

BALAGTAS' FOURTH REVOLT IN DEAD BALAGTAS

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Abstract

This paper looks into the influence of the poet Francisco Balagtas (1788-1862) on the webcomics *Dead Balagtas* (2013-present) by Emiliana Kampilan, who acknowledges that her work tries to express the revolts of its namesake. Kampilan is an avatar / character / author created by an anonymous author. In the essay “Apat na Himagsik ni Balagtas” (Four Revolts of Balagtas) (1988), Lope K. Santos enumerated what the poet was revolting against: cruel government, religious conflict, bad attitude, and mediocre literature. This paper focuses on the last revolt to show how Kampilan leads by example of what an imagetext (Mitchell 1994) can be and how the medium operates toward potential “critical comedy” (McGowan 2014). As Balagtas utilized the popular form of awit or corrido to interrogate colonialism and its consequences, Kampilan maximizes contemporary web komix that references various types of texts to critically analyze neocolonialism, neoliberalism and hegemony. She also mocks the privileged status and sense of entitlement of the elite and the middle class—those expected to access, read, and understand her works; thus, the avatar-author, being a petty bourgeois herself, exhibits self-reflexivity and encourages an attitude of being self- and class-critical among her target readers. By combining elements that appeal to consumers of popular entertainment as well as to students and enthusiasts of literature and history, Kampilan proposes a novel way of creating komix, and, in the process, advances a standard that balances complex forms with substantial content.

Introduction

My paper “Ilang Himagsik ng *Dead Balagtas*” (“Some Revolts of *Dead Balagtas*”), presented at the Pandaigdigang Kongreso sa Araling Filipinas sa Wikang Filipino (International Congress on Philippine Studies in the Filipino Language) in August 2017, attempted to contextualize the work of Emiliana Kampilan and to categorize her available online komix strips within the “four revolts” of Francisco Balagtas (1788-1862), as enumerated and discussed in an essay written by Lope K. Santos (1988).

For Santos, the poet Balagtas revolted against cruel government, religious conflict, bad attitude, and mediocre literature. Since the aforementioned paper discussed all four revolts, this article may mention the first three from time to time but will opt to focus on a more comprehensive study of the fourth revolt, which implicitly advocates sophisticated and high-quality literature that reward intermediate and advanced readers who are attentive to detail, curious of practical, even philosophical, truths and keen on references. In decoding and bridging the gaps between the panels, the komix strips official historical and literary texts naked, giving the pusong (trickster) author and her readers a chance to subversively smile and strategize against the cruel neocolonial government, the dogmatic religion of neoliberalism, and outmoded feudal culture—three revolts that spring from the fourth which intends to popularize and raise the standards of imagetexts. Of course, there exist barriers to the appreciation of the komix strips, which include requisite familiarity of the language, history, and culture, not just of the Filipinos, but also of the middle class who spend time stuck in the Web.

Before the YouTube video on the internet and the series on television, there was the awit, or the epic poem, as entertainment to common people; among the most popular of such epic poems were those by Balagtas. Regarded as a proto-ilustrado, he was considered as a precursor of both Andres Bonifacio, founder of the Katipunan, and Jose Rizal, the national hero of the Philippines (Santos 1988, 68; Agoncillo 1988, 207) and among the key figures of the Propaganda Movement. Ilustrados, literally “enlightened”, were

Filipino men during the Spanish colonial period of the Philippines, most of whom had studied in Europe. Rizal and Bonifacio form the dichotomy of the ilustrado-plebeian, pitted against each other by scholars who argue about whether an armed revolution or a step-by-step reform takes precedence in emancipation and eventually nation-building; I believe that both strategies can be utilized, as one can complement the other.

Various sources mention that during Rizal's travels in Europe, he brought with him an 1870 edition of Balagtas's renowned awit or narrative poem *Florante at Laura* (Mojares 2006a, 409; Mojares 1983, 75; Agoncillo 1988, 206; Sevilla 1997, 2) and that Apolinario Mabini, another ilustrado regarded as "the sublime paralytic", knew the aforementioned work so well that upon being ridiculed and challenged by an American captain to show him a poem by the greatest Filipino writer, Mabini wrote down Balagtas's *Florante at Laura* from memory (Lumbera 1986, 92; Sevilla 1997, 3). Tagalog poetry is so indebted to Balagtas that even a form of verbal joust that became popular after his time was named after him: Balagtasan. Advanced for its time, *Florante at Laura* could have been among the pioneering anti-feudal and anti-colonial literature, especially because its conceived prototype of a nation includes the Moro or the Muslims who were excluded by the Spanish colonial government as part and parcel of the Spanish empire's divide and conquer tactics.

Kampilan knows her history well and in announcing the death of Balagtas, she pays her respects and acknowledges the poet's ingenuity of combining popular and literary qualities. Despite her declaration that the period of great heroes is over, Kampilan's work retains the exquisite recognition Balagtas' influence which manifests in her anonymity, references to history, literature, popular culture, and tendency to communicate with her readers, just like Balagtas. Just like the awit in the 19th century, komiks of the early 20th century was a popular medium not taken seriously by authorities because it was considered "low art", "cheap" and "uncultured" and therefore not a real threat to the powers-that-be. As the dominant ideological state apparatus gradually changed from the Church of the Spanish colonizers to the school of the

Americans, komiks was derided as the “devil in new attire” (Jurilla 2008, 128-129) that tempted children away from reading and literacy. Now, komix remains outside the canon of high literature, relatively speaking; hence, the “x” in my use of the term, stemming from the neologism “ilustraxon” which describes how komix operates and produces meaning (Acuña 2018). The term komix is used throughout the article to imply a kind of Filipinoness and contemporariness, distinguishing it from the Western comics, the underground comix of the sixties (in Europe and America), and the classic Filipino komiks that had its “golden years” in the fifties (Lent 2009, 72).

Implicitly proposing a new standard of komix, Kampilan’s oeuvre forwards the fourth revolt, which arguably encompasses the other three. A new aesthetic espouses new content and substance, which implies the necessity and the imperative to imagine another possible society, free from any cruel government, religious conflicts, and problematic attitude toward other people. Kampilan’s objects of ridicule include government officials, friars, and ilustrados who often exhibit contempt toward the lower classes. Because of this context, the komix strips from *Dead Balagtas* to be analyzed in this paper feature William Howard Taft, Padre Damaso, and Jose Rizal.

In performing the analysis, I use W. J. T. Mitchell’s theories on verbal and visual representations. Using typographical marks, W.J.T. Mitchell (1994, 89n) shows how image and text engage in a dialectic: the two synthesize in *imagetext*, relate in *image-text*, and rupture in *image/text*. The *imagetext* manifests itself in media such as komix. Texts, however, can contradict or become the image, which can trick the spectator or reader. Classic examples cited by Mitchell (and McCloud [1994]) include Rene Magritte’s *La Trahison des Images* (*The Treachery of Images* [1928-1929]) which shows an image of a pipe with the text “Cest n’est pas une pipe” (This is not a pipe) and speech balloons which show words that readers are supposed to hear. The painting of a pipe is, however, not a pipe, and audio from speech balloons and sound effects within komix panels are never “heard”. We fill in the gaps and interpret the images, depending on what we know. The panels offer images and our minds conclude through “closure” (McCloud 1994, 63).

All, then, is not what they seem. In *Dead Balagtas*, we traverse time-space continuums that somewhat make sense by defying common sense. Perhaps, Art Spiegelman (quoted in Rosenkranz 2009, 27) is somehow correct in his remark that the aspiration of the form (comics or komix) for recognition as “art and literature” is an anachronism, especially in its attempt to transform itself from being an “icon of literacy” to being “last bastions of literacy”. Decades ago, most komix belonged to the former; now, it seems that Kampilan and a handful of other komix creators are approximating the latter.

Anachronicles of the Contemporary

Anachronism is one of the many devices Kampilan uses (or exploits, with wit and brilliance) to enunciate certain degrees of laughter, depending on the understanding and experience shared by the author and the reader. Her komix simultaneously chronicles the past and the present by weaving together objects from different timelines into one strip—reminiscent of Kate Beaton’s *Hark! A Vagrant* (2011) which situates people from Victorian England or Ancient Rome, with, say, American superheroes. Also note how the names that Kampilan uses with the images that combine the historical, the literary, and the popular enrich the reading or scanning experience of readers. Her avatar alone speaks a hundred words or so: a Makapili, with a smile across its face. Those unaware of the treacheries of the cosplayed image will simply find her cute. Students of history will find discomfort in such a performance and might react to the image with an uneasy, confused smile, a guarded reading, and a critical distance.

During World War II, imperial Japan occupied the Philippines. “Official history” often tells how the American Allies defended the archipelago, but Filipino guerillas were primarily the ones who fended off the Japanese Axis forces. The Makapilis (Kalipunang Makabayan ng mga Pilipino [Nationalist Association of Filipinos]) “collaborated” with the Japanese by accusing and “revealing” who among the townsfolk were guerillas. To conceal their identity, they covered their heads with a bayong (a bag made of woven strips of palm leaves), with holes for eyes, as they literally pointed their

fingers at people they believed to be rebels. Like Kampilan's, a grin on the bayong is not necessary since some Makapilis were themselves victims of intimidation, desperation, and the dilemma of choosing which devil to deal with and how. Those who collaborated with the American colonizers were not named as traitors by "official history".¹

The performance of Kampilan's avatar as Makapili itself is anachronistic, especially at a time when identities shift within networked spaces conducive to anonymity. Offline, upon appearing in komix conventions, she wears her trustworthy bayong, perhaps to render the author irrelevant, so the readers can focus on the text and the intertextual dialogues and dialectics. The following analysis of the five komix strips exhibit the anachronism that Kamilan's avatar performs.

In "We are best at freedom" (2014) William Howard Taft, American colonial administrator of the Philippines, offers the Filipina revolutionary Melchora Aquino (also known as Tandang Sora) a McDonald's Happy Meal. Taft says it is for her "invaluable contribution to the 1896 revolution". Tandang Sora clarifies and confirms whether she is receiving a reward for her commitment to the freedom of the Philippines, and that the award is being given by the new colonizer of the Philippines. Her thought bubble, which Kampilan opted not to spell out, says: "Seriously?" Taft proudly affirms this. The irate Tandang Sora walks away from Taft, who matter-of-factly says out loud: "I knew we should've gotten a Jolly Kiddie Meal instead."

To elucidate the diegetic context of Taft's patronizing attitude toward Tandang Sora, a survey of dates is in order. Deported by the Spanish colonial government to Guam due to her involvement in the Katipunan, Tandang Sora, the "Mother of Philippine Revolution", has just returned from her exile. After having been a governor to a colony, Taft would later become the 27th president of the United States from 1909-1913. Tandang Sora would die of old age in 1919. Fast food restaurant chain McDonald's would be founded in the 1940s in the United States, and Jollibee in the late

1 For a more comprehensive discussion of the Makapili, see Terami-Wada 2014.

1970s in the Philippines. None of these make sense, as neither logic nor reason can explain how such elements can co-exist in a coherent time-space. This elicits laughter, if not a knowing smile, at least from Filipinos who have had access to the education system and to the urban and semi-urban areas with franchises of McDonald's and Jollibee, and/or those who find Kampilan's sense of humor unprecedented.

Beyond comedy, the komix strip shows how the colonizers tend to infantilize dwellers of territories they assume to have conquered. Among the documentations and discussions about cartoons and graphics portraying the "white man's burden" of disciplining and civilizing those they consider children-barbarians are books by Halili (2006), Ignacio et al. (2004), McCoy and Roces (1985). Common portrayals show American Uncle Sam taking monster-like Filipino tykes for a bath or slapping them in the bum as a gesture of preparing them to be independent "adults," i.e., being capable of self-government. Rice (2015) went through American colonial Secretary of Interior Dean Worcester's archive of photographs that justify colonial rule by showing and alleging that Filipinos remain primitive thus unready for governing themselves. In the komix strip, Taft acts like the typical colonizer who feels superior, thus the condescending remark that Tandang Sora, an old revolutionary, would have accepted the reward, as a child would from a parent as a reward or treat. Imaginably, however, Filipinos who are used to punchlines of noontime television shows such as *Eat Bulaga* may find the strip less funny.

Anachronisms that might interest foreign readers who can read Filipino but remain unfamiliar with Philippine history are the strips featuring the novelist Jose Rizal and the ilustrados. In "Rizal's super advanced surgery skillz" (2013), Rizal returns to the Philippines from Germany after undergoing ophthalmological training. He tries an operation to treat the cataract of his mother and installs a ruby quartz visor. Later, an accident occurs as he is blasted to ashes by his mother, who does not know how the contraption is supposed to work. The radiations from the blast reads: "Mi Ultimo Adios", or "The Last Farewell", the title of Rizal's last poem before he faced the firing squad and died a martyr. Here, we have

historical figures and references to popular culture and literature. People familiar with Rizal's life, even only through movies, can recognize these scenes of the son attempting to make life easier for her mother. What is supposedly dramatic becomes tragicomic, as the renowned polymath commits errors of equipping his mother with something deathly, causing his demise. For those who have never read Marvel comics, the visor is from Cyclops of *X-Men*, showing the incongruity between advanced industrial technology and colonial feudal setting.

In "Dear Kuya Pepe" (2014), Rizal receives a letter from his younger sister Trining. "Kuya" is a respectful term referring to an older brother, while "Pepe" is Rizal's nickname. Rizal feels excitement as he opens the letter but ends up frustrated when it begins with "Eowz Powh", which is "Hello there", in "jejemon".

In "Simbang Jeje, 1880s" (Jeje mass, 1880s) (2013), Rizal bothers his áte (elder sister) as the jejemons catch and eventually hold his attention; he tells her how ridiculous their big clothes are and how uncouth their language is. His áte later tells him to hold her hand. He asks why. She informs him that it is time to sing the hymn, "Ama Namin" ("Our Father"), implying that the mass had ended without his noticing because of his fixation with the jejemons. This, too, merits explanation, since the jejemon phenomenon is probably unknown to an international audience.

Though Filipino readers may confuse jejemon with "leetspeak" due to apparent structural similarities, the latter is familiar enough to be one of the language options for all Facebook users. Leetspeak, however is "elite speak," and often used by network gamers; on the other hand, jejemon is used by people deemed uncultured, as they have no access to formal education but have access to technology such as mobile phones and the internet. The so-called jeje language is characterized by whimsical capitalizations, lengthening of words, adding unnecessary letters and substituting other characters or numbers for letters, which confuse people presumed to be schooled or educated. "Eowz Powh" is "Hello po" in conversational Filipino, with "po" as a filler that implies respect. Here, *Kampilan* seemingly takes a jab at Rizal's elitism and

condescension or contempt against fellow Filipinos who were not fortunate enough to undergo formal education.

Lastly, “Clara, join the dark side of the force” (2014) features characters from Rizal’s *Noli Me Tangere* (1883), which is required reading in Philippine colleges and universities as mandated by law; therefore, most educated Filipinos are expected to have read it. The scene parodied by the komix is found at the end of the novel. Its main antagonist is Father Damaso and its protagonist is Crisostomo Ibarra whose love interest is Maria Clara. In Kampilan’s komix strip, Damaso tries to prevent Maria Clara from entering the convent. She replies: the convent or death, and furthers that she will leave Linares (her fiancé through an arranged marriage) and her father (referring to Captain Tiago). Damaso cuts her speech short and tells her she is wrong. Finally, Damaso reveals the twist, which is, true to the novel: I am your father. As Damaso utters these words, the silhouette of Darth Vader forms a shadow on his face. Needless to say, this is a *Star Wars* reference. The second panel of this three-panel strip has “Darth Damaso” at the center: a visual pun that refers to fictional characters of authority from the past and the future; one is the embodiment of oppression from the Spanish colonial period, while the other is the figurehead of an intergalactic empire in a galaxy far, far away. Both dark forces utter in unison that they fathered ideals: Maria Clara, the ideal Filipina of Rizal’s imagined nation, and Luke Skywalker, the Jedi protagonist of the space opera.

Critique and Comedy

According to D.H. Monro (quoted in Nikulin 2014), laughter can be evoked by “superiority, relief, and incongruity, or a combination of them” (98). John Morreall elaborates on this idea by saying that superiority theory banks on ethnic humor; relief theory involves the Freudian unconscious; and incongruity theory invests on the discrepancy between expectation and conclusion (quoted in Critchley 2002, 2-3). As discussed in the previous section, Kampilan devises anachronisms and incongruities to deliver punchlines. However, since her humor utilizes cultural and historical specificities, it is necessary to explain the jokes and

expound on their respective contexts. Critchley (2002) discusses how jokes presuppose a shared context: “a common sense of humor is like sharing a secret code” which oftentimes is difficult, or even impossible, to translate (67-68). By selecting her intertextual references, Kampilan also chooses the readers she wants to engage and, perhaps, provoke. By deliberately putting together elements that seemingly do not go together, she constructs a Bakhtinian carnival, where reversals occur, especially in the strips that make irreverent fun of Rizal, a venerated national icon respected by the Katipunan and revered by Rizalistas as the Tagalog Christ.

Despite being context-specific, humor may tolerate or question its context. For Critchley, if tolerant, it reinforces the social consensus or the status quo, hence *reactionary* (11); otherwise, it defamiliarizes (10) and projects another common sense, a *dissensus communis*, distinct and deviant from the hegemonic common sense, hence *messianic* (or, perhaps utopian?) (90). For McGowan (2014), comedy does not necessarily trigger subversive laughter at all times as it can be conservative or critical. As a counterpoint to Bakhtin’s valorization of carnival’s emancipatory potential, McGowan argues that the powers-that-be can mobilize laughter to strengthen their authority (perhaps, a tyrant who cracks jokes can seem like a good person). The teller of the joke and its object indicate whether comedy is conservative or critical. For instance, if the emperor deliberately wears no clothes, cues his subjects to laugh, and remains emperor after ridiculing himself, then such a comedy is still conservative, even reactionary; the same can be said if the object of the joke is an outcast of society and the humor justifies the grave conditions of this objectified subaltern or, conversely, even if the oppressed is the teller of the joke with a figure of authority as the object of the joke, yet the laughter sustains or, worse, empowers the hegemon instead of challenging him. It is worth mentioning as a concrete example that one of the hosts of the aforementioned TV show, *Eat Bulaga*, is a senator who can be the source of jokes but is also prone to be its object. Despite his position, he remains a senator who can make fun of the indigent beneficiaries of the show through one of the show’s staple segments. In this segment, *Eat Bulaga* selects a poor

household and airs the troubles of its members. Such troubles will then be turned into material for comedy, consumed by the show's viewers as the hosts give away prizes in cash and in kind. After being objects of laughter on national television, the chosen family feels fortunate and thanks the show.

Critical comedy, for McGowan, shatters the illusion of wholeness of the teller, the object, and even third parties (220). For Critchley (2002), "laughter at one's self is better than laughter at others" (96) and the highest laughter is one that "laughs at the laugh", and derides "the having and the not having, the pleasure and the pain, the sublimity and suffering of the human situation" (111). The essence of humor is the smile (111). Kampilan, while wearing the smile on the *bayong* that functions as her face, makes the perceiver doubt, if s/he is aware of colonial history, the characters she features, and herself. She invites scrutiny by performing as a Makapili, implying that she cannot totally be trusted. This is reminiscent of what Žižek (2006, 63-66) calls overidentification, or subversive affirmation, as a strategy of the band Laibach (imagine Aryan boys in Nazi uniforms rendering a version of The Beatles's "Across the Universe" in a solemn manner). In the same way that the attentive listener becomes uncertain whether Laibach supports or mocks fascism, the insightful reader of *Dead Balagtas* learns to identify for himself which details are historically accurate and which ones are tricks devised to tell truths.

Works such as these demand attention and contemplation unlike imagetexts that exploit slapstick comedy and perpetuate teary-eyed, disenfranchised people as entertainment or products of comedy. Unlike shows with canned laughter that prompts viewers' emotions and conditions them to laugh at shallow jokes that reinforce oppressive measures, the gutters of Kampilan's komix leave gaps for processing. In the first strip, the object of laughter is Taft, who is portrayed as an insensitive buffoon. He fails to understand that Tandang Sora has her integrity intact. With dignity, she tells the colonizer to his face that he is, in fact, a colonizer, an enemy of liberty. It is also implied in the scene how colonial administrators naively intend to use "Filipinoness" to reward (i.e., bribe) and co-opt former revolutionaries, demonstrated by Taft who thinks

Jollibee, a Filipino fast food chain, would make a difference. He assumes he can sell identity politics to Tandang Sora, who, as we have seen, knows better.

With tools of literature and art at her disposal, Kampilan qualifies as a modern ilustrado (or ilustrada) following the lineage of Rizal. Therefore, by making fun of Rizal, she also makes fun of her own social class. Importing medical knowledge and technological know-how from Europe, Kampilan's Rizal hopes to cure his mother through foreign technology, just like some of today's intellectuals who intend to relieve the motherland of its cancer by applying theories that haven't been put into praxis yet. Rizal ends up dead from the imported technology that had been accidentally activated by a person dear to him. Among the famous jokes (that may or may not be true) is that Rizal could have fathered Adolf Hitler. In the strips featuring the *jejemons*, this is confirmed by portraying Rizal as a national socialist, i.e., a grammar Nazi who discriminates against *jewjemons*. The researcher tries to reach out by attempting to crack jokes referencing world history and to conclude with a pun. However, the attempt borders on conservative comedy, since it has a semblance of a holocaust joke. Ending the self-referential performance is a generous list of references for readers to facilitate further understanding of the historical context of the joke, complete with links to online resources that might shed light on themes and issues her work had introduced or raised. Likewise, the *komix's* namesake, Balagtas, utilized footnotes to comment on certain terms or characters imported from, say, Greek or Roman mythologies. Despite the limitations of space, Kampilan's *komix* strips are able to articulate as concisely as possible messages with complexity and sophistication to an educated, Filipino, petty-bourgeois readership that is familiar with Philippine history, and who often serve as objects of laughter themselves, just like their role model Jose Rizal.

Most studies of humor attribute its power to the unconscious, thus the necessity of psychoanalysis in understanding a joke and its effect on particular types of people. For instance, the object of comedy in the first *komix* strip may vary depending on the reader. Someone of a more colonial mentality might find Tandang Sora's

refusal impractical. On the other hand, it is possible to perceive Taft, as I have shown in my analysis, as a smug and self-absorbed colonizer with delusions of racial grandeur, thus becoming the very joke of the komix strip. Still, others might not find it funny at all, thinking that Happy Meals and Kiddie Meals seem absurd in such a context. The complexity of Kampilan's work expects a reader who is exposed to history and has developed specific reading, watching, listening, and perceiving habits.

If the Taft-Tandang Sora strip requires knowledge and interest in history and fast food, the jejemon strips necessitate familiarity with cultures and subcultures—from the practice of letter writing, mimicked by the epistolary novel, to multimedia communication portrayed in different ways, possibly from popular writing platforms such as Wattpad to experimental fiction that might spell irony and self-awareness. Just as in the Taft-Tandang Sora strip, the object of laughter varies depending on the personality, preoccupations and prejudices of the reader. Those who think Rizal should not be a national hero because he only represents an exclusive metropolitan Tagalog nationalism might view the strip as criticizing the alpha ilustrado in a happy manner. On the other hand, readers who have a sense of official nationalism (and therefore a passion for the national language) might identify with Rizal's contempt and find the jejemons deserving objects of mockery. Still, another set of readers might find the utilization or placement of elements funny, especially the use of the “OMG rage face” meme in “Dear Kuya Pepe”. More reflective ones might find the naïvete of Rizal (not Rizal himself) and his modern day counterparts as the trigger of snide, judgmental remarks. The same may hold true with Rizal, the surgeon. His failure, his death, the placement of “Mi Ultimo Adios,” the innocence of his mother with regard to the visor—any one of these things could have initiated the comedy of the strip, had it been funny at all, had it been appreciated for its wit.

Once the reader and the author meet at the crossroads, laugh at the same figure of authority, and decide to strategize on making that figure lose its power, then there is critical comedy. Awareness is turned into action. For instance, Kampilan maximizes the interactive spaces of her social media accounts (Facebook,

Twitter, blog) to respond to historical queries and, at times, even discussions about culture and institutions. One can even find in the comments section conversations between the readers and the author about hegemonic structures. However, such a rendezvous point will be manifest if reader and author initially proceeds with slight differences in pacing and ends up on the same page. This means, as Critchley cites in Wittgenstein, both parties know the rules and how to deal with this sort of language game. If the reader and the author do not meet at the same point, the subversive humor may still be effective, as it somehow reveals or approximates the position or x- and y-coordinates of either party in the political spectrum. Unlike slapstick or “false” humor (if we are to assert that conservative and reactionary laughter are not comedy at all), Kampilan’s work sheds light not just on certain interconnected issues but on potential alliances and antagonisms as well. This makes her revolt against mediocre literature somehow avant-garde, or at least, advanced for its time. Expected punchlines coupled with canned laughter comprise conservative, at times reactionary, laughter, while surprising twists make us question what we take as commonsensical. Clover (2017, 449) adds: “the funniest of jokes is one about which we are not at first clear whether it is funny at all.”

In carefully handling narrative and artistic techniques that are characteristic of critical comedy, Kampilan makes use of the komix form as a pedagogical tool that encourages reading, perceiving, and changing society in novel ways. She takes her comedy seriously, as if participating in a dialogue with society through dialectical arguments. Nikulin (2014) writes, “In both dialectical argument and comic plot, one must not only establish what but also why something is true and just. In order to show how the conclusion is achieved, a well-calculated and understandable step-by-step movement of thought or action must be given. Clearly then, comic plot reproduces the development of dialectical argument. Comedy is thus at once a realization of a practical truth and an image of a theoretical truth” (50). *Dead Balagtas*, in challenging preconceived truths, offers antitheses to the official order’s theses. The relevance of Kampilan’s critical comedy lies in its ability to create new imagetexts that challenge new authorities in new ways.

Conclusion

The roots of Balagtas' "fourth revolt" in *Dead Balagtas*, as shown in this paper, can be traced prior to the Propaganda Movement of the ilustrados (and possibly even before the colonial period). Kampilan is indeed an ilustrada, in many senses of the term. Aside from being the female counterpart to "ilustrado" in Filipino, "ilustrada" is also the Spanish adjective that pertains to something or someone "graphically depicted" or "learned". Hector Fernandez L'Hoeste and Juan Poblete (2009) use the term to describe the "official" national iconographies of 19th-century Latin America (4). A "national consciousness" of the "indios" of the Philippines under Spanish colonial rule would only be realized later in that century. Before the ilustrados allegedly "imagined" the Filipino nation, Balagtas did not just transform the corrido by incorporating socio-political commentary but also "defied the censors with a work that has, in totality, subversive implications" thereby addressing readers and invoking them to read between the lines (Mojares 1983, 67-74). Like *Florante at Laura*, Kampilan's *Dead Balagtas* has largely remained under the radar due to the reputation of komix as something that is neither serious nor literature, hence not something to worry about.

After "Filipino nationality" and its representative "national symbols" became "officialized" under the American colonial period (Mojares 2006b), komiks was ignored in the thirties as cheap entertainment for the masses and later denounced in the fifties as a deterrent to literacy. Contrary to the reputation of komiks as "escapist" and "illegitimate literature", Reyes (2005) would declare in the eighties that the popular form "mirrors life" and serves as a venue for the masses to confront reality, to voice out their protests, and to identify with the triumphs of superheroes and tricksters over evil (3-16, 160-169). As television and, later, the internet changed the configurations of mass media and popular culture, komix shifted its target readers from the general public to a niche market. Aware of such a shift, Kampilan found her critical space with history, literature, "official" culture, and subcultures (among other things) at her disposal. Disregarding commercial considerations, she produces intelligent and engaging imagetexts

that rebel primarily against mediocre literature and, consequently, against institutions. As an act perhaps of defying the profit motive, chapters of the book *Dead Balagtas Tomo 1: Mga Sayaw ng Lupa at Dagat* (Dead Balagtas Volume 1: Dance of Earth and Sea) (2017) remain accessible as photo albums on her Facebook page. Her strategically choreographed war dance that manifests in many fronts and forms remains to be seen as the book's "Tomo 1" promises a sequel.

Providing spaces for rethinking traditionally accepted values and reimagining celebrities of official history as objects of critical comedy, the online platform of *Dead Balagtas* breaches the limits of interactivity, as problematized by Gane and Beer (2008, 35-52). Kampilan encourages the komix community to produce and consume thought-provoking works and challenges her social media account followers to join protest actions, thereby advocating not just active roles as readers but also as citizens. Jenkins (2006, 133) distinguishes "interactivity" from "participation," as the former presupposes technological constraints determined and designed by companies, while the latter functions within the protocols of cultural and social contexts, and is hence "more open-ended, less under the control of media producers". Despite being published by an emerging komix imprint, Kampilan's work circulates through other relatively independent and alternative channels. Her contribution to komix anthologies (*Kabuwanan*, [2017], *Ligaw-Tingin: Kalipunang Komix ng Pagmamahalang Marilag*, [2018], among others) and portrayals of feminist icons through stickers (one of whom is Nanay Mameng of the militant urban poor group, Kadamay) predicate her stamina to continue a protracted revolt. With such energy and conviction, Kampilan engages her readers to participate not just in interpreting komix that juxtaposes the past and the present but also in changing the trajectory of the future.

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