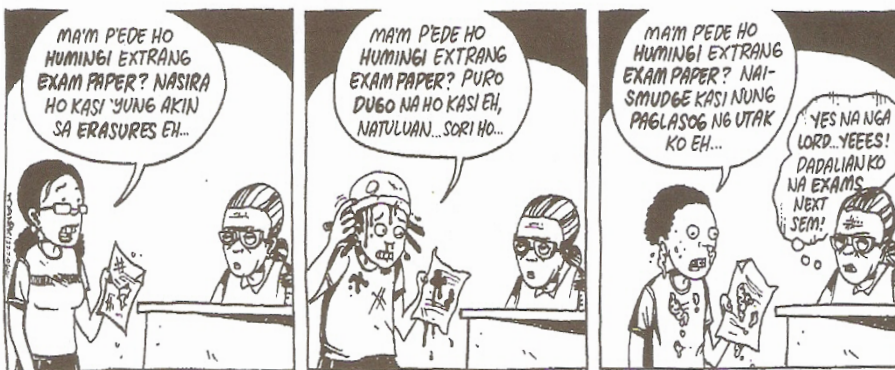


Fig. 1. From *Kikomachine 5: Alab ng Puso*.

The joke work in this latter strip depicts a very Filipino joke work of “one-upmanship,” in which the joke is usually a “competition” among three characters, each one trying to outdo the other by presenting a more exaggerated version of the situation. This is usually an attempt to emerge the “victor” in this narrative contest, and the individual with the most outré version of reality provides the punchline for the joke. In this case, we have in fact two levels to the strip’s humor: one that is provided by the suffering students (and the student who takes on the most damage “wins”), but we also see this being highlighted by the professor’s stereotypical sadistic impulses unleashed in her test questions as background.

In a connected set of strips, we see university students lining up to claim their corrected papers. We find the spike-haired, spectacled young man at the end of line, praying that he passes the exam “Lord, please make me pass the exam...please... Lord...” (Abrera, I: 56). In the following frames, “Spike” not only prays to pass the exam but bargains with God, promising that he will disport himself more humbly and that he will not brag in the future, only to jeer at his fellow students when he gets the exam papers, and doing the very opposite of what he has just promised in prayer: “Hahahahahaah! Yeeah! Pasado 'ko! Kayo? Bagsak? Man!? Who's da maan? Hahaah!” (“I passed! And you? Failures! Man! Who's the man?”; I: 56). The last panel, of course, dashes this supposed victory, and he is called a fool by the person giving out the papers, as he apparently has gotten the wrong paper, about which “Spike” again prays for God to take him.

The ensuing “exam” strips follow a similar theme, treating exams as a mystery, or as a mystical ritual as much as the receipt of grades is one. In another strip, the depiction of failure is allied to the configuration of exam papers as they are returned: exam results that are returned “as is” (I: 56) means that one has gotten a good grade, and if “folded over, given sideways,” one should assume that one has failed. In the last frame the exam paper is folded like an origami fan with the person giving it out asking for a lighter signalling the depths of hopelessness. Another metaphor used for this revelation of grades likens it to a similar complication, that of the way “television game shows” (I: 56) unfold pieces of paper with winners' names, the mundane act of getting graded papers now not just invested with simulated drama, but is shown in the context of performance.

Another area of university work that Abrera lampoons in this manner is thesis work, which, instead of being given the seriousness owing many capstone projects, is trivialized here by the student-youth. In two strips, Abrera notes his student-characters interviewing for their thesis, and the interviewees spout noble, if not lamentable truths, that are worth using as documentary supports. “Spike” asks a venerable-looking older person: “Sir, what can you say about the current state of science in the Philippines?” (“Ummm.. ano po ang masasabi n'yo sa kalagayan ng science ngayon sa 'Pinas?’ I: 57), to which the interviewee replies:

Sus! Napaka-katiting lang halos ng suportang nakukuha naming ngayon sa pamahalaan, sa tao...napakahirap tuloy maging scientist ngayon... katunayan ibang Pinoy inventions at innovations nabebenta na lang yung pag-aari sa ibang bansa! Tsk!

There is infinitesimal support given (science) by the government or the people... it is so hard to be a scientist at present... in fact, many inventions and innovations are sold (by Filipino scientists) and become the property of other countries. (I: 57)

The seriousness of this remark is interrupted by “Spike’s” rejoinder, in which he suddenly asks about “Einstein’s theory of relativity,” which strikes the reader as an unrelated question, but the unrelated tangent is made clear to us as an attempt by “Spike” to take advantage of the interviewer’s prowess for selfish ends, when somebody in the background remarks, “Isn’t that our homework?” (“Assignment natin yun ‘ah!”; I: 57). In another strip, a similarly serious comment from the resource person, this time about how schools could be helped by the ordinary citizen, yields ideas about citizen involvement and the need to support education; in like manner, this is trivialized and effaced when the apparent wisdom of these comments is left unrecorded by the student assigned to do this (“Spike” again, in this case). This incongruity is brought home to the reader when “Spike” so lackadaisically reminds the interviewer (in this case, the bespectacled youth who looks like Abrera) to let him know when he has to start recording the session, when so much of the commentary has gone unnoted (I: 57). The punchline is emphasized when we return to the previous panels and realize that “Spike” has been in the background with his video camera all the while, making this such a futile act. The wordless expression of surprise and dismay on the part of the interviewer also underscores what is lost in this exchange.

In another set of strips about university research, we see Abrera’s characters suffering from what they deem is another university scourge, so much so that the “Afro Hair” exclaims, “Oh God in heaven! Oh stars above! *Ayusin n’yo ang alignment n’yo!*” (Ensure that you are aligned correctly!; Abrera, IX: 7). We realize at the end of this first strip that the scourge he and his classmates find horrifying is the “random checking of bibliographies” (IX: 7), an unusual practice that is meant to prevent plagiarism in the writing of university research papers. In the ensuing strips, one of the female characters, this time the curly-haired student, reiterates this: “Tinitingnan talaga kung credible nga ba sources mo. Or kung nag-e-exist nga ba in the first place! Dami na nahuling puro imbento lang e...” (“Yes, they check whether your sources are credible or if these exist in the first place. So many invent their sources...”; IX: 8), for which “Spike” offers his solution:

Technique kasi pahirapin mo! Gawin mong hard to find/translate lahat ng nasa bibliography. I-reference mo ‘yung Holy Grail, Rosetta stone, hieroglyphs, Judas’ Bible. Ganon! Wahaha! ‘Di ka nag-iisip eh!

(The technique is to make sure they find it very difficult to do so! Make sure you use hard to find references. Translate all your bibliographic sources! Use the Holy Grail, the Rosetta Stone, hieroglyphs, the Judas bible! Wahaha! You aren’t thinking!; IX: 8).

And in the last strip, the old female professor scolds “Spike,” telling him that his sources are worse than using Wikipedia for university research, as “Spike” used *Facebook* as a resource, and “Spike” counters by asking if she knows whose account he referred to, and so proudly reveals: “Facebook ni Jesus Christ!! Liike!” (“Jesus Christ’s Facebook account! Like!”; IX: 8). And he punctuates this by emphasizing this incongruous juxtaposition of the sublime and the mundane, stating that Jesus Christ’s status says “I am thirsty” (“Nauuhaw ako”; IX: 8), referring to the sacred last words Christ utters during the Crucifixion.

We see in these initial examples the kind of humor that Abrera employs in his comic strips—largely working on pursuing incongruity, showing its readers the “odd, unusual, unexpected, surprising, or out of the ordinary” (Martin 6). Abrera usually begins his strip with a “nonserious or unimportant” stimulus, in this case, the taken-for-granted belief that examinations are a regular, if not routine, aspect of university life, the apparent normalcy of scholarly work, and Abrera himself states that this is the usual progression of his strip: “yung [second frame] build up ng kwento ko, yung third frame, yun yung punchline, yung patawa ba natin na nge! Tatalsik na yung character, so ganun yung usual comic strip, yun yung usual na ginagawa ko” (my story builds up such that the punchline is in the third frame, where we get the laughs... [where] we usually see the character being so surprised that he is blown away... that’s how the usual comic strip goes”; (Abrera “Komikrazy”).

More than this, Abrera’s joke work emphasizes not the sobriety of knowledge production or symbolic creativity in these facets of university work, but instead focuses on the absurdity inherent in study as “necessary work” – “that which has to be done every day, that which is not extra but essential to ensure the daily production and reproduction of human existence” (Willis 9). Alan DeYoung, while relating the status of university students in a country as far away as Kyrgyzstan, crystallizes what is seen to be the role of, and the disgust with, university education in a developing country:

realizing that [their] children have few options after secondary school and remembering that the university was once an important intellectual centre for previous generations, many parents do ‘whatever it takes to send their kids to the university, even if they do not study’: some even call it a ‘holy duty’. The government is complicit in this scenario... because ‘there are no real alternatives except for education . . . government does not offer anything except higher education institutions... your kid finishes high school, but there is no job for this kid’.

Approximately half of school graduates now go on to the university, which for a few years provides them with a relatively prestigious status as well

as a protected space to enjoy the fruits of an increasingly globalized youth culture. Some students do undertake academic and professional activities they believe are related to future jobs in the global marketplace. State (or public) universities, however, have themselves succumbed to local market forces, and their quality has declined sharply... (432).

These serious facets of university work are effaced in these strips, which make these all the more absurd—that in a Filipino context, university work, and by extension, exam-taking or preparation for thesis-writing or regular research work, should largely have been taken seriously, not only because these are attendant to this phase of youth, but that in a very specific sense “the central value that colors the lifeworld of UP students,” which Abrera really uses as template in this comics series, “is academic concerns,” and this is the pivot of their daily life. The rigor of their university preparation is in anticipation of their career beyond the university, and “all other concerns and competing values and commitments are subordinated to this end” (Lanuza 135).

In depicting these aspects in such apparently trivial manner, or in exaggerating it by performing it as extreme, brutal punishment, what is foregrounded is the view of the youth at university as inhabiting a strange world, in which examinations take on new ritual meanings accessible only to young people. The instances in which these young characters are shown as ruptured bodies exhibit a grotesque realism, positing the “material bodily principle” that lies in the “images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life” presented in an “extremely exaggerated manner” (Bakhtin 18). Mikhail Bakhtin assigns to grotesque realism the intrinsic characteristic of degradation, “*the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract... a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity*” (19-20; my emphasis). Abrera mines the rupture of bodily apertures to signify the extent to which this group is yoked together, and those who do get the multi-layers of the joke, beyond the obvious bodily humor, become part of this group. In one sense, we can see what Michel Maffesoli raises when he speaks of a “neo-tribal sociality,” which he deemed a

resurgence of basic forms of community, a move away from the rational, contractual social relationships towards *an empathetic form of sociality, where what is important is not some abstract, idealized goal, but rather the feeling of togetherness engendered by one’s direct involvement with the social group...* (qtd. in Sweetman 85; my emphasis)

The creation of fellow-feeling in the exam retrieval lines that we saw in the earlier strip, in which all students know the “ritual folds” of passing or failing papers, the anticipatory glee or gloom in the students waiting to know their grades, or the escalating experience of “difficulty” in going through an exam, is precisely the

"informal, dynamic, and frequently temporary alliances... built around tactility and proxemics..." (Shields qtd. in Sweetman 86), the goal of which is to "allow [them] to generate a certain *puissance* or 'affective warmth,'" which replaces the "loss of self in a group..." (Maffesoli qtd. in Sweetman 86).

It is this loss of self that Abrera addresses, too, in a series of strips entitled "Sayangan ng Brain Cells Org" (Organization of those who waste their brain cells) in the ninth volume of his collected comic strips, *Ilayo Mo Kami Sa Apoy ng Impiyerno* (*Save Us from The Fires of Hell*). What we find here are scenes apparently depicting an association of students, but here we see exactly what Maffesoli notes as modernity's hallmark to strip groups of any real substance, in spite of "the proliferation of associational forms of relationship" (qtd. in Sweetman 85). The very way the characters are drawn in this strip betrays the anonymity of the individual in the group, despite the denoted connection among these characters. Abrera tends to draw the collective as generic figures, very unlike the eight or so recurring characters, a number of which we have earlier seen. In these "organization" strips, aside from one character with spectacles, all others are "blob-like," with no discernible or remarkable features. And while these are as simple as a drawing may get, this kind of abstraction "push[es] 'cartooning' to its limit" (Wolk qtd. in Baetens 95). While Douglas Wolk initially applied this to Andrei Molotiu's collection *Abstract Comics*, he might as well have been speaking of Abrera's blob-like characters: "anyone who's used to reading more conventional sorts of comics is likely to reflexively impose narrative on these abstractions, to figure out just what each panel has to do with the next..." (qtd. in Baetens 95). Certainly, in Abrera, this abstraction is offset by the actual dialogue of these indistinguishable figures, but this experimentation "...[confronts] the reader with an opaque materiality paradoxically highlighted by the figurative dimension of the drawings" (Baetens 97).

In the first sample we see here, there is an organization leader who sets the agenda for the day, a truly intellectual, academic one: the "collection of potent quotes for philosophical discussion and existential pondering" ("Ok... nakaipon na ba tayo ng quotes na potent for philosophical discussion and existential pondering?"; Abrera, IX: 13), which introduces us to the function and nature of this organization. The first panel lulls us into thinking that this group is much like any university group, organized to strengthen bonds among students, as we observe the eager response of one of the members to the day's "agenda": "Affirmative" (IX: 13). This enthusiasm for the group's pursuit is furthered by the leader's rejoinder, "Game!," which already renders this more than just an organizational meeting. "Game" in the Filipino context means "let's start" or "ready, then," and the use of this word would pass muster as another regionalism, except that it in fact gives us a hint of the kind of play that we shall find in the strip as it progresses.

The next panel is again a subtle play of one-upmanship, as the members begin to counter each other's prepared "philosophical musings" which take the form of mangled, indeed, de-formed aphorisms and sayings: one character quotes, "To err is human, to errs is humans," which another rebuts by saying: "Ang buhay ay parang bato, it's hard" ("Life is like a stone; it's hard"), while another adds, "Better late than later" (IX: 13). In keeping with this abrupt and absurd transition, the next characters/group members present Filipino sayings that have now been so taken out of context and are now rendered truly nonsensical, saying: "Matalino man daw ang matsing, matsing pa rin" ("The monkey may be smart, but it still is a monkey"), and "Aanhin pa ang bato kung ang tamaan ay kabayo" ("What is the use of a stone, if it hits a horse?"; IX: 13).



Fig. 2. From *Kikomachine IX: Ilayo Mo Kami Sa Apoy ng Impyerno!*

The humor in this exchange lies in several levels. First, we note, again, the escalation of absurdity in this innocuous conversation. The first three sayings operate on the level of the linguistic, and the play is in the misuse of the English grammar, especially seen in "to errs is humans" and "better late than later." In the first instance, the humor may be activated by the departure of the sentence from the grammatical norm, where the latter example is funny because it operates now on two levels of the comic: we realize that statement has veered away from the original "Better late than never," constituting another departure, but the reader finds humorous, too, the fact that even while the statement has been overtly altered, it still makes some kind of sense. The transposition in "life is like a stone" engenders humor because it is not, in fact, a known aphorism. Not only is there humor in this "invented" saying, the false profundity of this figuration is, like the former "better late than later," a statement about reality that *appears to be* both trite and profound – one scratches one's head at how life is like a stone, but one does not deny that it is hard. The transposition of "hard" as a physical accident to jump to its meaning as "difficult" is one that underscores the incongruous humor here.

In the next two proverbs, the comic lies not in the misuse of language as it does in the actual revision of the saying to obscurity. In these examples, the incongruity is not merely in the comic strip characters' exposition of "wrong" adages; incongruity is activated within the culture that is able to identify the original Filipino proverbs (presumably the readers), which is able to point to another departure here, one that entails now both a logical and a cultural one. The original proverbs that are played with here should really read "Matalino man daw ang matsing, napaglalalangan din" ("The monkey may be *wily*, but there comes a time when it is victimized by someone *wilier*"), working on the personification of the monkey as a mythical trickster, and putting this in the Filipino context of morality, adjuring folk not to be haughty, or to put one over others, and instead practice fairness, because fate has a way of dealing with the prideful. "Aanhin pa ang damo kung patay na ang kabayo" ("What good is grass if the horse is dead?") is a proverb that encourages timeliness especially in terms of extending help to others, cautioning against foot-dragging in extending kindness, or hedging in one's desire to help. So, when the first proverb is transformed into a statement that simply notes the monkey's characteristic (smart, but still a monkey), or when in the latter example, "grass" (*damô*) is changed to a nonsensical replacement, "*batô*" (stone), and the whole sentence now has to do with the horse being hit by the stone, and not about the horse being fed the grass, the reader realizes the gap of meaning that is lost not only in terms of cultural knowledge and mores, but also in terms of recognizing any logic in these resulting "philosophical" statements.

The next sample begins with similar aggregation of the brain-cells-wasting members, but in this strip, they commence by "pondering" a single saying from one of the volunteers: "Give a man a fish you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish you feed him for a lifetime." We can see how this excites the group as the spectacled character comments in approbation: "*Asteeg!*" (63) – an inversion of from the "Filipino" word "*tigas*," literally meaning "strong," which could be translated to mean "cool" or "radical." The syntactic mangling to which we were introduced to in the earlier strip sample becomes all the more ridiculous here. The next member counters by saying: "well, give a fish a man, you feed it for a day. Teach a fish humanity, you feed it for a lifetime." Again, the fellow members are impressed: "Wow. Deep." "Intense." (IX: 63). In the third panel, we see another attempt to give this statement another philosophical twist: "Give a man a teacher, you fish for a day. Teach a man to give, you fish for a lifetime," which now piques the interest of the group more as they remark, "Wow. Pessimistic?" and "Yet with a glimmer of hope" (IX: 63). The dialogue in the last panel veers totally away from meaning as it provides the strip's punchline: "Man a teacher give, a fish you lifetime. Fisherman a day, give a feed you" (IX: 63), and the members are now drawn with faces all agog, eyes bulging, bodies in tremor, as they are blown away by what is supposedly the profundity of this last "saying," hailing it as "erudite," a "post-apocalyptic expressionist poetry" (IX: 63).

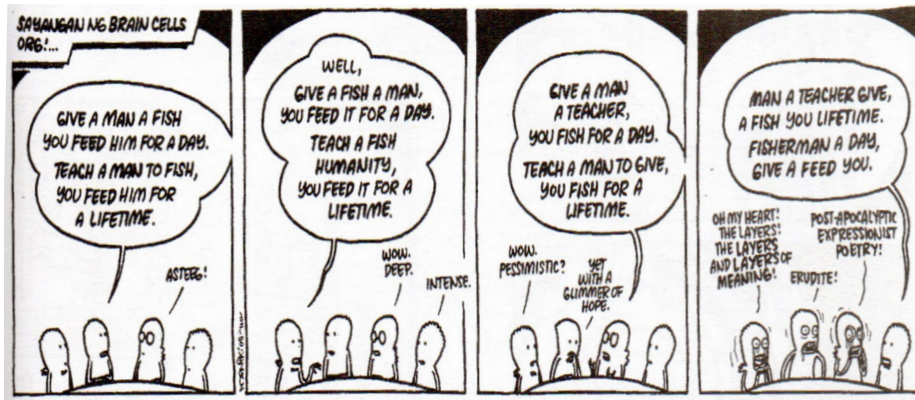


Fig. 3. From *Kikomachine IX: Ilayo Mo Kami Sa Apoy ng Impyerno!*

Humor in these particular strips can be explained by what Charles Osgood calls “semantic distancing,” which is a method he used to quantify incongruity. Osgood and his colleagues posit that concepts that have similar meanings are stored in a “cognitive space,” and those that are very different in meaning are stored at different locations. Hence, within incongruity, the funniness of words depends on the discrepancy between these words within semantic space. In Osgood’s experiments, words with high semantic distance—those that do not usually occur together—evoked the highest degree of funniness and were met with smiling and laughter (qtd. in Martin 92). Indeed, when we see the leader of the organization in the third panel of Abrera’s strip pronounce this a “good job,” and exhort his members to “existential pondering,” this punctuates not just this semantic distance that we have already earlier noted, but underscores too the gap between what had begun as a promising intellectual exchange, which has now become truly farcical, especially when the members are actually drawn making “pondering” sounds: one says “uhhhh,” another an almost mantra-like “mmm...” (Abrera, IX: 13). The strip’s title and the organization’s name, become then more than just an ambitiously funny appellation that is unacceptable and abnormal as a university association’s name; it is even more comic because we apprehend exactly how these members of the group have truly “wasted their brain cells.”

The state of the youth as subculture is one that we should examine in what could have been construed as a trivial strip. Abrera, as he does in many other strips, consciously parodies groups and individuals that over-intellectualize knowledge by poking fun at the very meat of this knowledge, which in this case is the esoterica of philosophy. But what he also presents here is the alienation of youth and the formation of cliques that is the mark of this youth culture. John Cotterell notes that the simple “acceptance of a social category as applying to oneself can be sufficient

for *psychological group formation*" (35), and while many adolescent crowd types have the tendency "to establish distinctive peer subcultural identities" by way of "style," exhibited in clothing, hair styling, manner of speaking and behaving (37), the manner by which the members of the "Sayangan ng Brain Cells Org" is drawn defies this visible mark of association. The nature of the group itself does coincide, however, with typologies of adolescent youth in many studies. For instance, Carey Denholm uses the term "nerds" as a type of peer crowd group in Tasmania in a 1992 study:

Group	Appearance	Activities	Music	Phrases
...Nerds	cords, skivvies ... out-of-fashion shoes, <i>short hair</i> , <i>glasses</i>	debating, doing charity work, programming their IBM, playing monopoly	Classical, top 40, country and western	<i>Terrific! I know the answer.</i>

(in Cotterell 37; my emphasis)

Again, we note here that while the characters in this particular strip do not reflect these clothing, music style, or activities, we could see, in their amorphousness, hints of the characteristics Denholm outlined. We especially note the identifying phrase Denholm indicated here because this is the very tone used by the "brain cells" members as they replied to their leader. Though we do not quite see here the identifiable markers that are distinctive to youth subcultures or youth crowd types, we nevertheless aver that in "creating" this organization, we see this as "emotionally supportive structures, affirming the individual members as somebodies with distinctive personalities" (44). "Distinction" sounds absurdly paradoxical given the almost non-distinctive faces and bodies in the strip, but what is significant in this group is "attachment relation" in which an "affective bond" is seen among its members (44). The clique or the crowd is more than just a collection of individuals, it now becomes a discrete social unit that affirms the "desire for a personal, affective response from a few other individuals" (44). So, while the organization in Abrera's strip provides the primary context for laughter by way of its ludicrously named group, underlying this humor is the function of subgroups like this one to hedge against the sense of emotional and social loneliness that the transition to university likely creates (Cotterell 79). What Paul Hodkinson notes as overlapping meanings of terms referring to these alternative cultural formations—"neo-tribes," "lifestyles," "scenes," "postmodern subcultures," "bünde"—supports this view, because substantively, this clique/crowd formation as an instance of the neo-tribe or of a youth subculture, no matter how incongruously conceived or presented, possesses and exhibits a similar "consistent distinctiveness in group values and tastes, a strong sense of *shared identity*, *practical commitment* among participants, and a significant degree of *autonomy* in the facilitation and operation of the group" (140-143).

Resistance and Everyday Life in Kikomachine

Another way by which we could examine the content of Abrera's comic texts is to look at the way it presents everyday life as the terrain in which youth local culture is enacted and engaged. In the many strips he creates in these collections, the reader is privy to aspects of dormitory life, rent-paying, food trips, university fairs, or students negotiating technology and public transportation such as jeepneys and taxi cabs, problematizing appearance and relationships, thus depicting ways by which the everyday is reckoned with here. Everyday life refers to "the most repeated actions, the most travelled journeys, the most inhabited spaces that make up, literally, day to day... the landscape closest to us, the world most immediately met... the everyday as value and quality... (Highmore 1), and it is in this realm that we wish to study the laughable rituals and practices that Abrera's characters evince.

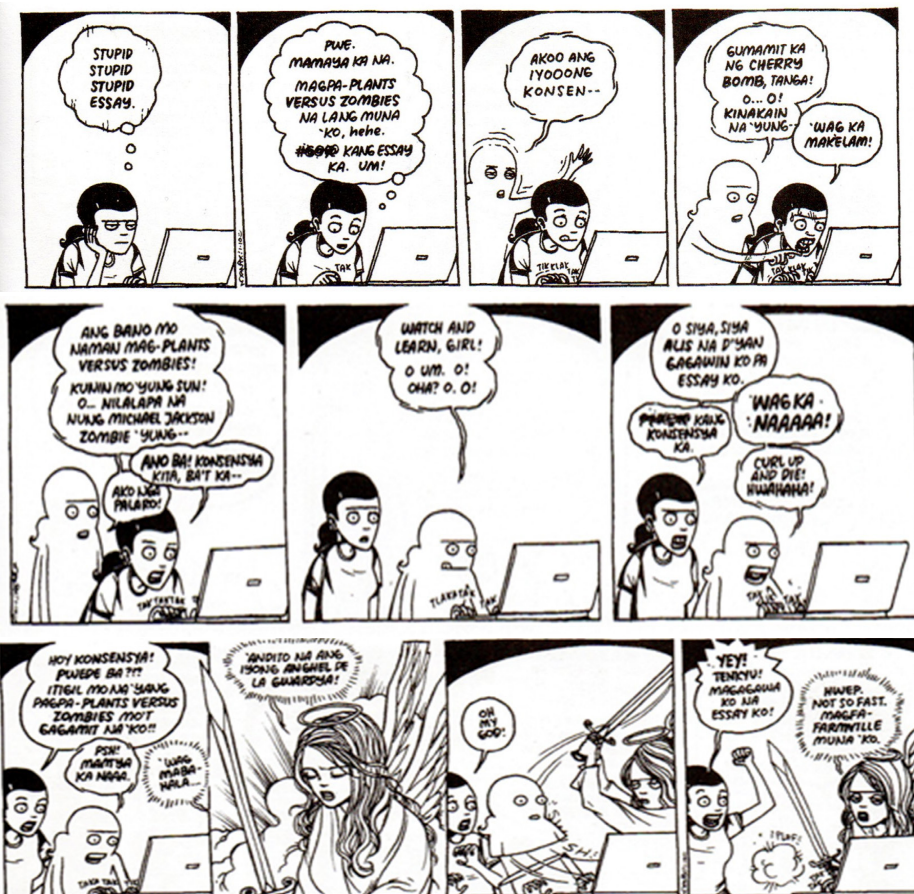
It is useful, at this juncture, to cite Alex Demirovic's definition of subversion and resistance. He speaks of subversion as "undermin[ing] ... established and naturalized practices," and resistance as a "turn[ing] against the practices of power" (32), a "negation of the existing order" (33), in which "power, police, hegemony, and the identitary logic of fixed identities" always seek to close the space in which subversion and resistance operate (32).

Demirovic stresses that subversion and resistance "*are not 'one-off' acts*" (32; my emphasis). In the first place, resistance undergoes shifts, such as when resistance oscillates from being an act of negation and becomes a corroborative or supportive act, even while at the same time it maintains a "critical and oppositional potential," and therefore a wholly formal definition of it is virtually unsustainable. Also, the resistance of a social group is always influenced by the discharge of power and domination by other groups, and resistance is itself the consequence of the power of these other bodies. Resistance is therefore always "subaltern," "always and only defined by that which the other group—those in power— does..." (33). Lastly, the fluidity of resistance is manifested by the fact that even if we were to allow those in resistance to achieve success, this instance only breeds another "newly constituted discriminated and oppressed subject and its new, different, as yet unknown type of resistance" (33).

The samples chosen here will focus on recognizable practices and beliefs in which we find Abrera's young characters resisting normalcy and acceptability within the confines of societal hierarchy and structures.

In these initial samples, we look at the way Abrera's youth negotiate technology. In the first set, we see ponytailed hair girl needing to write a paper, and she is shown as glum and resentful in the first panel. She resorts to procrastinating by playing

“Plants versus Zombies” on her laptop, but as she begins to do so, her conscience—drawn here as another amorphous figure—appears to her. The “conscience figure” already introduces herself to the girl, and presumably is supposed to set her aright. She helps the girl all right, but does not direct her to write the essay, and instead instructs her on the best strategy to win the computer game. The next strip continues with the “conscience” now hogging the laptop and continuing the “Plants versus Zombies” game, and becomes even more addicted to it than the girl is. In the following strip, “conscience” is so glued to the laptop that the student could not now use it to write her essay. Her guardian angel appears to help her vanquish “conscience”, illustrated here as a glorious figure equipped with a sword, the angel cuts “conscience” in half where she sits. In the punchline of the strip we see ponytailed hair girl gleefully thanking her guardian angel: “Yey! Tenkyu! Magagawa ko na essay ko!” (“Great! Thanks! Now I can work on my essay!”), to which the guardian angel replies, “Hwep. Not so fast. Magfa-Farmville muna ‘ko” (“I’m going to play Farmville first””; Abrera, VII: 75).



Figs. 4-6. From *Kikomachine Komix 7: Sorrowful, Sorrowful Mysteries*.

In another strip we find the actual intersection of the natural world and the digital one, as Abrera references the way technology and social networking surfaced in the “Ondoy” flooding in September 2009. Here, ponytailed hair girl and her dormitory roommate are on the roof of a presumably flooded building. While waiting to be rescued, huddled under an umbrella, “Ponytail” is amazed at how her dorm mate was able to bring her laptop with her, and her roommate said that she did so because social networking sites are very helpful: “Oo! Malaki matutulong ng social networking sites ngayon!” (VII: 7). “Ponytail” urges “Roommate” to use her computer to let others know that they are safe on that roof. “Roommate” relays that she has no *Facebook* account yet, and though “Ponytail” offers her own *Facebook* account, the roommate wishes to create her own because “that will be more memorable” to her. The strip ends with the two having waited for four hours already, both cold and drenched, and “Ponytail” impatiently asking, “Is it up already?” (“Wala pa ba?”; VII: 7), which literally means, “isn’t it there yet?” We see roommate saying, “Wait di pa ‘ko makapili ng profile pic e! Don’t pressure me!!” (“Wait, I can’t choose what profile picture to use!”; VII: 7).



Fig. 7. From *Kikomachine Komix 7: Sorrowful, Sorrowful Mysteries*.

In the first strip, the young student character engages with cyberspace, which is “conceptualized ... as a reality which is separate from our everyday lives... one [enters] the Internet world, thus leaving everyday life behind” (Hellenga 217). By deciding to play the computer game instead of writing the “stupid essay”, the student not only enters the social world of the Internet, she decides to free herself from “the usual complement of values and behavioral norms” (217). Writing the essay is part of the world of work, and the young woman’s resentment of it is part of the “boredom of everyday city life [which] is the boredom of the assembly line, of one thing after another, of pieces locked in an infinite series that never really progresses: the more it changes, the more it remains the same” (Langbauer qtd. in Highmore 6). Academic requirements are supposed to be intellectual work, very different from “manual,” “assembly line work,” but the context of this boredom allies this mental work to factory work, the student churning out requirement after requirement, making it a “wearisome routine of endless drudgery in which the same mechanical process

is... repeated..." (Marx qtd. in Highmore 6). In this strip, the world of work and university expectations recedes, in fact disappears, in a "place" that provides her with "many liberties," a "place" "which imposes very few limits on speech, behavior, or relationships" (Hallenga 217).

The introduction of mythical/fantastical authority figures in the forms of "conscience" and the "guardian angel" does two things here. There is an activation of humor in the insertion of these "unreal" characters in the real, and indeed, workaday world. "Conscience" is supposed to embody the normal behavioral norms, as conscience in reality functions to provide a guide to moral, ethical life—a student is supposed to devote her/himself to the life of the mind—and "conscience" here appears to begin to make this reminder. But, aside from the few moments when she appears soberly in the second frame, the inversion is introduced at once, and she is depicted as even more avid in playing the game, going so far as to give the girl strategies to win the game, and later taking over the laptop completely to vanquish the digital "monsters" instead of providing the student strategies to write the essay. That the student reverts back to treading the scholarly path as she decides to return to writing her essay is another inversion in this frame.

Another quirky aspect of "conscience" here also lies in its conception not as an ethical figure, but already as a product of a Filipino consumer system: "Ako ang iyong konsensiya" ("I am your conscience") seems like an innocuous introduction here, but is really a famous tagline for a bath soap advertisement in the 1970s. So here, we have another aspect of the real/unreal and now the hyperreal fermenting in this strip and contributing to its incongruity.

The "guardian angel" that vanquishes the addicted "conscience" is supposed to represent righteous behavior even more but is depicted to be as coopted by digital gaming as the other two were. Both these authority figures "seem to have continued the process of 'juvenilization' associated with leisure pastimes... in particular with notions of playing games" (Sefton-Green 3). If online games are part of the association of games with play and childhood, and these authority figures are 'juvenilized' by these current online game fads, then the ponytailed hair girl experiences "adultification" in two senses here: first, in this unlikely trio, she emerges as the most rational and as having the most control, and therefore, the most "adult," even while this is belied in the beginning of this narrative. Also, her entry into the digital realm allows her to maneuver in it "with the equivalence of grown-up power" (3). In the digital age, youth and adulthood are also reckoned with differently, because

being an adult in the digital age... may involve this concession to one's latent childishness... By the same token, young people can use digital technologies to act in the adult realm, an arena traditionally denied them

in economic and social terms... Similarly, being online is not a body-dependent activity and therefore age is not the barrier it conventionally is in a face-to-face social encounter (4).

In the second strip, we are lulled into thinking that the comic merely rests on the ludicrousness of accessing one's Facebook account in the midst of a disastrous metro flooding, but this in fact pales in comparison to the reality of how the medium and the platform were used to broadcast the status of people who were actually trapped in their homes or on their roofs in the height of the storm "Ondoy," which extensively flooded areas of Metro Manila and led to deaths and destruction in the city. That we have two young women depicted in this situation seems simply to borrow from reality. However, that the expectation of help and the return to normalcy so sought after here is impeded not by the use of digital technology itself but by the preference to "style" oneself in preparation for presenting the self to the possible rescuing world, and by the very presence of this option, seen in the choice of "profile pics."

While we are hailing here the truly creative use of the internet as a "meeting place and a worldwide bulletin board for a vast array of cultural subgroups... who would not normally have access to other people 'like them'" (Hellenga 224), in this strip the communal appeal of "Facebooking" is far outweighed by its nature as an outlet for adolescents to "[experiment] with their social selves," thus also highlighting their struggles "with the incongruity between an internal sense of emerging adulthood an external experience of being treated 'like a child'" (224). Taking four hours under the rain to choose a profile picture is synecdochical to the attempt of a young person to take advantage of this medium for "maximum self-presentation by commission and omission" (Schnarch qtd. in Hellenga 226).

This also plays into the idea that the "presentation of the self" that is depicted in this strip is "subcultural noise" [as opposed to sound]—"interference in the orderly sequence which leads from real events and phenomena to their representation in the media" (Hebdige qtd. in Barker 415). Agonizing over the choice of the profile picture presupposes an attempt at styling the self, which we now note not simply as a choice of individual acceptable markers like clothing or hairstyle, but a whole gamut of "modes of dress, ritual, argot" that are resignified and represented (Barker 415). The "acceptable" presentation of one's self signals the tendency of youth culture to possess a "...stylistic similarity and a shared, unified semiotic space, shared symbols; a unified music scene; and a unified space of communication, formed as a result of the commonality of objects of the infrastructure..." pointing to membership in, if not an association with, common clubs, stores frequented, or magazines read (Latysheva).

In the strip, this presentation seems to be an individual choice, and appears rather random and eccentric, but the youth's choice of a distinct style "have long been recognized as key elements in young people's expression, exploration and making of their own individual and collective identities, and remain amongst [sic] the most visible forms of symbolic cultural creativity and informal artistry..." (Willis 85).

In this last set of strips, I wish to highlight Abrera's penchant for presenting ways by which the supernatural invades student life and its daily routine, and the way the traditional is upended by these depictions. In one, we see the introduction of what could be construed as an urban legend, the statue of the infant Jesus, the Santo Niño, coming to life in a student dormitory. Goth girl character informs her fellow dormitory renter, the Afro-haired young man, that the owner of the dormitory brought a statue of the Santo Niño to the dorm. "Afro Hair" does not see anything remarkable about it, and "Goth girl" replies: "yes, if you aren't a scaredy-cat" ("ok kung dehins ka matatakutin, tsong"; Abrera, VII: 8). She proceeds to inform "Afro Hair" that there are stories about the Santo Niño being a "playful" statue, and that there are times when the scepter it holds is moved from one hand to the other, or that "one could hear tiny footsteps in the house, sounds of running, passing by rooms, followed by high-pitched laughter" and when people look into the rooms they find the Santo Niño "smiling at them" (VII: 78). She punctuates this storytelling by saying that "Afro Hair" will be all alone in the dormitory that night as all the others will be out.



Figs. 8-9. From *Kikomachine Komix 7: Sorrowful, Sorrowful Mysteries*.

In the next set of strips, it is nighttime, and “Afro Hair” is studying in his room. He tries to bolster his courage by telling himself that the story of the Santo Niño coming to life at night is not true, and that it is simply a figment of overactive imaginations (Abrera VII: 79), but humor is activated here as we find in that same panel all the markers of the Santo Niño’s arrival – the “*klakklaklak*” of footsteps, the “*aheeheehee*” of the high-pitched laughter (VII: 79). Even while “Afro Hair” tries to convince himself that the sounds must be made by burglars, we see the Santo Niño in its regalia sporting a freaky smile and saying, “malinis ba ang iyong konsyensya?” (“Is your conscience clean?”; VII: 79). In another strip, “Afro Hair” continues his denial of this strange visitation, saying “it is not real,” “don’t think about it,” “it will pass,” while all through the panels we see the Santo Niño roaming about, and in the last panel, it actually climbs over “Afro Hair’s” head to grin at him face to face.



Fig. 10. From *Kikomachine Komix 9: Ilayo Mo Kami Sa Apoy ng Impyerno!*

In a similar set of strips, we find almost the same narrative development. The roommates that we featured earlier in the paper, who were trapped on the roof in the midst of floods, we now see in their dormitory, and the “Profile Pic” girl arrives complaining: “Aaaaaghh! Ang sakit sa uloooh! Exagge na yung acads, mga balita sa bansa, social life ko, nagkakandaletse-letse sabay-sabay! Ahrgh!” (“What a headache! Academic life is so exaggerated, and then there’s all the news about the country and my social life have all gone haywire!”; Abrera, IX: 86). She talks about all these triggering her migraine, and in much the same way “Afro Hair” thought the story of the strange statue was just a tall tale, “Ponytail” thinks a migraine is a normal consequence of juggling a chaotic student life. In a bid to create some kind of fellow-feeling, she asks, “So, what do you do when you get a migraine—do you pull your hair or hit your head against the wall?” In the last panel, the reply she gets is a nonverbal one as we see images of the pentagram and “666” on the dormitory room walls, her roommate transformed into a possessed creature, tearing what appears to be the Bible (IX: 86). And much like “Afro Hair,” “Ponytail” tries to play it cool by interpreting all of her roommate’s “symptoms” as either caused by stress or migraine:

Ok. Easy lang. Sige, lumulutang na 'sya sa kama. Okay. Kanya-kanyang drama naman yan pag mina-migraine eh... nagthi-thirty-degrees na ang ulo. Well, hardcore migraine n'ya e. That's her. Kung ako sinasabunutan ko sarili ko, s'ya ganyan.

(Okay, take it easy. She's floating above the bed... well, everyone has her own drama when a migraine strikes... now her head's turning thirty degrees... well, that's a hardcore migraine she's got...I'd be pulling my hair, but that's how she is.; IX: 87).

Where "Afro Hair" continues to deny the presence of the Santo Niño until the end, the rationalizations we find in this strip are countered by the last panels in which we find the roommate, eerily saying, "Psst, oh dear roommate, papatayin kita... papatayin kita sa pagtulog mo. Hmwahaha!" ("I'm going to kill you... I'm going to kill you when you fall asleep.;" IX: 87). Much like "Afro Hair's" reassurances to himself, "Ponytail" puts on an innocent face and says the same things—"it'll pass," "cool it." In a similar conclusion, where the Santo Niño is undeniably present because it peers into "Afro Hair's" face, the roommate is now on the ceiling right above "Ponytail," coaxing her to sleep, and "Ponytail" concentrates on her book, blocking this "evil" out.

In the last strip, we go back to "Afro Hair" and "Goth Girl," again in the dormitory, and now encountering the usual electrical blackout that accompanies torrential rains. "Goth Girl" invites "Afro Hair" to join them "while the setting and the mood are perfect..." to "play with unknown and mysterious forces," punctuating this with diabolical laughter and the lighting of candles. In the last panel, however, "Afro Hair" does join "them", but "them" shows Goth Girl with a nerdy-looking girl in glasses. They ask each other "what force is needed if the acceleration is..." "if friction has been taken into account..." (IX: 88). What is expectedly a séance or a Ouija board game, or a mystical communion with unseen forces ends up being a tutorial about literal unseen forces in physics.

In these strips, which are in fact representative of many other comics strip topics Abrera uses, we find the juxtaposition between the routine of everyday life and the mythical/mystical traditions, beliefs, and rituals of Filipino life. Here, everyday life continues to be located within the terrain of study/university work, and we say this is so even while the dormitory serves as a temporary home/domicile because this site is really an adjunct of the school, constituting for the youth/student an impermanent stay within the environs nearest to the university. In addition to this, we find that the characters Abrera uses in these particular strips all end up being marked by study as a defining and literal act, thus reinforcing the currency of study as part of, and indeed, indicative of the quotidian in this visual text. That we see

these characters “battle” with, or better yet, rationalize these strange experiences and struggle to invest these with logical meaning within a dormitory setting illustrates how dorm experiences are “a very significant part of the life of the youth... prepar[ing them] for self-independence and autonomy... [and] provid[ing] a transition to act out adult roles and identities” (Lanuza 63).

In these strips, we see the characters, and Abrera, not just making fun of traditional Christian Catholic beliefs in the Infant Jesus, or in the concept of possession by evil spirits. The comic is actually mined in the most stereotypical aspects of these beliefs, in which we find the spiritual taking on truly native turns. The Infant Jesus is not just a holy deity, but one whose power is now made manifest now that it can mysteriously roam around and speak almost like a possessed doll, which, while extremely outré and almost blasphemous, is no more strange than dressing it up in many different “costumes” (Santo Niño as a fireman, farmer, police officer, basketball player), “babied,” and expected to grant wishes. The migraine-suffering roommate takes on the most dangerous transformation as an extreme response to academic burdens, as she changes into a possessed entity whose joy is to kill her dormitory mate. That the burden of work/study is embodied here by actual corporeal changes is itself a “stylization” of this resistance to real life.

Style refers to more than just appearance or overt manners of behavior—style is “a signifying practice that is an obviously fabricate display of codes of meaning” (Barker, *Making* 169). And while here we do not see stylization in the form of clothing, hairstyle, and other fashion accoutrements, the apparent change in the roommate’s body (in the voice mostly, signified by the “chill” in drawn dialogue callouts, or the evil demeanor, or the incredible positioning of the body on the ceiling) is the “form of symbolic resistance forged on the terrain of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic struggle” (Barker 415). The expected séance that ends up being a physics tutorial in the last strip mocks the notion of “mysterious” forces, which also pokes fun at the penchant of the Filipino to assume an extra/supernatural aspect to daily life.

In these strips, the official, institutional religious beliefs are burlesqued as a tactic for the youth to make a statement about the absurdity of study as “la vie quotidienne” – “the ordinary, the banal...”, what connotes “continual recurrence, insistent repetition” (Highmore 128).

When we laugh at the insertion/intrusion of these spooky supernatural narratives, we laugh in familiarity at the trivialization of the operation of the mystical in Filipino culture, but we also laugh at the way dormitory life and study are “routinized” and “mechanized”, and the way to rebel against this repetitive life is to animate its

characters/actors by way of an improbable script/narrative that resists the authority of normalcy. The weaving of the supernatural story as a horror story is a tactical resistance, a “ruse... of everyday life ... that seek to make space habitable” (Barker, “Making” 172); “...the weak... continually turn[ing] to their own ends forces alien to them...” (de Certeau 70). Here, the supernatural narrative is met at all times by the rhetoric of disbelief, the discourse of the normal, and the dormitory as space for study is set both as a site for work while being at the same time a grotesque space of “rituals, games, mockeries, and profanities” (Barker, “Making” 171). Youth in these strips is seen both as a “source of social change”, in terms of the study as transforming knowledge, and “as a potential threat to the existing social order” (Cloete), in making this a truly carnivalesque, transgressive site.

Conclusion: Flogging freakery and instantiating resistance

We have read Manix Abrera's *Kikomachine* as the Philippines' current comic narrative which specializes in the depiction of youth within Filipino life and culture, and we have examined Abrera's visual texts as a successful presentation of how humor is activated as a way for young people to craft youth identity/ies within a university/ study milieu, using the experiences incurred within this site to resist the routinization of study as part of Filipino everyday life, as well as to foreground subterranean values that interrogate “middle-class values of work and success” (Cohen qtd. in Barker 411).

Abrera has presented aspects of Filipino life lived by the adolescent characters with which he peopled his comic strips as creating a new realm within Filipino culture itself, by way of the incongruous takes that these young characters have invested these aspects of Filipino life, from negotiating the university and its denizens—professors, classmates, peers, dormitory mates— to maneuvering life on campus and dealing with cheap food, organizations, or transportation concerns. We have sited resistance here in two ways: first, by looking at how the university or school itself becomes a distinct space in which we find youth as a subordinate social force, adopting the humor of incongruity as a tactic to interrogate the dominant culture, which in these strips is seen under the rubric of the authority of the normal and the mainstream. We find the youth characters in these strips, and their many depictions, inscribed within the space of abnormality, irregularity, and unacceptability, and through these they are able to ridicule either those who are in power or those who hold some kind of power or authority, and put in place or retaliate against visible representatives of ruling-class culture (see Bennett in Barker, *Cultural* 433). School is traditionally deemed a “social institution provides a preparatory transition

beyond family socialization to [the] adult social world” (Lanuza 80), but in Abrera’s strips that we examined here, school becomes a “discursive construction that is the target of emotional identification or investment” (Barker, *Making* 73). As Michael Brake puts it,

youth as a homogeneous group is now rejected.... Subcultures arise as attempts to resolve collectively experienced problems resulting from contradictions in the social structure... they generate a form of collective identity from which an individual identity can be achieved outside that ascribed by class, education and occupation (qtd. in Barker, *Cultural* 411).

The university functions “to shape spaces for alternative experiences and to rewrite scripts of social reality, furnishing solutions to the existential dilemmas of identity” (411). In Abrera’s comics, though, we find, too, a melding of school and real life and the creation of distinct responses to the incongruous aspects of regular activities that mark schooling as its own microculture, and therefore school as adolescent space in Abrera’s text “offers a form of collective identity different from that of school and work” (411).

Another aspect of Abrera’s *Kikomachine* strips that this paper dwelt on is its presentation of study as integral to everyday life. Looking at the way the prosaic nature of study is juxtaposed against, and indeed, interwoven into, high technology, on the one hand, and into traditional supernatural beliefs, on the other, solidifies our view that youth creates here new identifications with culture, and points to the reality that the apparent regularity of everyday life misleads us into thinking that this routine is monolithically seamless. What, in fact, we realize in these strips is that strangeness lies at the heart of the everyday, bearing witness not to the normalcy of youth but to youth’s “fragmented self,” “not one self waiting to be discovered but a multitude of often contradictory and diverse selves occupying [sometime fleeting] positions in discourse... the meaning of selves is not fixed but fluid: continually constructed and reconstructed” (Widdicombe and Wooffitt 108). Not only do we have multiple recurring characters that Abrera utilizes to establish diverse perspectives and persons here, but even Abrera’s penchant to weave definite characters and amorphous ones highlights the variety of selves in the strips.

Lastly, while we have been noting Abrera’s humor in these strips as a tactic that delineates how Filipino youth culture is created, we have to address, too, the nature of the resistance that Abrera makes operative in these strips. In most of the strips across Abrera’s collections, what we see depicted are not the extreme forms of youth subcultures (although he does have recurring Goth-girl characters in the series), which are so marked by morally deviant behavior. More visible in his strips is the more traditional reference to family, to peers, and remarkably, to God. Abrera

dedicates strips that have actual references to religion, albeit humorously (for instance, he has a whole series about the use of the Internet to modernize the way the country's Lenten traditions are observed). Aside from these, we note that though strange and almost freakish, Abrera's many characters are made to spout religious epithets as part of the emphasis in the dialogues used in these strips, as ways to deal with comic burdens and difficulties.

We find a parallel to this depiction in what Filipino sociologist Gerardo Lanuza noted in his research on youth cultures in the University of the Philippines, which is particularly apropos given that Abrera mines UP student and campus culture for his comics. Lanuza stated that "the current dominant culture of UP students is almost a replica of the dominant, adult culture" (134), a culture that is marked by "general conservatism" (119) and a centering of the roles of family and religion (118), and of peer influence (120). But in the midst of what appears to be a cooptation to this dominant traditional Filipino culture, Abrera rightly documents the way youth culture/subculture in *Kikomachine* carves strategic positions of resistance and spaces of negotiation that Lanuza sees in the way youth/campus subcultures and countercultures "practice nonnormative actions" in everyday life (134). Where Lanuza refers to these "nonnormative actions" in terms of "sexual liberation, performing delinquent behaviors, holding radical beliefs and ideologies," we see Abrera doing something more subtly subversive, which is to inscribe resistance within the matrices of the ordinary and the everyday, using the guises of humor to show how Filipino youth culture within the university reclassifies and defamiliarizes the "taken-for-granted-ness" of the Filipino lived experience to present new articulations and interpretations of it.

NOTES

1. Abrera's use of abstract figuration extends into later compilations of "wordless" *Kikomachine* strips (*12: Silent Comics*, published 2009, and *14: Silent Comics*, published 2014). Abrera also uses the same abstract techniques in his online comic strip *News Hardcore* (currently available under www.gmanetwork.com).
2. While this paper examined strips from *Kikomachine* Issues 1, 5, 7, and 9, there are, to date, fifteen issues already published, the most recent of which is *Kikomachine Komix Blg. 15: Bulwagan ng Misteryo*.
3. All dialogue quotes in Filipino taken from Abrera's comic strips, comics collection titles, and other terms in Filipino from the comics used in this article were translated into English by the author, as was the excerpt of the interview comment by Abrera on page 16.

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