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Courting the Gaze, Romancing the Margins: Queer Re-Orientation in Emiliana Kampilan's *Komix*

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the narratological strategies deployed by *komix* creator Emiliana Kampilan, whose multi-modal storytelling and editorial choices are grounded in Philippine feminist activism. By analyzing Kampilan's online sticker series, first graphic novel, and editorial work for a lesbian komix anthology, this article traces how Kampilan draws together the discourses of gender, sexuality, and political engagement. We attempt to ground this strategy in the local production context surrounding lesbian narratives, where the struggle between visibility and misrepresentation continues to require narrative innovation across media.

Deploying Sara Ahmed's (2006) notion of queer orientation to tie in the discussion of the formal aspect of the gaze in comics—the narratology that allows sexual identities of fictional characters to find expression on the page—and the politics of looking at and between these characters, we argue that Kampilan's project comprises a

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> redirection of the gaze to the margins. Kampilan strategically romanticizes non-normative character representations and relations by re-orienting popular tropes: that is, selecting imagery already associated with traditional gender categories, she revises them to relay progressive and inclusive signification. Through close reading, we demonstrate how the confluence of subversive language and feminine-coded motifs, the collapse of historical time to simultaneously represent past and present politics, and the relegation of normative and patriarchal antagonism to the periphery, allow the creative work to challenge readers to relearn narrative cues and perhaps glimpse alternative horizons of a more inclusive Philippine society.

The gaze is indispensable in comics, a medium where looking and reading are indistinguishable activities. Nancy Pedri (2017) reiterates how the multimodality of comics requires engagement that goes beyond the comprehension of words and images: in the visual track alone, meaning is constructed through sequencing of images, page layout, visual metaphor, the incorporation of other visual media, among others. Beyond combining verbal and visual literacy, this complexity encourages readers

> to engage in a multifaceted visual literacy…one that takes into consideration the different information—social, historical, imaginary—each type of image communicates alone and in combination with other types of images in a comics universe. In these instances, readers are asked to engage visual literacies, to integrate them in the construction of the storyworld, and to synthesize them into a coherent narrative meaning. (Pedri, 2017, n.p.)

Academic studies on the narratology of comics, such as Thierry Groensteen's *System of Comics* (2007), provide theoretical lexica by which to analyze the particularities of meaning-making in the medium. The sophistication and cultural variation of these vocabularies emphasize that literacy in comics—like other modern literacies: social media literacy or, let us say, financial literacy—cannot be taken for granted. Such literacy is acquired by readers if not through formal study then often by continued

exposure. Now and then creators step up to do the instruction, providing an entry point and orienting the reader to the workings of the medium. In the Philippine scene, Emiliana Kampilan's work is a good example: it provides orientation—an entry point or an instructional moment—for its readers, whether they are avid consumers of comics or hapless wanderers scrolling around social media spaces. That said, Kampilan works *not only* on comics, and her work orients us in more than visual literacy.

A self-declared *komix*[1] creator, Emiliana Kampilan's multi-modal storytelling and editorial choices are grounded in Philippine feminist activism. As our title suggests, Kampilan's re-orients in two ways: she redirects the reader's gaze to the margins and ushers marginalized subjects into productive discourse. She does this by combining an "eye-catching" aesthetic—bright colors, highly recognizable or iconic figures, decorative layouts—with complex narratological relations, which we analyze in three of her works. In the interest of organization, we deal with aspects of this strategy one work at a time, though they are present across the entire corpus. This breakdown is also necessary because of the different mode and context of production of each work.

For Kampilan's sticker series "Subukan mo lang barilin sa puki!" (2018b) we survey how the visual representation of figures of militant feminism construct a complex response to contemporary misogynist discourse, and how a static illustration creates dynamic effects in relation to time, space, and gender representation. This analysis doubles as groundwork for a close reading of the aesthetic at play in her debut graphic novel, *Dead Balagtas Tomo I: Mga Sayaw ng Dagat at Lupa* (2017), which promotes inclusionary and intersectional discourses within mainstream popular culture. In this komix, Kampilan combines verbal and visual vocabularies—including that of natural science and of political activism—with popular tropes of romance and courtship, easing mainstream audiences into comprehending the complex cues of visual narrative and the dominant cultural beliefs surrounding sexuality. Finally, we touch

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[1] *Komix* refers to underground/radical Philippine comics, vis-à-vis mainstream komiks, and is used by Kampilan. We revert to "comics" in general and theoretical discussions of the medium. Graphic novel is deployed as a format description, distinct from strips or short comics published or anthologized in book format.

on Kampilan's role as editor and book designer for the anthology of lesbian love, *Ligaw-Tingin*: *Kalipunang Komix ng Pagmamahalang Marilag* (2018c), considering the implications of her relative anonymity and her deference of "narrative space" to other lesbian creators.

Arguing that Kampilan creates with the intent to re-orient, we frame this reading within Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) to foreground how the "work of reorientation needs to be made visible as a form of work" (p. 100). Apart from a phenomenological discussion of the notion of sexual orientation, Ahmed's considerations of direction and perspective, foreground and background, boundaries and alignment, emphasize the linear and spatial dimensions of "orientation," making it apt for adaptation to the analysis of illustrated visual narrative. Narratological techniques such as focalization, static representations of action and directional movement, and page and panel design, especially as expressions of character development, can be described in the same terms, all of which are grounded on the notion of directed perception. While not specific to komix or Philippine lesbian discourse, Ahmed's queer phenomenology can serve as an ontological bridge between dealing with characters as formal functions of narrative and as representations of real people. Ahmed says of the gaze and its objects:

> The move from object to object is shaped by perception—the gaze that turns to an object, brings other objects into view, even if they are only dimly perceived—as well as by how orientations make things near, which affects what can be perceived. […] The nearness of objects to each other comes to be lived as what is already given, as a matter of how the domestic is arranged. What puts objects near depends on histories, on how "things" arrive, and on how they gather in their very availability as things to 'do things' with. (p. 88)

This phenomenology of juxtaposition—of objects, bodies, subjectivities—aligns with Kampilan's narrative use of the gaze, her visual metaphors for social relations, among her other "directorial" decisions.

Through close reading, we demonstrate how (1) the confluence of subversive language and feminine-coded motifs, (2) the collapse of historical

time to simultaneously represent past and present politics, and (3) the relegation of normative and patriarchal antagonism to paratext, allow Kampilan's creative works to challenge readers to synthesize multimodal narrative cues as well as to learn to imagine the work that goes into creating a more inclusive Philippine society. To contextualize these strategies, we first situate Kampilan within the local production context surrounding lesbian narratives, where the struggle between visibility and misrepresentation continues, especially in mainstream media.

VISIBILITY AND LESBIAN ART

In the narratology of comics, the gaze can refer to how the reader's eyes are led across a sequence of words and images across panels or pages. It can also refer to a narratorial point of view. Either way, a discussion of the gaze must eventually consider what—or who—is being looked at. The relation between looking and pleasure is both a formal concern of narrative media and an ontological one of character figuration. In the discussion of visual culture, Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay continues to inform discussions of the gaze in popular culture, though the male gaze as conceptualized by Mulvey already has a long history of being challenged and subverted by critics and creators alike for its binary analysis of power that reifies sexual difference while disregarding class and race. For example, Judith Halberstam (1995) has critiqued this paradigm for its "extremely neat formula for the increasingly messy business of erotic identification" (as cited in Neville, 2018, p. 67) and argues for a view of spectatorship that acknowledges the multiple gendered positions that the gaze affords, especially in lesbian and queer works. Yet a general conception of the male gaze remains relevant, if not exactly as detailed by Mulvey, then at least as a representative of the type of visual culture that gave rise to the need to imagine alternative gazes: Kathryn Hemmann (2015), for example, notes how the male gaze remains

> deeply entrenched in media practices and exerts a hegemonic influence over what is published and released for mainstream audiences. Therefore, while it is important to demonstrate how female creators and consumers operate outside the realm of

> the male gaze, it is equally important to examine how they subvert it from within male-dominated mediascapes. (p. 1)

Rather than the specific mechanisms described by Mulvey, it is the ubiquity of a hegemonic gaze, one that is recognizable across media platforms and creative industries, that constitutes the challenge: other ways of being seen remain marginal in comparison, seldom received on their own terms when, or if, they enter the mainstream.

We argue that Kampilan's deployment of the gaze is counter-hegemonic. The choice to call it a queer re-orientation is more a description of what it turns away from and how that "turning," to call back Judith Butler's discussion of Althusser (as cited in Ahmed, 2006, p.15), allows subject formation in the text. That is, because the gaze in Kampilan's works is deployed in a field of images that serve hegemonic aesthetics, it challenges the primacy of the male gaze that persistently hypersexualizes and equates male homosexuality to feminine sexual availability and passivity, or that encourages lesbian visibility as an occasion for erotic spectacle. We hesitate to label this a female, homosexual, lesbian, or even a queer gaze, not only because these may reflect assumptions about Kampilan's identity, but also because these alternatives are often theorized outside the Philippine context. Nonetheless, queering as an approach, rather than as an identity or audience demographic, retains this counter-hegemonic connotation sufficiently. It suggests that the approach is situated within and in relation to a dominant discourse which regards the queer as strange and possibly deviant. In a similar move, Ahmed also avoids identifying a queer "line" (p. 179)—her idiom for specific experiences and social relations that compound to make a discernable life story—and refers mostly to her own lesbian "life line" (p. 19) for specificity. Nonetheless, her queer phenomenology highlights the discursive potential of considering queer orientations in discussing how bodies are situated in place and time, especially in relation to societal norms. Queer orientations, in the plural, are

> those that put within reach bodies that have been made unreachable by the lines of conventional genealogy. Queer orientations might be those that don't line up, which by seeing the world "slantwise"

> allow other objects to come into view. A queer orientation might be one that does not overcome what is "off line," and hence acts out of line with others. (Ahmed, 2006, p. 107)

In addition, Ahmed describes how this queer orientation relates to lesbian experience:

> For lesbians, inhabiting the queer slant may be a matter of everyday negotiation. This is not about the romance of being off line or the joy of radical politics (though it can be), but rather the everyday work of dealing with the perceptions of others, with the "straightening devices" and the violence that might follow when such perceptions congeal into social forms. (2006, p. 107)

Kampilan's characters are not always female, and when they are, are not always lesbian, but her works are always clear about the social forms those characters are up against. Kampilan's reorientation is already apparent in her occupation of the canonically privileged position of Balagtas; as Dead Balagtas she recalibrates the gaze of poet as social critic to befit her medium and chosen themes. But in countering a patriarchal view, she deploys an aesthetic that is recognizably feminine-coded: these feature a preponderance of flora, a representational preoccupation with clothing and changing hairstyles, and narrative investment in *kilig* and romancing. It is in these openly declared feminist work and arguably "feminine" romance stories, including those with heterosexual or male homosexual characters, that Kampilan negotiates sometimes female, sometimes homosexual, visibility and scopophilia. These works evoke the pleasure of looking and allude to sexual desire but resist the sort of visual fetishization that dominates the mediascape they are published within; this background may be public discourse on social media, the Philippine mainstream komiks industry, or even, at the most specific, Philippine lesbian narrative "tradition." Indeed, Kampilan deploys gendered motifs drawn from lesbian stereotypes, such as the visible difference between butch and femme. We later investigate how these codes are placed by Kampilan in narrative contexts so that the work of subverting them as stereotypes can begin.

Scholars often posit invisibility as a starting point, framing discussions of lesbian art production in the Philippines as a search. Flaudette Datuin, in *Home, Body, Memory* (2000), inquires: "What makes a lesbian artist?"

Little is known about lesbian artists largely because they are marginalized and consequently invisible in both feminist and mainstream culture, making it doubly difficult for them to declare themselves as lesbian artists. And even if they do come out, would they want to be known primarily as lesbians? Heterosexual women artists, for instance, resist being called "women artists," and want to be called artists period. Is it the same case for lesbian artists? (p. 165)

Avoiding these labels is often grounded in the artists' need to be visible through the merit or subject of their work, with sexuality informing but not defining their place in the industry. Yet by openly identifying as lesbians or even as women, artists run the risk of being subjected to tokenism, treated as a novelty, or otherwise "co-opted by the dominant heterosexual culture" (Datuin, 2000, p.165). Roselle Pineda (2003) also reiterates that the sense of sight and the process of becoming are linked, so that lesbian art needs to be categorized as such to be recognized. Yet, the supposed "personal-ness of the lesbian narrative makes it less political and visible" (Pineda, 2003, p. 58). Because discussing one's sexuality is seen as making a story too personal—implying that others do not find it relatable or relevant—some creators downplay sexuality in order to foreground other "themes." This may contribute to trends observed by Sharon Anne Briones Pangilinan (2009) in her investigation into anthologies of women's writing in the Philippines: lesbian writers are included, but usually without mention of their sexuality, or their contributions to such collections are more often stories that do not tackle lesbian concerns (p. 226). In this way, their work as lesbian creators remain largely undifferentiated from broader feminist efforts in "affirming identities as a response to problems of invisibility, homophobia, and discrimination" (Pineda, 2003, p. 85).

Identifying with a larger creative community or movement, such as LGBTQ+, gives lesbian art the appearance of adequate representation, but even there the discrepancy between attention afforded to gay artists

compared to lesbian ones, or indeed to others in the spectrum, persists. This has been noted by Pangilinan (2009) in relation to research on Pride Marches circa the 1990s and in short story production up to 2008. In accounts of her own research *Nasaan ang Lesbiana sa Panitikan* (2012), she laments that "*kung hindi sasadyaing maghanap, katumbas ng imposible ang pagkakataong makasalamuha ang mga tekstong lesbiana*" (p. 6). There is no lack of stories to tell, especially if online fan production is to be considered. Yet even what is formally published tends to have limited circulation, remaining "safely hidden" within niche communities, including writers' collectives. Of the 12 fellows at the recent LGBTQ+ fiction writers' workshop organized by GlobalGRACE and the University of the Philippines (July 2019), nine writers identified as gay, two as lesbian, and one as gender non-conforming queer femme. Rather than the manuscripts themselves, the discussion of the women's works centered on how other lesbian writers in their own circles hesitate to participate in institutional or mainstream production. Their misgivings resonate with fears previously aired elsewhere: in Danton Remoto's 1998 review of *Tibok,* he mentions that many writers were in the closet and viewed being published as "signing their names in blood," feared losing their jobs, or their families "declaring war" on them (p. 529; see also Pangilinan, 2009, p. 222).

That some creators in Kampilan's *Ligaw-Tingin* publish under pseudonyms is a symptom of this continued apprehension: as Sadie Lee has argued, lesbian content tends to be the lesser issue compared to writers identifying as lesbian (as cited in Pangilinan, 2003). Philippine writers and artists who do openly identify as lesbian must somehow push for increased visibility and inclusion in mainstream narrative production, while also resisting being read only for their sexuality. Thus, another less personal difficulty for those who "come out" as creators or who would anthologize stories for institutional publication: the pressure to be representative of Philippine lesbian experience. *Tibok: Heartbeat of the Filipino Lesbian* (1998), for example, has been critiqued for representing only urban-bourgeois lesbians, without a single story written in the vernacular language (Pineda, 2003). While this social pressure is nowhere as threatening as the conformity required by work and family membership, it hints at the limitations of mainstream circulation and accessibility.

This is not to say that there is a lack of effort to empower LGBTQ+ communities in the country, only that these also tend to have limited scope. Lesbian organizer Julie Palaganas clarifies that there are organized lesbian initiatives and advocacies in the Philippines, but that these cannot be equated to a movement, which requires a framework relevant to people outside the lesbian community to truly mobilize (Pangilinan, 2012, p. 41). To this Pangilinan adds that the learned and exclusionary language wielded by the writers within such collectives continue to limit participation to educated or elite members of the demographic. The most visible and institutional effort is undoubtedly the filing of the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression (SOGIE) Equality bill, which has been stuck in the legislation process for over two decades (*Rappler*, 2019). Recently, the bill has also brought to light prevalent misconceptions about what it means to advocate for LGBTQ+ rights. Circulating in social media and within the Senate hearings themselves, the bill's supposed "undercutting of religious and family rights" (Macaraeg, 2019) continues to stunt public discourses surrounding SOGIE.

In this atmosphere of unambiguous and often institutional homophobia and misogyny, and the ongoing difficulty of realizing intersectionality in practice, the mainstream debuts of Emiliana Kampilan's *Mga Sayaw* and *Ligaw-Tingin* can thus be considered small but significant moments in Philippine popular culture, particularly for mainstream komiks publication. Their garnering attention in the mainstream, from casual audiences and critics to activist circles and institutional award-giving bodies, is enough reason to give it a closer look. To hail these works as LGBTQ+ texts would allow us to foreground how these komiks provide mainstream access to feminist as well as lesbian discourses that inform their production.

VISUALS THAT STICK

When current President Rodrigo Duterte, known for his blatant misogyny, urged the military to shoot female activists in the vagina (Presidential Communications Operations Office [PCOO], 2018), it brought to fore issues of institutionally sanctioned sexual violence across Philippine

history. It served as a reminder of how women are still encouraged to cover up and shut up, to remain invisible in order to be safe; that women are still thought to invite rape by the way they look and behave, by allowing themselves to be "caught" in photos attending protests, by posting their opinions "openly" online.

Social media spaces, where these assaults are now often witnessed, also enable quick widespread responses. As various theorists have noted, activism has increasingly focused on providing visual spectacle through mainstream media to enable participation from the broader public (Poell, 2014). Or, as Henry Jenkins (2016) posits in *By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism,* current methods of political participation increasingly involve "grassroots media being deployed as the tool by which to challenge the failed mechanisms of institutional politics" (n.p.). In the Philippine context as elsewhere, the need for online activist content is driven by the absurdly spectacular exercise of macho-fascist powers. Kampilan was one of the artists who responded to this assault by representing historic moments of resistance, the sort that misogynistic discourse again sought to silence. Kampilan began posting colorful portraits of Filipina revolutionaries, each featuring a banner with the declaration: "*Subukan mo lang barilin sa puki!*" The illustrations were initially circulated through her social media accounts before being printed and sold at a local comic market as stickers.

Each illustration tells of a complex history in a media-specific way. In them, as in her komix, Kampilan's storytelling strategies resonate with spatiotemporal features of social media and digital publishing. These narrative strategies are the collapse of historical time to simultaneously represent past and present politics, which we unpack here, and the relegation of normative and patriarchal antagonism to the background, which will be discussed in the next section. Both have to do with "reorienting" audience attention, which are enabled by these "spaces" which, in terms of online engagement, also describe allocations of time. Ahmed relates the formation of identity to how much time is given "towards" a direction, an observation that can be extended to engaging online content:

> We might note here that "dwelling" refers to the process of coming to reside, or what Heidegger calls "making room" (1973: 146), and also to time: to dwell on something is to linger, or even to delay or postpone. If orientation is a matter of how we reside, or how we clear space that is familiar, then orientations also take time and require giving up time. Orientations allow us to take up space insofar as they take time. (p. 20)

Kampilan's stickers are primarily static illustrations, inviting a viewer to dwell on the image, to linger and—if the stickers are "stuck" as such—perhaps start a conversation with the owner of the object on which the sticker is displayed. However, their circulation online introduces these art objects to a discursive space where "dwelling" is a matter not only of pausing to view a post, but also of repeated engagement, as when the image is shared or reposted. This online space is described by asynchrony: Hassan (2010, p. 371) suggests that "nothing in cyberspace happens in real-time. Temporal lags, and hierarchies of speed, depending upon levels of technological sophistication and social context, beset the network society." Content can be "bumped up," given extended presence and exposure, sometimes years after its original posting. Kampilan works through such amplification, extending the visibility of activist causes. She mobilizes her online clout by bumping up stories and personages that could otherwise fall into obscurity, in effect highlighting their relevance to contemporary times. This is her online social orientation, in as much as "orientations are effects of what we tend toward, where the 'toward' marks a space and time that is almost, but not quite, available in the present" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 20).

Arbeen Acuña (2018) calls Kampilan's komix "anachronicles of the contemporary," in that she "simultaneously chronicles the past and the present by weaving together objects from different timelines into one strip" (p. 107). Kampilan addresses "lags" in Philippine historical memory by enabling *transhistorical dialogue*, where anachronism goes beyond having events occur outside of their "proper" historical time, such as the reassignment of figures and actions between the past and the present. Rather, both historical points are seen developing as if there were no distance

between them, temporal or otherwise. While the functions of analogy and allegory are maintained, the mechanics of visual media allows the metaphoric relation between past and present to be that of simultaneous representation, not substitution. This drawing together allows each access to the other, from which it has been discursively alienated.

Thus, while not primarily a narrative work, Kampilan's stickers are dialogic. The text in each sticker situates the armed woman in present discourse, yet she is not a contemporary heroine: dialogue is extended to her across history. Anachronism allows Liliosa Hilao (figure 1), a student columnist who wrote against the Marcos' dictatorship (1972-1986), to brandish a newspaper featuring the current dictator and one of his agents of misinformation, but it is the fusing of two regimes that stresses the role of student journalism in combating institutional violence and marks the female writer as an agent of social awareness.

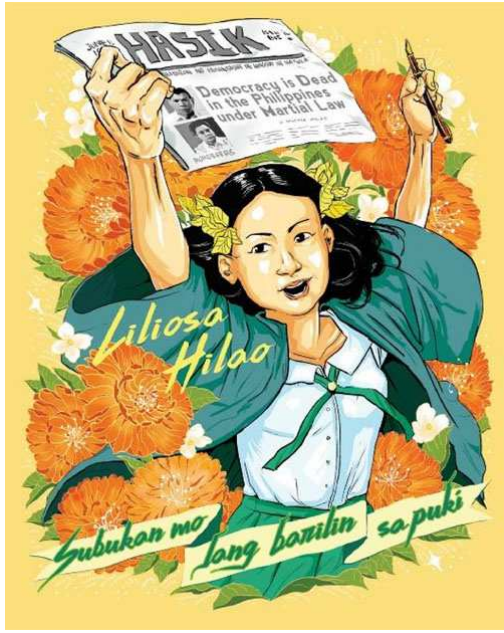

FIGURE 1
Liliosa Hilao with school paper and toga
(Kampilan, 2018b).

Hilao was one of the first casualties of media repression under martial law. After writing about the death of democracy for the school paper of Pamantasan ng Lungsod ng Maynila, members of the Anti-Narcotics Constabulary unit detained her in Camp Crame, where her family members eventually identified signs of torture and sexual abuse on her dead body (Bantayog, 2015). Her biography recalls other instances of state-wielded violence against dissenters throughout the country's struggle for democracy. In the sticker she is portrayed alive and triumphant, and her school uniform is matched with a toga and laurels that signify the accomplishment she was denied in life, but which she dons in present commemoration.

Ann Cvetkovich (2003) notes that trauma puts pressure on conventional forms of documentation, representation, and commemoration because trauma is often unspeakable and marked by forgetting and dissociation. The burden of coming forward with narratives of pain and oppression compounds the traumatized individual or community's experience of violence, as the effort to confront injustice or represent otherness is often met with prejudice, while the decision to stay silent likewise increases that burden in others who suffer similar violence. Likewise, the omission of figures of resistance from official history silences them and severs their narratives from those who would otherwise benefit from their commemoration. Trauma thus extends to others, marring society's historical imagination, limiting what the oppressed imagine they can do. Those who suffer violence, including lesbian and queer women, are often relegated to this "constrained enunciative position" (Salter, 2013, p. 156) in relation to their experience of trauma. Communicating with and rewriting responses to the past allows them to redefine their approach to, or reproach, that abuse. This "networking" can help individuals cope with such moments of disorientation, when they feel reduced to "being an object among other objects" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 160). Stories of past survival can be a lifeline: for while unsettling moments "can shatter one's sense of confidence in the ground or one's belief that the ground on which we reside can support the actions that make life feel livable […] the body might be reoriented if the hand reaches out and finds something to steady an action" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 157). More

than commiseration, transhistorical dialogue gives the present its bearings in relation to both the past and the future.

Three out of five stickers feature female combatants: Kumander Liwayway, Dayang Purmasuri, and Lorena Barros are depicted with their battle scars and weaponry, but also make-up, jewelry, or flowing hair that identify each woman. The colorful palettes and burst of flowers appear contradictory to the militant poses and the dare on the banner. This combination disturbs longstanding views toward gender in the context of Philippine political resistance: that women only "helped out" in revolutions, remaining outside of armed conflict unless they were its victims; that Filipina "rebels" are opportunities for target practice and rape. Linda McDowell and Jo Sharpe attest that "the body, its size, shape, gestures, the very space it takes up, those masculine and feminine norms which mean that men sprawl and women don't; the differences in physicality that construct and reflect gender norms create ways of being in space" (as cited in Ahmed, 2006, p. 60). Against such norms, these women are visible in the field, leading the fight as women. None take the threat of being shot lying down.

This repudiation of feminine passivity is more nuanced in the two stickers that feature writers. After all, the stickers respond to a threat that was as much a verbal one from the President as a military one on the ground, and the battle is fought across all sorts of mediascapes. Ahmed notes that when women "take up space as writers, their bodies in turn acquire new shapes" (p. 61) because such spaces are not easy for them to inhabit—they are constricted in ways owing to how society initially refuses them that enunciative space. So Liliosa Hilao and Leona Florentino (figure 2) are crowned with golden laurels, marking them as figures of authority: women wielding the pen as an act of resistance. They raise their arms and publications, *again* speaking up against subjugation. In relation to the written caption, Kampilan turns the language of gendered violence against itself—making the same words do different work—by giving its target faces and names. The caption also dares viewers to look upon not only present sources of violence but also its history, and the many instances when and where women have taken up the banners of political struggle. As Ahmed says of feminist philosophers, they "do gather and have gathered, creating their impressions. Our task is to recall their

histories of their arrival, and how this history opens up spaces for others that have yet to be cleared" (pp. 62-63).

FIGURE 2
Leona Florentino with scapular and manifesto
(Kampilan, 2018b).

Leona Florentino, though hailed as one of the pillars of the poetic tradition in the Philippines, is commonly associated with works on love, religion, and the domestic space. Her critique of the Spanish rule and manifesto of Filipina strength, *La Mujer Filipina*, is rarely cited as part of her repertoire, and her satirical writing is described as gentle and subtle, lacking the "spirit of revolt against political and social repression" (Yabes, 1936, p. 37). Indeed, Pangilinan (2012) observes how anthologies neglect the significance of Florentino's sexuality and ignore the lesbian themes in her work (p. 225). Kampilan has also produced a short comic addressing this gap, *Isang Dead Balagtas Short: La Mujer Filipina* (2018a), in the preface of which she notes how Florentino's romantic relationships with women of Ilocos are omitted in official chronicles. In featuring Florentino, Kampilan

establishes that Philippine lesbian feminism not only exists, it has a lineage within literary tradition which contemporary writers extend.

While historical representation and contemporary politics may conspire to constrict the space for women, Kampilan makes it a point to give women's bodies room to extend. Visually, the extension manifests as flowers blooming—*pagyabong*, Kampilan calls it—from the body of the revolutionary herself. The blooms extend her body, enhancing her figure: allowing her beauty, authority, and political conviction to occupy more space. Furthermore, when encountering the stickers as a series, the repetitive layout places her in exemplary company, but variation in the details that identify her emphasizes differences in identity, cultural group, or mode of resistance. These iconic profiles render historically obscure female figures more visible on mainstream platforms, encouraging viewers to recognize them. The juxtaposition of verbal and visual elements mark them as subjects rather than passive objects of the gaze, as women that other women can see and desire *to be like* and *be with* in the struggle, allies in directing the words back at the patriarchy.

If indeed "gender is the effect of the kinds of work that bodies can do, which in turn 'directs' those bodies, affecting what they 'can do,'" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 60), then representing female historical figures in their moment of accomplishment serves as a fitting reminder that female bodies have taken up revolutionary roles, and that they can be taken up again. The retort becomes a reminder that threats of rape defeat political resistance as ineffectively as it converts a lesbian into a straight woman, misogynist tactics that nonetheless prevail. The women in the stickers face the threat of violence not with fear or calls for protection. They remind contemporary Filipinas that they need not face these threats alone and that the value of responding—showing up, speaking up—is often in how it extends the space of resistance to others. Addressing violence and trauma through this display of transhistorical solidarity—encountered online or off—lifts the burden from the individual viewer's isolated recollection or discovery of injustice and oppression, affirming that it is a collective experience that can be addressed as a community. The sticker itself may be static, but the invitation to engage with it, every time someone catches sight of it, has the potential to revitalize discourse.

NARRATIVE RE-ORIENTATION

The simultaneity described by transhistorical dialogue is particularly significant in sustained narratives like the graphic novel, where the visual phenomenon of braiding complicates the notion of dialogue as a verbal affair. Braiding, or *tressage*, is the phenomenon in comics defined extensively by Groensteen (1999/2007) in order to describe "the way panels (more specifically the images in the panels) can be linked in series (continuous or discontinuous) through non-narrative correspondences, be it iconic or other means" (p. ix). This refers to how a comic, as a printed work especially, gives access to all pages simultaneously, as opposed to visual narrative media that are bound by temporal constraints, such as film or animation: "Within the paged multiframe that constitutes a complete comic, every panel exists, potentially if not actually, in relation to all the others. This totality […] responds to a model of organization that is not of the strip or the chain, but that of the *network*" (p. 146). Intertextuality and historical metafiction are not unique to Kampilan; however, this sort of "intra-textual network" pervades her work, giving further coherence to her otherwise episodic graphic novel—where, coincidentally, she uses visual metaphors of "weaving" to represent mythic cosmogenesis—and informing her book designs for both komix.

Kampilan's graphic novel is an ambitious project, rich in contradictions even in terms of its publication and marketing. Published in print by Anino Comics in 2017, *Mga Sayaw* was formally launched at an upscale bookstore in Bonifacio Global City, a bourgeois space in which Kampilan's mass-oriented politics appears out of place, but also an acknowledgment of the middle-class position she shares with her target audience. Apart from selling quickly, the volume garnered the National Book Award for best graphic literature and best book design in 2018. These incongruities are part of the strategic play enabled by the creator's awareness of her own seemingly contradictory position as both auteur and activist, especially as the work openly promotes inclusive views of gay and lesbian love. While the creator's sexuality, or indeed the LGBTQ+ aspect of the work, is given the backseat in formal marketing, the popular reception of pages Kampilan posted on social media suggests that many readers found the romantic content relatable,

if not in terms of personal experience, then at least in terms of foreign media they already consume.[2]

Here we read *Mga Sayaw* as re-orientation because it seeks to direct the attention of a dominantly middle-class readership with the hope of teaching it to review how queer narratives engage with political conditions in the Philippines. In four chapters, each one a stand-alone love story, the work narrates the creation of the universe to the formation of the Philippine archipelago. The komix has no diegetic continuity apart from the geotectonic one, but narrative development across chapters suggests an escalation of contextual complexity. Opening with two heterosexual romances, the narrative then gives way to two homosexual ones. This sequence appears geared towards normalizing the latter, gradually teaching the reader to look beyond their difference from "universal," actually heteronormative, narratives. But this arrangement also suggests that Filipinos who identify as non-normative may have a heightened awareness of the specificity of their struggle, not only to find love, but to navigate life in the Philippines.

We earlier identified another strategy at play in Kampilan's work: the relegation of hegemonic paradigms to paratext such as prefaces or promotional practices outside the immediate work. In the stickers, Kampilan "turns" verbal abuse back to construct a reply; in the komix she keeps the dominant paradigm within view, but off focus. This relegation is more of a "backgrounding" than erasure, where the background is comprised by what is "produced by acts of relegation: some things are relegated to the background in order *to sustain* a certain direction; in other words, in order to keep attention on what is faced" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 31). In the komix, this peripheral vision is necessary as a source of narrative or ideological conflict, as the field within which characters move. It is not the focus of attention of the characters in the narrative, though it may draw the attention of the reader. Thus, when it comes to SOGIE-based antagonism, this relegation to background

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[2] Faced with enthusiastic claims that her work is *Shounen Ai/Yaoi* and *Shoujo Ai/Yuri* [Japanese popular genres for homosexual content] Kampilan carefully reminds fans that not only is there a local comic tradition, but also that these labels conveniently obscure local LGBTQ+ experiences.

scenery may effect an idealized view of non-normative characters, who appear busy negotiating religious, familial, and class-based problems "outside of" sexuality. This strategic romanticization may be the project precisely: Kampilan is aware that the creation of safe spaces for these narratives, the characters in them, and maybe even for their readers, is still in process, more imaginary than actual. Hence, while the stories are personal affairs, they are framed as widely shared experiences, normalized *a priori*, and directed at presumably heterosexual readers as much as known allies. This optimism may seem suspect, but it is not without nuance.

As a graphic novel, hegemonic views are embedded in *Mga Sayaw* as a persistent dialogue with traditional myths and the value systems attending them. This is established in the beginning and sustained through each succeeding chapter, eventually tying in the work as a coherent counter-narrative.

FIGURE 3
Creation as woven world
(Kampilan, 2017, pp. 7-8, spread).

Mga Sayaw is divided into a preface and four chapters. The first half orients the reader by deploying presumably familiar stories. Chapter 1, "*Ang Santinakpan*," is a cosmogenic tale based on the *Hinilawod,* the Visayan folk epic. To begin with a celestial creation myth is to begin with a familiar form of narration, but myth, in practice, is always a retelling: Kampilan's version not only ties it to the scientific concept of an expanding universe, it also revises its gender politics by giving the previously "lazy" wife, Laon Sina, enough autonomy to leave the

hero-husband, Tungkung Langit, when he gives her no space to create within *his* world (figure 3). Chapter 2, "*Ang Pagibig ay parang* Plate Tectonics," goes into the geotectonic process in earnest by narrating the mechanisms of continental drift as a tale of childhood friends, Nica and Jonoel, who drift apart as they mature. The story of growing up and apart is presented through a geological analogy that most readers can easily grasp. The first two chapters thus set the scene: here is the "heterosexual world" in which the most "normal" of relations are "naturally" threatened by conflict. These "universal" retellings are a manner of unsettling, of problematization without solution, leaving the difficult work of resettling and conflict resolution to the two couples that follow.

The second half of the volume is divided between "*Ang Karagatan*" and "*Lupang Hinirang*" which deal with the formation of new spaces which define nation as territory. In each story, homosexual characters confront each other in situations where violence, difference in creed, and class conflict seem to make romance—or happiness—impossible. But these confrontations are made to do other work: myths and idioms are revisited and revised as room is made for love, and queer resettling is made possible.

As a point of orientation, both queer stories open with "familiar" conflict, following the romantic trope of a meet cute. Thrown together by public commute, Ramon accidentally injures Rahman on the train. Within the closed space of the commuter train, this dispute leads the crowd to anticipate more violence; social instinct parts the crowd to give the men room to brawl. Meanwhile, "*Lupang Hinirang*" opens with Anais cutting a day of work at the underwear factory to attend a feminist forum. Her narrative parallels the rifting of Palawan from mainland Asia, and her contact with the activist student, Dylan, is presented as a northward migration to be part of an autonomous archipelago. Each conflict thus proposes a trajectory, a "natural" direction, but Kampilan, in her paneling as in her plot, is averse to straight lines.

FIGURE 4
The "field" of heterosexuality as background,
then strategically obscured
(Kampilan, 2017, p. 47).

Rather than fight, Ramon agrees to buy Rahman a jacket to replace the damaged one, and the conflict leads to a fitting room scene (figure 4). Rahman invites Ramon and the reader to ascertain whether the jacket looks good on him, gazing off panel to look at himself while we confirm alongside Ramon that the stranger he injured on the train is, indeed, one good-looking guy. The fifth panel confirms Ramon's role as focalizer, but also juxtaposes him and his gaze to a background full of advertisements and merchandise representing heteronormative views of sexiness and marriage. This "field of heterosexual objects" (Butler, as cited in Ahmed, 2006, p. 87) is gradually replaced by extradiegetic designs, a geometric pattern that becomes aquatic, with a recognizable fish motif in Ramon's final panel. Apart from suggesting Ramon's orientation based on what he turns away from—indeed before either character is revealed to be gay—the scene highlights Ramon's choice to reconcile with and see the beauty in his adversary.

This gaze is eventually verbalized as the two men continue to meet, as Ramon is paying for Rahman's jacket in installments. In one scene Ramon refers to Rahman twice as "*magandang lalake*" while gauging the latter's sexual orientation by inquiring after a presumed girlfriend. It is high-tension flirtation, as Ramon—who has also taken the initiative to order a chicken dish for Rahman, observing that the latter is Muslim—fears offending Rahman by wrongly suggesting that he is gay. Only after pretending to be offended does Rahman diffuse the situation by indicating his sexual orientation—"*Wala akong* boyfriend…*sa ngayon*" (p. 56)—and even accepting the compliment about his beauty. This dialogue suggests that both men are aware of the possibility of a homophobic dismissal and the need to tread lightly when hailing a potential ally. Later they openly discuss homosexuality in relation to the biblical myth of Sodom and Gomorrah, which is often used to scare young men into straightness in both Islamic and Christian creeds (p. 58). The biblical myth is deployed

FIGURE 5
Making room at the women's forum
(Kampilan, 2017, p. 70).

against its conventional purpose and works instead to bridge the cultural gap between two gay men where personal experiences of homophobia in the context of home and worship define their relationship as one of overcoming differences in favor of love.

In "*Lupang Hinirang*," Anais turns away from demeaning work, choosing to risk her livelihood by attending a women's forum. Dylan's acknowledgement of her arrival literally affirms that she is seen and that there is room for her (figure 5). Dylan's reiterative greeting—"*Magandang hapon po muli sa inyong lahat! At* welcome *po sa magandang bagong dating*" (pp. 70-71)—places focus on Anais, although it is more often Anais shown gazing admiringly at Dylan. This joining of gazes in an activist space marks the beginning of desire, as Ahmed remarks "[l]esbian desire can be rethought as a space for action, a way of extending differently into space through tending toward 'other women'" (p. 102). Furthermore, the scene resonates with critiques on lesbian bourgeois spaces: Pangilinan (2012) has noted how organized activities and fora, despite attempts to be inclusive, still depend on the social mobility/availability of the people that attend (p. 5). Indeed, having had their meet cute at a women's labor rights seminar, under the context of consciousness-raising, Anais and Dylan's relationship continues that trajectory: emotional and ideological shifts in their journey are visualized simultaneously as upward and downward movements. But also, despite its radical potential, the meeting does not erase Dylan's privileged position as part of society's elite, which becomes a point of conflict later.

Initially, Dylan's looks can be considered typical of *tibo* or butch lesbian; her name is a reconfiguration of Diana Lynn. As such she is the more recognizable lesbian figure who, in Philippine mainstream culture, is commonly imagined to be a man trapped in a female body, who desires to become male, representations that reinforce normative notions of masculinity. What separates Dylan from lesbian caricatures in media is how she confronts systems of power within and outside her relationship with Anais. While common depictions in literature and film would have lesbian characters reaffirm their position in society by settling in masculine roles or being subject to tragedies that leave their stories and desires unresolved (Cantor, 2017; Pangilinan, 2012),

Dylan's romancing is framed by and verbalized through feminist discourse, in contrast to the gendered aggression and questioning both women constantly experience elsewhere. It is not explicitly stated that Anais is lesbian; her brother assumes her to be straight until he realizes that Dylan is female. But because Dylan, whom her own sister quickly reveals to be lesbian, extends an invitation for Anais to sit with her in and later outside the forum, Anais' desire is also made visible. Lesbian desire, which is "often concealed within public culture" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 102), is made visible not only through Anais' gaze and the blush on her cheeks as she looks up to Dylan, the potential romance is reiterated on the page as a floral border and a triangle, which given the theme of an activist romance appears reminiscent of hierarchical models, perhaps Marx's mode of production or Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

FIGURE 6
Lesbian contact framed by a triangle and wreath of flowers
(Kampilan, 2017, p. 72).

Visual elements, such as color and ornamentation, simultaneously accentuate cultural identities, political positions, and inner states of being. The red and blue palette shifting saturation, the sprouting of flowers (figure 6), the birds and fish populating the margins (figure 7), mark transformative moments otherwise invisible. Unlike looking at a sticker, or even a panel taken out of context, some of these shifts are only noticeable when the komix is read as a whole. Furthermore, the reader's eye typically favors dialogue and figures, particularly character faces, seldom lingering on backgrounds unless these call attention to themselves. *Mga Sayaw*'s geotectonic frame encourages a sustained suspension of the hierarchy of motifs: that is, it allows background and foreground to construct meaning dialectically, without favoring one over the other. Both are simultaneously diegetic and symbolic, concrete and physical—spaces, movement—and loaded with abstract or referential significance—signifying emotions, identities, relations. The background, as aforementioned, may be considered "not simply what is around what we face […] but as produced by acts of relegation" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 31): it is a sign system *rendered* secondary by the narrative preference for the foreground, even though both take up space on the page and bear the same potential for meaning. The same goes for panel borders, gutters, and other seemingly decorative elements. Thus, in addition to transhistorical dialogue between contemporary life and the creation of the world, the visual narration involved in *Mga Sayaw* emphasizes spatial

FIGURE 7
Rahman coming to terms with his sexuality (Kampilan, 2017, pp. 61-62, spread)

and temporal flux between primary and secondary symbolic systems, discouraging a one-way interpretation of the text's allegorical play. Such symbolism reinforces the geotectonic analogy as cultural allegory while also lending ontological depth to the characters. This "extra" layer of signification fills the gaps, making spaces work *affectively*.

In the storyworld, too, there is something relegated to the background as the story moves along: the vocabulary of each chapter is naturalized to make way for the complexity of the weaving that follows. As aforementioned, the first half of the novel teaches the reader how the komix "works": the mechanisms of the narrative. Then it moves on to less familiar territory: increasingly nuanced intersectional work, braided through the same visual lexica. For the romance of Anais and Dylan to move past institutional and internalized homophobia, Ramon and Rahman's story is shown clearing spaces within those discourses. The family, for instance, is an integral part of the political and social formation of queer individuals. Coming out stories often contend with conservative values passed down through generations, echoing Ahmed's discussion of a child perceiving heterosexuality as something that defines residing in the parental home (2006, p. 86). Family members are required to "take sides"—a form of orientation that identifies which feelings and attitudes are possible—as a way of affirming their position in the family and consequently in larger society (Ahmed, 2006, p. 89). Kampilan animates

FIGURE 8
Ramon's familial background
(Kampilan, 2017, p. 64).

this dynamic through Ramon's backstory: Ramon's father attempts to "straighten" out the gay child through violence but is instead scolded by Ramon's mother, grandfather, and significantly, a godmother who is established to have a female partner and who wields a corresponding traditional *pamalo.* Together this extended family turns the pressure to reform back onto the father and by taking Ramon's side, giving him room to remain homosexual.

Ramon and Rahman's story begins at a point where the two men can speak of their struggles casually because self-acceptance is already in hindsight. In diegesis they work to accept each other, and eventually tread a queer line together. They make visible the work that Ahmed describes for the white and black boys in Countee Cullen's "Tableau":

> to walk alongside each other, without wonder, as if it were an ordinary path to take. […] one is not asked to "take sides" when one is "beside"—one walks beside and alongside. That is enough to clear the ground. […] Perhaps the simple gestures of bodies that keep up involve a radicalization of the side, when the beside becomes alongside, where one side is not "against" the other. (p. 169)

Unlike the gay men, Anais and Dylan navigate those lines, in the present rather than the nostalgic mode, and to a further extent than any previous couple in the volume (figure 8). The two women's families bear more economic and social concerns than their "tending toward" other women. Dylan's mother, a distinguished lawyer, initially refuses to acknowledge Anais as her daughter's partner. In reaction, Dylan reconfigures the mother's space: she moves out of the comforts of the family home, rejecting her mother's insistence on her place at the family table and denying her influence on her daughter's future. This separation eventually convinces the mother to re-evaluate her prejudices, which were never about Dylan's sexuality.

FIGURE 9
Graduation; Dylan defies her family for Anais
(Kampilan, 2017, p. 91).

Cohabitation thus extends the romance to a second conflict cycle which not only reverses the women's situation, but also goes on to mirror the mythical conjugal conflict in chapter 1. Dylan's saturated red reappears not as a background for mass-organizing or romance, but as volcanic rage, as the same political idealism that lifts Anais from exhaustion prevents Dylan from finding employment. She is portrayed taking care of the household as Anais increasingly spends more time in the office, scenes that resonate with feminist discussions of social reproduction and unpaid work, the "invisible" labor borne by women and which sustains capitalist operations (Arruzza, Bhattacharya, & Fraser, 2019, pp. 21-22). Dylan's knowledge on labor conditions fails to remedy her frustrations, as lived experience is often entirely its own form of education. Visually, this change is marked by hair styles: Dylan grows out her hair as circumstances leave her disengaged from activist circles and confined in the home; as a call center agent, Anais sports a fringed bob, a change from her ponytail as a factory worker. It is a play on the butch-femme aesthetics established in the beginning of the chapter, but embodiment and gender expression are marked as fluid and linked to the material, rather than sexual, lives of the two characters.

When Dylan's attitude does crack under pressure, when Anais comes home late on their anniversary, she lashes out with the same rhetoric that Tungkung Langit levels against Laon Sina, and that her own mother—in rejecting her life choices, including dating a working-class "mocha girl"—used as reminder of filial ingratitude:

> *Wala kang utang na loob*
> *Ibinangon lang kita, Anais!*
> *Anumang meron ka…*
> *…dahil sa akin! Wala ka kung wala ako!* (pp. 112-113)

This inherited condescension threatens a relationship that is not yet founded on maturity of experience or secure personal acceptance. Yet Anais' tears and her rehearsal of the rhetoric of subjugation—"*Ganiyan pala* kababa *ng tingin mo sa 'kin*" (p. 113; emphasis in original)—inspires recognition in Dylan. Anais does not turn away as Laon Sina does, instead giving Dylan time to *revise her words* and *restate her view,* giving space on the page and in their home for something other than a relationship built on the social hierarchies that had oppressed each woman in turn. The outburst is not only forgiven, it is followed by further opportunities for reconciliation (figure 10). The resolution suggests the formation of a relationship of mutual support rather than codependence, and the tale ends with dinner at Dylan's family home.

In presenting geological history, *Mga Sayaw* suggests that the forces that divide are the same ones that enable intimate understanding. Queer characters resist replaying dangerous and divisive formulas provided readily by normative social relations. The komix presents queer characters negotiating other discourses of difference and discrimination. Homosexuality is no longer a point of contention for the characters, though it may be so for the general reader. By giving them space to resolve other conflicts, the komix clarifies that their sexuality is *not* a problem waiting to be solved. We do not mean that non-normative sexuality *is* a solution, but that this way of thinking about difference extends from queer discourse to inform other realms of the social. It reiterates how the refusal to follow the "straight" line involves a "habit-change," to quote Ahmed's discussion of Irigaray and de Lauretis, which "requires a

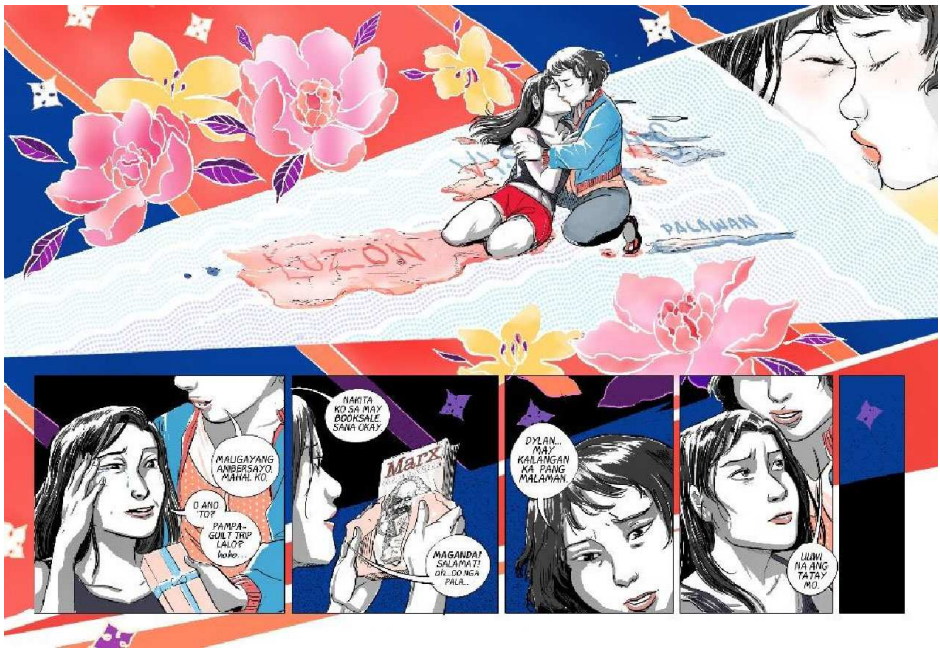

FIGURE 10
Slanted frames for settling and reconciliation
(Kampilan, 2017, p. 115).

reorientation of one's body such that other objects, those that are not reachable on the vertical and horizontal lines of straight culture, can be reached" (p. 100). These are the points from which better things bloom: here and in Kampilan's other stories, the moments that promise possibilities of connection, whether desire or reconciliation, are those punctuated with flowers and other polysemic motifs that readers learn to recognize.

"Keep Da Change"—a stand-alone comic that Kampilan contributed to *Ligaw-Tingin*—bears the same tilted panels and boundary-crossing gazes (figure 11), and though flowers make only a subtle appearance (figure 12) they signal the titular change brought about by the moment of encounter. A much shorter story than "*Lupang Hinirang*," the concentration of visual motifs in "Keep Da Change" function closer to stereotype as shorthand signals for recognizing one

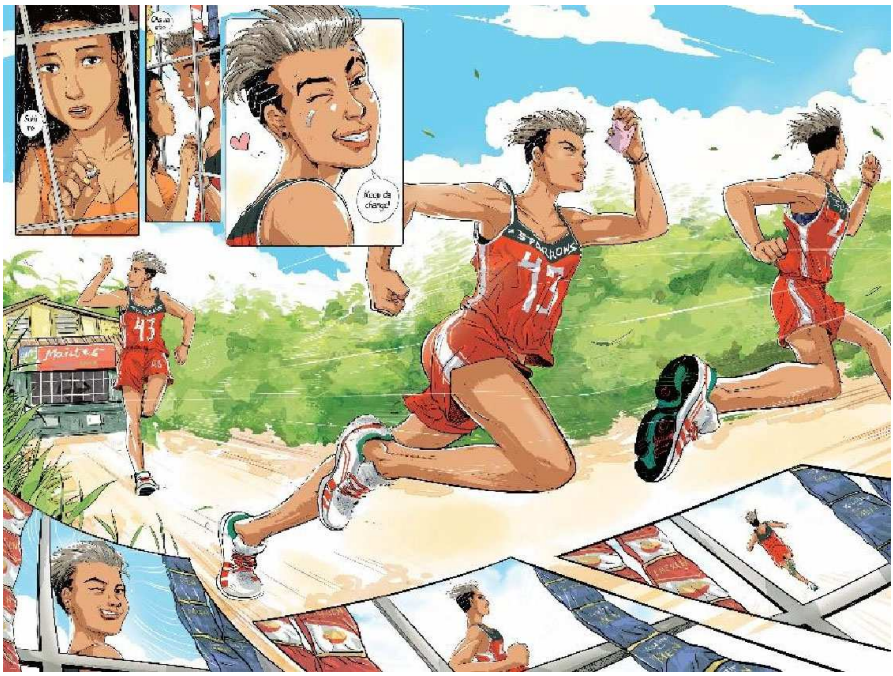

FIGURE 11
The wink, doubly focalized
(Kampilan, 2019, pp. 74-75, spread).

lesbian, and then the other. The visibility of the butch is once again signaled primarily by her short hair, then by her outfit. Yet there are a series of winks to the reader: a teammate calls her Girlie, and Girlie's offhand "Keep da [sic] change" is a signal of need to change sanitary napkins. Through these winks the story actively counters one stereotype of the butch-femme dynamic, which is that the lesbian desires to be a man. Girlie makes no effort to hide her "femaleness": not only does she retain such a telling name, she announces her menstruation, and in the moments that the gaze makes a spectacle of her body—doubled by the view of the vendor and the splash page display for the audience—it is apparent that she dons a sports bra. The gendering attached to the basketball uniform is itself preconceived: are sports an innately masculine activity? In this case the uniform does not function to conceal

the female body, instead accentuating the grace and urgency of an active woman off to take care of basic hygiene.

But it is not Girlie's heart that changes. Her visibility as a "typical butch" is taken by the story to make visible the desire of the supposed femme—the vendor whom, in the audience's view, cannot help but share the name of the store she mans: Marites. The diegetic inclusion of the television and the *teleserye*, precisely the sort of intermedia representation that signals multimodality within comics (Pedri, 2017), here stands in for mainstream cultural discourse. It simultaneously verbalizes the suggestion that Marites surrender to the "truth" of her feelings but interferes with those feelings from off panel. The reaction to this interference is to *turn it off* just as it insists on gender categories. In a wink, the statement "Ako eng [sic] lalake" is cancelled, as Marites' desire turns her elsewhere.

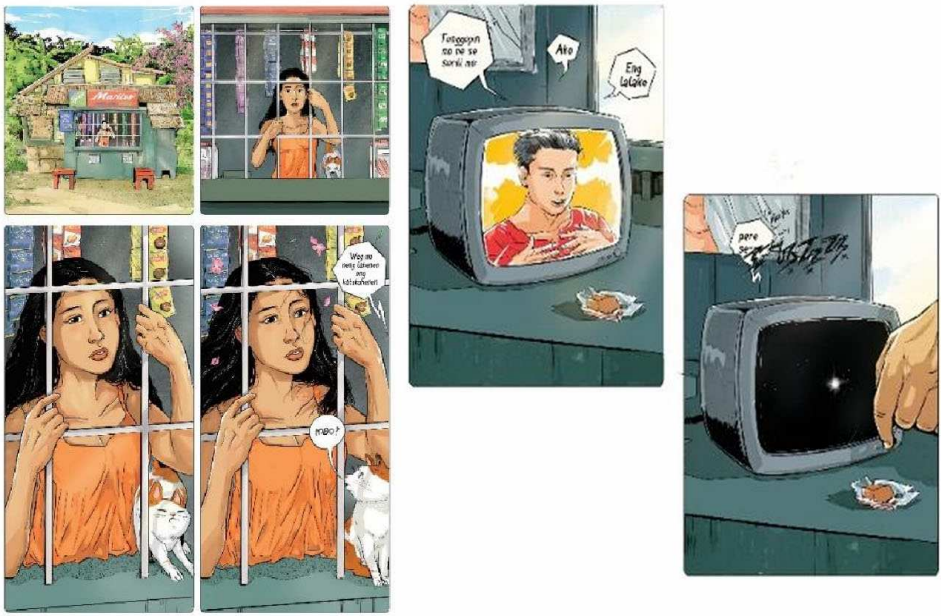

FIGURE 12
A dramatic turn of the gaze
(Kampilan, 2019, pp. 76-77, spread).

The play on heteronormative binarism is familiar, but the story directs attention to one positive discursive aspect: that butch visibility enables "hidden" lesbians a recognizable entry point into expressing desire outwardly as narrative action. As Pangilinan (2012) argues for Philippine lesbian short stories, this butch-femme role-play can itself be reworked to subvert stereotype and instead reflect nuances of lesbian self-representation (p. 12). Given its brevity, the story does not confirm whether either character is lesbian—only the inclusion in *Ligaw-Tingin* ensures this identification—or if they ever have a romantic relationship. Hence the gaze extends longingly beyond the final page.

MAKING WORK VISIBLE

Officially acclaimed as an award-winning creator and book designer, Kampilan's main contribution to *Ligaw-Tingin* goes beyond her short story. Of greater impact is her editorial role, which allowed the exercise of her style without her laying claim to the anthology's content. Ceding the front cover (figure 13)—a space of privilege—to Katrina Pallon's oil painting, Kampilan decorates the internal title page, the copyright page, the table of contents, and the editor's preface. She populates these paratextual spaces with silhouettes of girls kissing and romancing in the style of old candy-wrapper cutouts and illustrates the contributor's pages with portraits of the 10 *komixera* engaged in traditional *harana*.

The candy wrapper motif ties in thematically with "Keep Da Change," suggestive of "eye-candy" aesthetics and sari-sari store romance. Following this conceit, Kampilan's book design as well as her social media promotion "wraps" this anthology, which made its rounds just as Kampilan was awarded for *Mga Sayaw.* This book, too, has a life of its own, one that is aligned with the view shared by its publishers and contributors.

Peeking into the anthologizing process reminds us that comics, and thus komix, are a product of cultural ecologies: that people, places, cultural practices, and interactions localize around specific publishers and imprints (Friedlander, 2018). Whereas Anino comics is a trailblazing imprint within mainstream publishing—young and innovative, pooling

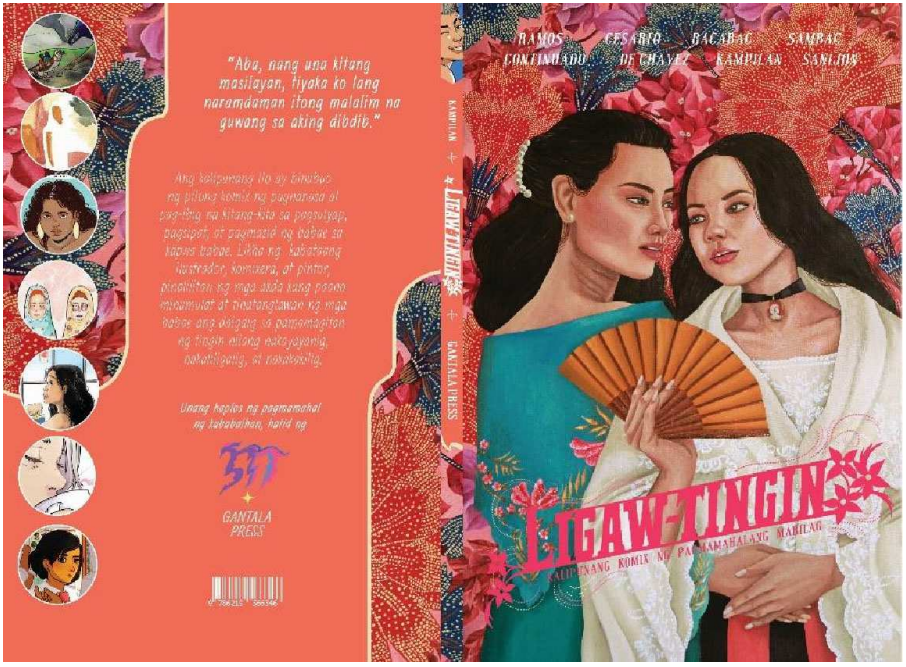

FIGURE 13
Ligaw-Tingin cover art by Katrina Pallon,
design by Emiliana Kampilan (2018c).

talents from a burgeoning independent komiks scene—it is only one of many players in the industry. Gantala Press, the publisher of *Ligaw-Tingin*, is blazing a different trail. As an independent feminist press, Gantala collaborates with various groups within the women's movement, forwarding the belief that feminist publishing has a strong potential for shaping public history (Cura, 2018). Gantala's work with labor, agricultural, and migrant women's collectives aim to carve a space for such narratives in a male-dominated publishing industry, to commit their experiences onto the page and, consequently, to public memory, and to build a network of support for women across geographic and socio-political bounds. They veer away from "mediation" as an approach to rendering women's stories, seeing as "mediators usually determine the language and system of knowledge to be used in the act of mediation or narration" (Cura, 2018).

While removing any and all mediation or curation may seem too idealistic, *Ligaw-Tingin* attempts to puts this vision into practice by showcasing work of lesbian artists from all over the Philippines and by allowing pieces written in their respective vernaculars: Bisaya, Filipino, and Taglish. The editorial process is consultative rather than prescriptive and copyrights are shared with the komixera, enabling both the inclusion of culturally diverse creators while affording those who choose anonymity the chance to be represented under Gantala's banner. In this sense, Gantala diffuses notions of ownership over their published works—an exercise that often becomes convoluted in the context of private, profit-driven publishing in the Philippines.

Kampilan situates herself within this network of art and activism by speaking through a collective voice. As mentioned earlier, she uses the connectivity afforded by the platform to amplify calls to mass organization and to re-present evidence of violence inflicted or proof of active resistance. Her own views are presented primarily through her creative production, yet even there it is amplification at work. Her denial of sole authorship, the use of "we" in her author bio and editor preface, positions her and her work as a response to and an outcome of existing creative traditions in the Philippines. Her graphic novels also feature "cultural referees" alongside scientific references, which she practices when representing subject positions not her own (E. Kampilan, personal communication, March 18, 2019). Other practices of anonymity include her use of Emiliana Kampilan, a nom de plume like Dead Balagtas, even for copyrights, as well as her appearance in public wearing a *bayong* over her head in the fashion of the Makapili, a group historically identified as Filipino collaborators during the Japanese occupation. She received her national book awards thus costumed. This authorial conviction extends to how she disseminates her work: she recently uploaded and gave free access to "Keep Da Change" in the spirit of solidarity and to express indignation over the government's failure to address the Covid-19 crisis. She has also granted open access to selected spreads from *Mga Sayaw*, manifesting her stance regarding the ideological and material value of her komix.

In the preface of *Ligaw-Tingin*, Kampilan as editor and representative of the gathered komixera, begs the reader's indulgence as a suitor: "*Umaasa kami, ang iyong manliligaw, na magbubunga ng matagal na pagsasama itong pagsuyo namin sa iyo. Asahan mong magkikita tayong muli. Sana sa susunod, makuha namin sa wakas ang matamis mong 'oo'? Dahil kami, Mahal ko, ay nakuha mo na*" (2018c, p. 6). This negotiation with the reader reiterates the need for consensual support: that narratives of lesbian love, told against the odds, would hopefully be passed on, retold, and allowed to spawn more such stories. This anthology portrays lesbian love, and the practice of komix itself, as habitual: they need to be sustained, repeated in hostile environments, for them to be sustainable. This textual romancing, a practice of "women identifying with each other, without sexual contact" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 103), diffuses both activist hard-lining and author celebrification, which would be in conflict with the consensual and communal values the producers espouse.

MOVING FORWARD

Intersectionality as a framework demystifies the confluence of power differentials in society; as such its goals are aligned with established grassroots activism in the Philippines. Nonetheless, the historical trauma surrounding female and queer desire continues to cloud the connections among discourses of gender, sexuality, labor, and art. Creative practices that aim at intersectionality may therefore benefit from more visibly engaging with this trauma by demonstrating how to unlearn hetero-patriarchal ways of reading and reiterating the entangled nature of gendered and material life. Popular culture is one arena in which this battle is fought, and the competition for attention—over the gaze, over engagement—leads artists and activists to innovate ways in which to restore more than a superficial connectivity. Thus, the tools may seem familiar: eye-catching art, nostalgic representations of quotidian life, allusions to shared cultural norms. Each work aims to catch the eye quickly but, because re-orientation itself is a gradual process, attention is sustained through other means.

The romantic optimism of the works analyzed here is part of the project of recuperation: healing trauma cannot begin if violence is either denied or allowed to remain the dominant discourse. It must be addressed directly, but not in its own terms. Likewise, the recuperation of traditional motifs—femininity, religiosity, filial bonds, nostalgia—are not in themselves transgressive, but they remain viable points of entry for dialogue to be possible. It is in the complexity of that dialogue that the challenge lies: transhistorical dialogue encourages a viewer to inquire about the past as much as to face the present. As a kind of metafiction, it allows queer narratives to be dislodged from heteronormative traditions and to more actively curate how their presence is represented and read. While this may be read as escapist or utopic fantasy, we may also ask whether such fantastic optimism is disallowed in our fictions? In the braiding of myth, of political, natural, and personal histories, such works suggest that the renovation of the imagination is groundwork for making other changes possible. After all, gender and sexuality are not individually experienced. They are shaped by social discourses of identity and intimacy, distance and connection, and the representations of those possibilities. Perceptions of queerness vary depending on what cultures one is exposed to, what narratives one has access to, where one finds one's allies.

Kampilan's trajectory is one of intersectional activism: directing readers towards marginalized discourses, making visible queer figures in her own work, and making room for their stories in the industry. Through creative and editorial practices, online and off, she invites her audiences to claim collective ownership or co-authorship of such narratives. Kampilan's body of work reminds us, to borrow Ahmed's words, that "[e]ven when orientations seem to be about which way we are facing in the present, they also point us toward the future […] risking departure from the straight and narrow makes new futures possible, which might involve going astray, getting lost, or even becoming queer" (p. 21). The invitation to link up with the margins, for which Kampilan's work proposes to be points of contact, serves as a beginner's guide to those who are learning how to refuse to align with dominant ideology or are presently at a loss on how to cope with the threat of oppression

such a refusal often entails. In the struggle of coming out, as in coming forward to face injustice, the value of seeing that one is not alone is both basic and crucial: if such a meeting of gazes—between two people, among allies, across generations—is romanticized and cherished, it is because the work that follows is arduous, incomplete, and certainly cannot be done alone.

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