

Postcolonial Camp: Hybridity and Performative Inversions in *Zsazsa Zaturnnah*¹

J. Neil C. Garcia

There is a common presumption that queer theory is global and unproblematically so. This paper argues otherwise, by performing a postcolonial reading of *Zsazsa Zaturnnah*, an extremely popular Philippine “campy” text from 2003, which is easily assimilated into a queer reading that all too devastatingly overlooks its specificities as a postcolonial articulation. In particular, the paper differentiates contemporary Western camp from the postcolonial camp to be found in texts coming from the Global South, whose theories of subjectivity, even if pathetic, remain distinct from postmodernism’s understanding of agency, simply because they remain entirely utilizable in anticolonial and nationalist projects, as this text itself illustrates. Queer theory’s “doctrine” of gender performativity therefore needs to be reinterpreted from the perspective of postcolonial syncretism and/or hybridity, which indeed can be seen to challenge its most basic assumptions regarding the issues of agency and social transformation.

Keywords: camp, bakla, postcolonial, agency, nationalism, gay

Too often, antiheteronormative (mostly referenced as “queer”) theorizing in places outside the Global North presumes a continuity of oppositional discursivities with it. This unproblematic wholesale adoption of concepts and frameworks is itself a manifestation of the thoroughness of Euroamerican neocolonial cultural hegemony—especially in the realm of postmodern-inflected academic theory—and of the stifling heteronormative (and erotophobic) conservatism of traditional nationalist paradigms, that encourages if not necessitates such an imaginative and/or theoretical “migration.”

In this paper, I will register a demurral against such a tendency, primarily by performing a “specifying” postcolonial reading of a phenomenally successful Filipino graphic novel from 2003, written by Carlo Vergara. *Zsazsa Zaturnnah* (the comic book and later, the hit musical and the feature film), presents a very good opportunity to distinguish the transgressive reinscriptions of Western postmodern camp from their “formally comparable” counterparts elsewhere,

specifically in “transitional cultures” of the Third World (Vergara, 2005). Offhand, this uproariously ironic and irreverent text may be seen to draw its aesthetics from Western postmodern Camp, but a closer reading will reveal its postcolonial difference, specifically in terms of the underlying gender and sexual definitions (and their dynamics) and the notion of the “pathetic subject” that they evoke. By examining the intricacies of this difference, I will also be reinterpreting Queer Theory’s “performative thesis” within the framework of transcultural perversion or hybridity, and linking these to the contentious, supposedly retardataire, but persistently relevant and vital question of anticolonial nationalism.

Ultimately, I intend the paper to provide a preliminary argument against the damaging over-reliance, in Asian or perhaps Third World antihomophobic discourses in general, and in Philippine gay studies in particular, on Western postmodern theory, which decenters Western liberal humanism’s individual subject, but also finally precludes all consideration, even within postcolonial discourses on the Global South, of beleaguered, marginalized, subaltern, and/or pathetic” subjectivities. Like other postcolonial critics, I will attempt to present initial and hopefully useful examples of how we can possibly begin to negotiate our way between the essentialist and constructionist positions, chiefly by looking for “traces” of split, hybridized, dialogic, double (or even multiple) consciousness in own non-Western traditions, and for “antecedents” to poststructuralist theories in own various, national texts.

A Different Kind of Superheroine

Zsazsa Zaturannah takes place in a nonspecific corner of the Philippine countryside, made patently rustic by wide expanses of rice fields and a magical volcano that harbors monstrous amphibians, and yet important, big and perhaps urbane enough to have its own beauty parlor, bakery, a church that can accommodate the entire town, a cemetery, and because it will later on prove necessary to the text’s final battle scene, its own roomy and abandoned rice cake factory. The hero is Ada, a flagrantly effeminate *bakla* (male homosexual, often stereotyped as a sissy) beautician and proprietor of his own modestly successful beauty-enhancing business, and his best friend, constant companion, helper, and sidekick, the saucily plump and outrageous Didi. These feminine names are not private monikers, for the entire community uses them for these two effeminate characters.

We know that recently jilted, lovelorn, and solitary Ada is rather reserved and not very demonstrative, but that he is a competent entrepreneur and is well loved by his numerous clients, most especially the wiry-haired and vain

Aling Britney, a wrinkled old woman who may look like a veritable hag, but is something of a cougar in this town. Right across Ada's parlor is the local bakery, whose handsomely drawn and buffed baker, Dodong, Ada likes to steal coquettish glances at. And because this is a fantastic *bakla* superheroine story, in the opening scenes we see the gorgeously brawny he-man Dodong likewise stealing glances at the demure but secretly besotted Ada—something which Didi the noisy sidekick is only all too happy to notice out loud.

Because *Zsazsa Zaturannah* is a shameless gay homage to a slew of Filipino *Darna*² and *Darna*-like films from the sixties and seventies, soon enough Ada becomes the unwitting recipient of a mysterious stone that comes crashing down from the sky one night, and bops him on the head as he is in the middle of belting a tacky torch song inside the shower. On the rather huge, rough, and loofa-looking stone is inscribed the enigmatic word “Zaturannah,” and prodded on by Didi who reminds him of the protagonist's expected move at this point in the familiar superheroine narrative, Ada manages to stuff the mysterious stone into his revealingly cavernous mouth, which promptly melts on his tongue, like vanilla-flavored syrup. As happens in the “Darna” story, Ada shouts the stone's name, whereupon the fantastic but rather explosive transformation ensues. Out of the dramatic smoke-screen emerges the orange-haired, genitally female, but heftily muscular, big-boobed, and very gay Zaturannah, Ada's alter-ego, who has the strength of Hercules but is as flightless as an ostrich on steroids. Didi quickly christens her “Zsazsa Zaturannah,” and requisitions for her a perfectly slutty superheroine costume—consisting basically of chrome-fitted brassiere and ultra-revealing thong—and puts her to work on her first violent encounter: a show down with a gigantic frog that has begun to wreak havoc on the lives of the destitute and helpless townspeople, especially the children and elderly.

Zsazsa gets swallowed up by the monster frog, but manages to defeat it by clobbering it from the inside out. As it turns out, the slimy and jumpy beast had been unleashed on the hapless townspeople by a feisty and colorfully garbed group of five extraterrestrial, man-hating, and warlike “Amazonistas.” They have come from the planet Xxx to conquer the woebegone town and annex it as a territory. Their queen is the upwardly mobile and anglophile Femina Suarestellar Baroux, who expresses mocking admiration for Zaturannah's brave but inevitably foolish resolve to come to the defense of her own people. They challenge Zsazsa to another duel, this time in the dead of night inside the eerie town cemetery. Here, Zsazsa and Didi bump into the cute and conveniently ubiquitous Dodong, who witnesses Zsazsa's reversal back into Ada when the former accidentally retches the hefty and potent stone. For this violent confrontation, the Amazonistas have reanimated the cemetery's

resident corpses, and an entire army of rotting “mumus” comes to descend in all their wormy decrepitude on the horrified inhabitants of the nondescript town. Dodong almost goes completely dishabille after a group of lascivious zombies pounces on him, at which point Didi heroically comes to his rescue and beats the putrid sluts to a gritty and mushy pulp. Zsazsa is taken aback when she meets the corpse of her long-dead father, whom she loves, despite the latter’s manifest disgust and hatred for his shameful and sissy—that is to say, “womanish” or *binabae* — son. Rather than relive the trauma of his profoundly disappointing life, the corpse of Adrian’s father literally tears itself apart. (At this point we come to know that Adrian used to be Ada’s name, just before he became an orphan, and well before he moved out of the house and established a career as his hometown’s most famous beautician). Rejected even from beyond the grave by his own family, Zsazsa leaves the scene awash in melodramatic tears.

Zsazsa and Didi, with the assistance of the parish priest, manage to rally the townspeople, and armed with crosses and holy water poured into the atomizers and spray bottles that have been requisitioned from Ada’s parlor, they valiantly rush out of the church and proceed to dismantle the scary but apparently flimsy, cadaverous army. Thwarted once again, Femina sends a message to her enemy, in which she issues her final and ultimate challenge: a battle to the death at noon of the next day, right in the middle of town. Come morning, we see Zsazsa retouching her makeup inside Ada’s parlor, and Dodong comes to say hi, and to offer to take on the burden of fighting the fashion-conscious invaders, by being the one to swallow the prowess-giving stone. Zsazsa declines and practically dismisses the offer, declaring that being *bakla* and an orphan she is eminently expendable, unlike Dodong, who has siblings and parents who rely on him. Also, she thinks that the image of Dodong fantasizing over his own female incarnation is much too troubling for words. Cutely drawn and chivalrous Dodong leaves the parlor visibly humiliated and spurned.

Inasmuch as they cannot know for certain how this day will end, bosom buddies Ada (qua Zsazsa) and Didi have an emotional moment of bonding—punctuated by the tearful recitation of famous lines and titles from some of the more forgettable Filipino dramatic movies of the last two decades. At last, the appointed hour comes, and Femina and her court of fellow Amazonistas—namely, Nora A., Vilma S., Sharon C., and Dina B.—appear in all their sartorial glory. Femina has changed into her special armor—the VanessaLeon Battle Gown Model 555—and it must be mentioned that it isn’t so much a gown as an exhibitionistic floozy’s metallic T-back. Courtesy of Femina’s wistful flashback, we learn that the Amazonistas are indeed a bellicose and violent race of angry

and aggressive women, for this is what they have rightfully become after struggling against and overcoming the oppressive male-forms of their planet, who had kept them enslaved to the reproductive imperative for ages. It was the unstoppable and outspoken Femina who chose to break the silence afflicting her gender, and she eventually succeeded in leading her fellow womankind to overthrow the ruthless reign of men.

Back, then, to the present: wielding their special armaments—an assortment of properly symbolic hammers and staffs—the Amazonistas fall into battle formation after performing a series of show-stopping production numbers. Zsazsa breaks their painstakingly choreographed routine by throwing a truck at them. Also, she responds in kind with her own impromptu but energetic dance number, characterized by a series of gyrations, gestures, and salacious moans—all strangely redolent of a beerhouse floorshow. Femina kicks her in the provocatively pouty rump, and this briefly immobilizes her. At this point Dodong rushes to her rescue, but Femina understands that demonstrations of male chivalry merely serve to reinforce the illusion of male superiority, and so she beats him up—just enough to render him useless for the moment (for she has yet undisclosed plans for him later on), and tosses him like a doll into the air. Thankfully albeit clumsily enough, the male townsfolk break his fall by catching him (or at least trying to).

Zsazsa and Femina fight in earnest, the latter using her beefy and Kung Fu-adept arms and legs, the former utilizing her ample bosom to deflect the force of the marauding extraterrestrial limbs. Zsazsa succeeds in momentarily disorienting the suddenly idiotic Femina by pulling out her ponytail, which turns out to be the latter's power transmission antenna. However, after getting bopped on the head, Femina's thought processes turn coherent again, and she decides to shoot at the townspeople who have gathered, like the fence-sitting kibitzers that they are, in the center of town to watch and take bets on the grand showdown. Wonder-woman-like, and using her plastic wrist bands, Zsazsa is able to deflect the volley of lethal bullets, save for one, which hits the broad-sided and unsuspecting Didi, who promptly collapses. Sensing this to be his own special dramatic moment, Didi soap-operatically confesses his undying gratitude and friendship to Ada, who has been an abiding source of consolation and joy in the arid wasteland that is the *bakla's* lonely life, and declares Ada to be truly and incontrovertibly beautiful, inside and out. Before Zsazsa can respond Didi has started snoring. Dodong comes to comfort Zsazsa, and agrees to take Didi to the town infirmary, for Zsazsa still has more superheroic battling to do.

Wishing to get the townspeople out of harm's way, Zsazsa rushes off to the abandoned *kakanin* (rice cake) factory, and draws the Amazonistas there. The five-woman assault proves too much for Zsazsa, and soon enough she is overwhelmed. Outside, the townspeople, including Dodong, are earnestly praying for their defender's victory. Cornered, overpowered, and outweaponned—specifically by the ultra-powerful Pagoda Cold Wave Motion Gun—Zsazsa decides on another tactic. Since Femina has always declared men to be her teachers in the ways of warfare, Zsazsa spits out the talismanic stone and reverts to being the effeminate and genitally male Ada. This throws a monkey wrench at the Amazonistas' scheme of anatomically dichotomous things, and caught in a dualistic quandary and unsure of what has happened to their pastel-haired adversary, they turn to their queen for counsel. Before she can open her mouth Ada has popped the Zaturannah stone into it. Soon enough Femina shouts the magic word, and is transformed into a huge and pig-headed male-form from planet Xxx. The Amazonistas panic, and believing that they have encountered a stowaway from their world, they subdue the beast using their combined strength (that is genetically preprogrammed, by the way, to increase exponentially in the presence of just such a threat). All together they beam back up to their space ship that promptly hurtles into the mysterious bowels of outer space.

Soliloquizing about the unlamented plight of the oppressed across history, Dodong carries the badly beaten Ada out of the factory, praising him, comforting him, and assuring him that it will now be his turn to take care of the unsung but utterly heroic beautician, who risked his life to save his people from the despotism of alien invaders.

In this comic book's final chapter, which serves as a kind of epilogue, we are told that Didi is recovering in earnest from his wound, and that life in the town has finally returned to normal. Ada has decided to try his luck in Manila, and says goodbye to Aling Britney, who wishes him well and instructs him to open himself up to the possibility of love. Dodong then visits Ada at the now empty beauty parlor. Confessing that he cannot quite explain how he came to have these feelings, he professes his undying love while handing Ada a bouquet of roses. And then, Dodong offers to accompany Ada in his brave new adventure in the big city, to care for and look after him and pursue his own dreams as well. Demure at first, Ada finally relents, and coquettishly embraces Dodong. The book's final frame is an aerial shot of the street right in front of the padlocked parlor, the tricycle bearing the city-bound lovers revving up and away from the frame's rightmost boundary and into this comic-book world's unforeseeable sequel.

Camp?

That this extraordinary and immensely successful graphic novel may be said to partake of the conventions of the discursive practice known, in the postmodern West, as “Camp,” is easy to understand. After all, looking more closely at its text—constituted as much by words as by drawings—we readily notice the presence of just the kind of ironic juxtaposition, theatricality, hyperbole, and humor that Western queer and postmodernist critics have come to identify with this subcultural signifying practice. In particular, the text’s recycling of kitschy elements from popular culture—including, first and foremost, the intertextual references to earlier local superheroine movies and their colorful cast of macabre and tackily coutured interplanetary antagonists, as well as TV commercials, melodramas, and certain famous (and infamous) local actresses—identify it more closely with “low Camp,” that particular variety of Camp that recycles images and concepts poached randomly from commercial mass culture, which it typically satirizes and into which it invariably becomes subsumed. Certainly, the appropriateness of the camp description as far as *Zsazsa Zaturnnah* is concerned is made even more inevitable when we recognize its declared position concerning the issue of heteronormative gender and sexuality—which is to say, given its unremitting and screamingly insistent gayness. The simple fact that *Zsazsa Zaturnnah* is about the story of a *bakla* who morphs into a buffed superheroine after he gulps down a chunk of interstellar debris clearly qualifies it, in an easy enough sense, as Camp.

According to the critical convention, Camp creates improprieties, incongruities, and ironic inversions or “reversals” of hierarchical polarities. (Meyer, 1994) Indeed, in *Zsazsa Zaturnnah*, a garden-variety frog turns gargantuan and ravenous, atomizers become powerful weapons against an army of invading zombies, hair styling products work as deadly alien ammunition, worm-eaten corpses turn into lascivious rapists, and as earlier mentioned, courtesy of an outlandish and brick-sized stone, a sissy male beautician transforms into a shapely and superheroic but very faggoty superwoman. Also, ideas and ideals are turned upside down by Camp:³ in this graphic novel, the gravity and pain of family rejection are rendered in a hysterically funny scene of a paternal cadaver plucking its own head and limbs out of angry frustration at having fathered a sissy son; and what would have been an entirely dramatic death scene of a mortally wounded *bakla* looking back on a life full of misery and valiantly defended hope is rudely punctuated by the same *bakla* falling unceremoniously asleep and loudly snoring.

Western critics also tell us that Camp’s anarchic inversion of binaries serves simply to denaturalize them, even as it visibly revels in artificiality and

celebrates the un- or even the anti-natural. This anarchic endeavor results from Camp's wholesale reduction of the world to pure surfaces devoid of implicit depth. In fact, in Western Camp, surface takes precedence over depth, as the aesthetic is deemed more important than the ethical (Dollimore, 1991). In order to explain this more clearly, critics typically contrast the blatant and ironic campiness of drag against the earnest imposture of transsexual impersonation: simply put, drag queens are campy while male-to-female impersonators are not. The former rarely intend to be taken seriously as women, unlike the latter, who seriously and often affectingly enact the gender transition (Stein, 1989). Drag queens are too selfconsciously artificial and unnatural; they are much too stylized and exaggerated to become remotely perceived as natural.

It is precisely Camp's inversion of social hierarchies that makes it an eminently political and ethical question for lesbian, gay, and/or queer thinkers. One of Camp's most radical powers is that it so blurs the line between humor and seriousness that its effects become ambiguous and undecidable; it is both failed seriousness and failed humor, and the message it secretes is often a dark and unfunny one. In any case, in the past, the low or pop culture Camp of the flamboyant drag queen was routinely condemned by both gay and feminist thinkers, because it supposedly reinforced the antigay stereotype that all gay men were sissy, and it supposedly ridiculed women and perpetuated misogyny. Marxist-oriented thinkers likewise critiqued this practice because by being ostensibly tolerated by mass culture, it effectively functioned as yet one other means by which late capitalism could naturalize its inequities. According to this argument, Camp is a kind of compensatory activity that capitalist society allows abjects (like, for example, transgendered lesbians and gays), who are thereby reconciled to their powerlessness. (Bergman, 1995) In this sense it may be said to occupy a contained and tokenist space, that naturalizes and makes acceptable the oppression of sexual and gender dissidents, in effect making them laugh at—instead of causing them to feel righteous indignation about—their own sorry states.⁴

And yet, what's interesting is that these kinds of feminist and materialist critiques no longer enjoy widespread currency in theory circles in late capitalist Europe and America, as it has since been neutralized and effectively superseded, from the 1990s onwards, by the performative thesis—a powerful genealogical account that has become one of the grounding assumptions of what is now, beyond any doubt, the great tradition of Western (increasingly, Global) Queer Theory (Butler, 1990). According to this thesis, the various camp performances of gay and lesbian drag represent a radical form of praxis that theatricalizes and makes palpable the illusory, mimetic, citational, repetitive, and performative

nature of heteronormative gender.⁵ As we earlier remarked, Camp reverses naturalized norms—foremost of which are the norms of gender, masculine and feminine, and of sexuality, homo and hetero—and thereby renders them visibly constructed and thus, inherently relational and contingent.

Performativity

We understand that this rethinking of Camp in Western critical discourse is part and parcel of the last century's "post-structural turn" concerning the question of identity—which is to say, the unmasking of the subject and of agency as socially efficacious myths. Queer performativity takes heterosexuality to be a cultural matrix through which gendered identity becomes intelligible, mainly because it renders other identities, other possible combinations among the calculus of sex, gender, and desire, practically unintelligible. According to performative theory, gender is nothing but a "cultural fiction," the result of the repetitive performance—or ritualistic imitation—of norms that cannot in fact be achieved, only ever so slightly approximated. The man or woman who is said to perform his or her gender identity is in fact the effect—and not the cause—of those performances. Thus, identity isn't what we are, it's what we do; but we must remember that it is the doing itself that produces the illusion that there is a pre-existent doer—a male or female "us"—behind the deed.

The performative thesis calls our attention to those social processes by which identity categories influence and condition personal and collective action. By virtue of it, we may now more easily appreciate the fact that gender and sexuality are simply the products of a signifying system, and that identity itself is always already an identification, as well as an identity effect. Collective identities can no longer be simply and unproblematically asserted and assumed, for all forms of identity politics easily lend themselves to exactly the kind of fascistic control they seek to break free from.

Moreover, performativity reminds us that gender norms are naturalized by repetition, by the habitual performance of its binary norms (male/female, masculine/feminine, heterosexual/homosexual) that creates the effect of the natural, and excludes those who cannot conform. Such naturalization, however, is unstable and open to ridicule, precisely because the processes that consolidate heterosexuality's unified and coherent "self" are never actually finished, and need to be anxiously performed over and over.

According to this account, parody is the inevitable result of these repetitive "actings out" of gender norms; that is to say, the performativity of gender itself undermines the notion that there is an original essence after which the imitation that is gender patterns itself. Performativity parodies or questions

the idea of an original, inasmuch as the gendered person is herself or himself always already an effect of the repetitive performances of unrealizable norms. Femaleness and maleness are unrealizable because we do not accomplish them once and for all; in fact, we shall always be acting them out in our lifetimes. Given these premises, it only follows that drag—Camp’s selfconscious, excessive, funny, and theatrical mimicry of heterosexual gender and sexuality—is the best and most paradigmatic example of this characteristically parodic mode. As performativity’s founding thinker, the feminist Judith Butler, succinctly puts it: “In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency” (Butler, 1993). Drag’s “literal staginess” deconstructs the naturalness and originality of any or all gender; its troubled and troubling performances “repeat and displace through hyperbole, dissonance, internal confusion, and proliferation the very constructs by which they are mobilized.”

The necessarily parodic effect of gender inversions like Camp and drag has caused innumerable problems even in the postmodern West itself, where critics have registered various demurrals against the simplistic equation that the theory of performativity would seem to draw between politically motivated parody and all transgenderal performances. For one, this theory neglects considering the affectional and pathetic investments of the performer in question; for another, it seemingly forgets the fact that there is a particular social context within which such performances take place, and it can radically define what their political effects are or can become. In light of *Zsazsa Zaturannah*, we can likewise make additional objections against the universalisms implicit in these theories of performative gender and self-referential Camp, and they all necessarily proceed from the complicated postcolonial questions that surround this text’s production and reception—that is to say, that define it as a specifically situated cultural achievement.

In the first place, while we may easily admit the performative thesis as being the best and most cogent elucidation (thus far) of the material constitution of gender and sexuality—namely: that rather than assured essences, they are in fact fragile idealizations that need to be repetitively performed—we must insist, just by using our commonsense, that by virtue of simple locatedness alone, the various instances of *bakla* performance in the Philippines cannot simplistically be considered as “drag” despite their striking resemblance to this Western, postmodern phenomenon. Obviously, while the activity of employing the central insights of the performative thesis may prove to be theoretically productive transculturally, it would still be good to remind ourselves just how localized and context-bound gender and sexuality, even if not precisely as performativities, always are.

I have already argued this in other places (Garcia, 2000), but by virtue of the absence in our culture of an effectively secular and psychiatric dispensation, let me hypothesize once more that the quasi-religious, ritualistic context within which local performances of the *bakla* self are made intelligible, grounds the force of their signification in a kind of “psychospiritual inversion,” which is perfectly in keeping with Tagalog-Filipino culture’s privileged idiom for gendered subjectivity as a form of heterosexually delineated depth or *loob* (literally, “inside.”) By the simple fact that it is sited in a Philippine locality, this *loob*-oriented and psychospiritual performativity is postcolonially imbricated. As such, it cannot so easily be equated with postmodern Camp, which, as we have earlier examined, is primarily a parodic “emptying” of categories of subjectivity and signification. Flamboyantly recuperated as a political strategy by the Queer movement in the West, Camp performs a flattening and evacuation of meaning—a hollowing of identity from the inside—towards the eminently performative space of surface artificiality. Needless to say, like the Philippine *agimat* of traditional animist lore, the magical *Zaturnnah* stone reveals, literalizes, and somatizes the logic of inside/outside. That is to say, it externalizes or brings to the “outside” (that is to say, the body) the soul’s innermost desire or identification, which may or may not be manifested on the conscious level, as for example in the case of this novel’s vociferously man-hating but evidently man-obsessed villainess. As in other recent local textualizations of *kabaklaan*, in *Zsazsa Zaturnnah* the logic of *loob/labas* functions as a central node around which concepts pertaining to gender and sexuality remain obsessively constructed.

All this tells us is that rather than the unproblematic predominance of the postmodern ethos of *surficial* politics, libidinal dispersal, and pastiche, at the very least some residual evidence of the depth model of a kind of affectional and pathetic identity may still be seen as operative in this undoubtedly hybrid, postcolonially campy text. Indeed, like many other examples of Philippine gay writing, in this text gender and/or sexual identity continues to be premised on an idea—more like an article of faith—that privileges depth, psychospiritual plenitude, core-ness or *kalooban*. This local model of interiority, like Western gender/sexuality, is heteronormatively defined (that is to say, bifurcated into male and female), and is arguably at the core of the minoritization of gayness in the Philippines as an effeminate *kabaklaan* that remains slavishly fascinated with supposedly “heterosexual” masculinity (Garcia, 2009). As we know, *kalooban* delineates identity as an outside and an inside, even as it already presumes that what is inside is more precious and significant than what is outside. For the *bakla*, gender transition from male to female is accomplished

via the *loob*, which in this text the *Zaturnnah* stone affirms and spectacularly (because magically) externalizes. Moreover, we can say that the selfless heroism or martyrdom which Ada/Zsazsa ritualistically takes on and performs in this narrative itself derives its power and cogency precisely from this psychospiritual investment.

We need always, thus, to insist on the undeniable specificity of this text. Obviously, there are Western, neocolonial and yes, Camp elements to be found in it, and yet, as we have examined in relation to the notion of psychospiritual inversion, as articulated in this text these elements are finally refunctioned, localized, and rendered inescapably hybrid. This offers us an opportunity therefore to reread this text as postcolonially significant and signifying, inasmuch as its very hybridity may be said to derive from the nonconvergence between neocolonial power's intentions and the affects of those who receive them—which is to say, between the globalized influence of conventions coming from Western Camp and the creative ways that they are fashioned and refashioned by, in, and as Philippine gay culture. After all, like other colonial and neocolonial impositions—including those that pertain to gender, sexual identities, and desires—objects coming from Western gay or queer globality do end up becoming resignified by and in our culture, split between their claims and their performances, recontextualized and syncretized right from their very moment of contact. Like its older and more frankly brutish incarnation, neocolonial power isn't a monolithic and absolute system, for it is necessarily fractured and transformed in its relationality with its subjects, over whom it exercises both a coercive and an empowering mystique. For the simple reason that it illustrates the imperfect workings of a dominant discourse that transforms and is transformed in the very fact of its incumbency, neocolonial hybridity ironically particularizes, for our contemporary situation, the notion of an internally incoherent, appropriable, and ambivalent power.

For instance, in *Zsazsa Zaturnnah Ze Muzikal*, adapted in 2006 by Chris Martinez and staged by the Cultural Center of the Philippines's Tanghalang Pilipino under the direction of Chris Millado, the persistence of an earnestly avowed and pathetically expressed *kalooban* clearly hybridizes the *surficiality* of the production's predominantly camp sensibility.⁶ While most of the songs composed by Vincent de Jesus are undoubtedly joyous (if not jocund), now and then they turn shamelessly maudlin and sad, as for example in the affecting filial duet sung by Ada (played by Tuxqs Rutaqio) and Zsazsa (played by Eula Valdez) after the encounter at the cemetery with the reanimated corpse of the former's unforgiving and stubbornly intolerant father, and in the mock "swan song" of Didi (played here by Ricci Chan), which is otherwise entirely comical

— sung in a state of delirium by a histrionic drama queen who knows this is her career-defining aria, hallucinating a host of macho-dancing angels who have come to frisk her away from her earthly imprisonment to the glory of an orgiastic heaven—until the lyrics suddenly bring up the sad and all-too-real reality that undergirds the *bakla*’s moment of socially enforced hilarity:

*ni minsan ay di nila ako ginalang;
maliban sa pagiging bayot ko,
sa aki’y wala na silang
nalalaman pa*

[They never once showed me respect;
other than my gayness,
they really cared to know
nothing else about me].

To many beleaguered *bakla* in the audience, the effect of the intrusion of this serious (and easily relatable) social commentary into an otherwise light-hearted and fun song can be pretty powerful (staggering, almost) indeed. These seriocomic moments are nothing if not clear instances of an inescapable mode of constitutive hybridity in this performative text.

As in the vicious colonial past, in the neocolonial present hybridity continues to be inevitable and constitutive of the complex cultural dynamics in our time inasmuch as once they become situated (and situational), all of neo/colonial power’s impositions—its concepts, knowledges, and cultural practices—can ever stay self-identical or absolute. And the curious thing is that none of this needs to be meant or schemed by anyone at all: given the transcultural quality of our presently neocolonial life, hybridity just is. Consequently, our own form of postcolonial critique may be seen as an analytical procedure that seeks to surface not only the willful resistances and dissidences, but also the “critical difference,” the irreducible specificity, which is a direct function of cultural hybridity, implicit in postcolonial practices and texts. In light of the double-dealing “homogenizing” project of the newly globalized imperialism, this difference or specificity may now be recognized not merely as evidence of cultural diversity in postcolonial societies, but as forms of meaningful demurrals, instances of “performative subversion.”

Hybridity

In other words, *Zsazsa Zaturannah's* representation of the *bakla* is, as with all other Filipino gay texts, a syncretism of local and Western gender and sexual constructions. Rather than adopt the nativist perspective that sees this hybridity as a symptom of weakness on the part of Filipino culture and a sign of the ultimate triumph of colonialism, we must instead argue, contrary to how it's usually seen in dogmatic nationalist discourse, that hybridity represents a most potent "ground" of postcolonial resistance (Bhabha, 1993). Needless to say, we must do this because Filipinos already are, at this point in our "multi-layered" history, helplessly and unquestionably hybrid anyway. Indeed, to deny or reject this fact will be tantamount to denying or rejecting nothing if not our very selves. When the nativists among us dismiss, in the name of Filipinoness and of the cultural nationalism it often permits and is permitted by, the hybrid spaces in Filipino life as "colonial minded," "contaminated," or "complicit," what they refuse to see are the facts that, first, all cultures are hybrid from the very beginning, and that even as the local culture persists despite colonization, it does so not as itself but as an agonistic compromise between Self and Other; and second, that the terms for subjectivity and agency in our case have already been set in place and defined by the colonialism to which Filipinos owe their very existence as a country. Thus, any post- or anti-colonial position that denies its own hybridity, and that refuses to recognize its history of "contamination" by neo/colonial power, can only be at worst impracticable, and at best, delusional.

To read *Zsazsa Zaturannah* as a hybrid text is to clear textual spaces for possible expressions and/or interpretations of its postcolonial difference, as well as to recognize the various resistances and oppositionalities that this difference inaugurates and bespeaks. As this reading reveals, the text's representations of Didi and Ada/Zsazsa as *bakla* function as tropes that are irreducibly different from textualizations of the campy homosexual, gay, queen, or queer in America or elsewhere in the restively globalizing world. As a cultural and political figure, the pathos-bearing *bakla* in *Zsazsa Zaturannah* interrogates the efficaciousness and self-presence of the neo/colonial project, for he demonstrates the persistence of the "local" and the "old," despite or precisely because of the prevalence of the "foreign" and the "new." Just now it strikes me that this particular rhetorical "intermeshing" of anticolonial and antihomophobic strands of interests may not be as cogent or as critically generative elsewhere in current-day Asia, where an American-style queer movement seems to be unproblematically afoot.

Needless to say, one of the assumptions from which this kind of reading proceeds is that the Philippines occupies a relatively unique position as

far as the histories of American global imperialism and sexual and gender transculturation are concerned. Indeed, in the Philippines at least, these otherwise unrelated histories happened and continue to happen, hand-in-hand. The effects of this convergence are not simply repressive, as we already know. The discursive enforcement that is neocolonialism, like its more blatantly loutish predecessor, itself spawns the possibilities of its essential undoing, simply because it can only pluralize and disperse itself at the same time that it vanquishes the countless peoples it alternately subjects and abjects.

And yet, other than the subversive affordances of its all-too-obvious and tragicomic hybridity, perhaps the more poignant and uniquely postcolonial entry-point that *Zsazsa Zaturannah* provides us comes from its emplotment of the all-too-familiar struggle between the downtrodden masses of the downtrodden bayan, and the foreign and tellingly English-speaking invaders who seek to annex and subjugate it. In other words, astonishingly enough, aside from offering us proof of the postcolonial specificity of our forms of *bakla* “camp” expression, this text can also be read as a sophisticated and self-reflexive national allegory of sorts, especially when we consider the congruence of the subaltern *bakla*’s sad fate with the plight of the downtrodden Filipino bayan or nation.

We find this notional conflation most clearly in Dodong’s surprising monologue—a serious and pathos-filled plea, to be sure—towards this graphic novel’s end:

Sa buong kasaysayan natin, wala na tayong ibang ginawa kundi ipaglaban ang karapatan natin bilang tao. Kung tutuusin, dito natin napapatunayan ang ating kakayahang manaig sa anumang balakid. Ngunit parati na lang nating itatanong: Bakit tayo?... Ang maaari lang nating gawin ay ihanda ang sarili, ipagpatuloy ang pakikibaka... at manalig.

[We’ve done little else throughout our history but fight for the dignity of our rights as human beings. In a manner of speaking, we’ve been able to prove our courage to overcome whatever odds in all these recent events. But we cannot help asking: Why does it always have to be us, who should need to prove anything?... All that we can really do is to prepare ourselves, to continue the struggle... and to keep the faith.]

In this series of speech bubbles, while carrying the battered Ada out of the empty *kakanin* factory, Dodong speaks from a nonspecific “we” that can, amazingly enough, refer to the oppressible *bakla* as well as to the neocolonially shackled Filipino nation as a whole. Faced with the same brutal and dehumanizing forces, in this controversial passage—controversial because it possibly complicates the popular *bakla/tunay na lalaki* dynamic that this text may be said to endorse and build its fantasies on—the now mutually loving effeminate and masculine *bakla* are seemingly being called upon to engage in the unfinished anticolonial struggle of Filipino subalterns to liberate themselves from the tyranny of discrimination, poverty, and disenfranchisement.

In this respect, we may need to remember the continuing value of the anticolonial nationalist movements in the Global South, from which, it has recently been revealed, a great part of postcolonialism’s deconstructive energy and radical inspiration in fact derived. Critics now tell us that anticolonialism is a major wellspring of poststructuralist thought, inasmuch as the latter’s well-known deconstruction of totality is nothing if not the dismantling and rejection of the imperial structure itself (Young, 2001). Thus, the decolonization movements in Europe’s former colonies were in truth the historical referents of the poststructuralist moment in cosmopolitan philosophy.

Furthermore, recent postcolonial accounts tell us that conceptual compatibilities or analogies do exist between anticolonial nationalism and the poststructuralist moment in Western philosophy — for example, Third World humanism is, in many important ways, performatively similar to the poststructuralist critique of Western civilization’s self-determining subject. In the end, while we must strive to engage with a poststructuralist critique of Western philosophy and its complicities with colonialism, we must not abandon the undeniable and untranscendable distinctions between the Global North and the Global South. Nor should we situate all the debates of colonialism within the terms and genealogies of Western thought, and sacrifice the study of all history to a theory of language or discourse alone. Not everything “poststructural” or “postfoundational” can be seriously entertained by us, to be sure. Simply put: we must recognize that the deconstructive decentering of all categories of thought can often be inimical to the assertion of the very concepts that prove vital to the struggle of many of the world’s countless disenfranchised and (neo)colonized peoples. Thus, the persistence of the pathetic “depth model” of identity in *Zsazsa Zaturnnah* need not be seen by us as politically regressive or futile, for as the works of historians of our country’s subaltern histories tell us, our own country’s many anticolonial popular movements across the centuries were themselves founded on revolutionary reconceptualizings of this collective or “shared” inner self.

The incongruence between our locations is clear, after all: in the Global North, poststructuralism decenters liberal humanism's individual subject and deems it incoherent, while in the Global South postcolonial discourses (chiefest of which continues to be nationalism) still must affirm an alienated subjectivity—an identity that postfoundational and anti-essentialist theories inevitably preclude. We can, I believe, rightfully insist that poststructuralism, a highly elitist and “parochial” development in relation to the rest of the world, need not be seen as the standard for all kinds of theorizing, after all. While oppositional intellectual work in the Global South must remain wary of essentialism, especially as it is invoked by neocolonially complicit institutional discourses, and as it pertains to accounts of the pure and native past, we nevertheless must not let this concern deter us from allowing more and more localities, individualities, and collectivities in our societies to speak and carry out their own representational projects, to declare their own “lived experiences,” in the furiously unraveling interstices of the here and now.

It's quite interesting that, while postmodern theory continues to produce its “subject-effects” in the Global North, it nonetheless shuts out any and all considerations of the totalizing effects of global capitalism while at the same time continuing to offer narratives of subjectivity that are necessary for this rapacious capitalism to proceed unperturbed. Little wonder that all these difficult theories of the “incoherent subject” have thrived most luxuriantly in the richest and most capital-endowed countries of the world! On the other hand, in the various national spaces we inhabit—inside the massive gashes that rive the surface of the unfree world—when we encourage ourselves and one another to speak, it is both partially and painfully because we know that speech, theory, or discourse can scarcely even approach the unspeakable privation, hardship, and abjection of our peoples' increasingly impossible lives. Suffice it to say that while our theorizing must keep its oppositional moorings, it nonetheless has no choice but to take cognizance of the silenced, marginal, and subaltern among us, whose “lived experiences” certainly deserve representational, discursive, epistemic—not to mention simple, actual, and livable—space.

And yet, we must speak in this theory-laden language that is the burden of our time and circumstance—the onus of our inescapable colonial inheritance. This means that in the process of engaging in representational and self-representational work, we must try to reclaim the many pasts occluded by imperialism, primarily by engaging history in a meaningful conversation—a dialogue that will negotiate a path between the annihilating extremes of nostalgia and cynicism. For many of us, this conceivably might mean describing if not documenting the coping mechanisms and survival strategies

of our nation's oppressed cultures and peoples. Analyzing these processes of adaptation and survival means moving away from a wistful meditation on past origins, toward a recognition of how the present uses narratives of the past in order to enable itself. Here, I must insist that this self-ironic historiographic undertaking is not the same as cultural nationalism's discourse of nativism, which we must remember mystifies rather than illuminates the relationship between the nation's "now" and its necessarily fictional "then."

Nevertheless, we must always be mindful of the fact that the evil effects of neocolonial globalization on the plundered masses of the plundered earth cannot all be peremptorily blamed on the failures and abuses of the nationalisms therein. On the one hand, the thwarting of many national liberation movements in the Global South has irrefutably been the masterful handiwork of aggregations and complexes of insuperable translocal and global forces. On the other hand, nationalism is rarely an unproblematic and coherent discourse or ideology in these regions, in which national bourgeoisies acting as and through state agents typically deploy the passionate mystique of a myth-making nationalist rhetoric to justify their pecuniary enterprises and selfish political agendas. Obviously, we need to remember that the everyday practice, idea, and ideal of the *de facto* nations of the world necessarily exceed the abuses which official nationalist discourses typically legislate and enact. As postcolonial critics of gender/sexuality, we would do well not to surrender the myth and reality of the Filipino nation to its exploiters; instead, we should recuperate it and acquaint it with more locally rooted alternative and radical performativities and conceptualizations. In facing the daunting and complicated task of postcolonial critique, we can also attempt to negotiate our way between the essentialist and constructionist positions by looking for traces of split, hybridized, syncretic, and double (or even multiple) consciousness in our own intellectual traditions, and for "antecedents" to poststructuralist theories in our own local and/or national texts.

In various stages in my earlier work, a preliminary and tentative attempt to deploy a more local theory of "constitutive otherness"—which is to say, deconstructionism—may be seen in my radicalizing of the Tagalog-Filipino binary for "depth/surface:" *loob/labas*. This binary has been repeatedly explained, commented upon, and thereby "colonized" by a variety of religious and positivist thinkers, who have pointed to the lexical richness of *loob*, and have mined it for its various metaphysical and psycholinguistic implications. As I see it, the corporeal associations implicit in the *loob/labas* binary can certainly be claimed and deployed for its transgressive and reinscriptive potentials by Filipino LGBT thinkers, who can always overturn the "violent hierarchy" to

which this conceptual opposition has traditionally been subjected. Indeed, this “reversal” is what I attempted to perform in my work when I argued for a perversely somatizing reading of this popular national idiom of gendered subjectivity, in my discussion of the “psychospiritual inversion” evident in the self-representations of the effeminate *bakla* in urban gay cultures of the Philippines.

Those doing postcolonial and LGBT work in the Philippines may also want to locate early examples, in local critical and creative discourses, of what postmodernist theory commonly refers to as “complicitous critique” (Hutcheon, 1989). This critical procedure describes a form of transgressive irony that reinscribes difference right at the heart of the Same. Astonishingly enough, evidence of it may be found in the writings of many of the early Filipino nationalists. Just now I’m thinking of the Philippines’ foremost hero—the writer-martyr and revered “Father of the Filipino Nation,” Jose Rizal. In the preface to his edition of a seventeenth-century Spanish book about *Sucesos de Las Islas de Filipinas* (Morga, 1609), Rizal laid down an essentialist claim to an ancient “racial singularity”—an awareness of whose “yesterday” he sought to rectify for and to restore to his people, with which they could begin their work of “charting out their future.”

Constructed by Spanish colonial discourses, both in the Philippines and in Europe, as a civilizational “Other,” Rizal decided in this book to fervently embrace this powerful social fiction, and to champion it against the odds. What’s supremely interesting is that in his other writings (for example, his correspondences to friends and former mentors), Rizal reveals to us that he clearly understood just how fictitious, improbable, altogether risky and ultimately provisional this entire “racial” and/or “civilizational” enterprise was (*The Rizal-Blumentritt Correspondence*, 1961, p. 120). And so, we can plausibly argue that, even then, Rizal provided us a local model for the transgressive and complicitous use of irony—as a “double-taking, forked-tongued mode of address” that knowingly participates in colonialism’s oppressive discourse, in order to subvert and transvalue it, from within.

More recently, sometime in the 1960s, Jaime Bulatao, a Jesuit anthropologist from the Ateneo de Manila University, articulated his theory of “split-level Christianity” (Bulatao, 1971). Putting aside this clergyman’s missionary zeal—a zeal that caused him to bemoan the woeful coexistence of contradictory “cognitive” and “philosophical” systems in the lives of Filipino “folk Catholics” who are given to preaching one thing, and yet practicing another—his social theory in fact anticipates, rather interestingly, the postcolonial notion of hybridity. As commentators like Homi Bhabha would later on explain,

hybridity or transcultural “mixedness” derives mainly from the ambivalence of colonial power itself—an ambivalence that is evidenced by and results in the lack of fit between colonial norms and their affective performances by the subjects they simultaneously determine and animate. The imagery of a “split-level” colonial personality itself repeats the eminently deconstructible “depth/surface” dualism—a dualism that, as my book (Garcia, 2009) from more than a decade ago attempted so painstakingly to illustrate, functions as a particularly cogent trope for gendered and sexual subjectivity in many different locations in the Philippines.

Perhaps as a corrective to the over-reliance on the kind of intransitive and purely discursive resistance that the notion of cultural hybridity can induce, this second kind of postcolonial reading—a “critically nationalistic reading,” to be sure—proceeds from a radically anticolonial perspective that, first of all, does not neglect to acknowledge the material *raison d’être* of colonialism: capitalist expansionism. Moreover, it is a perspective that does not perfunctorily jettison the national question in favor of the typically class-bereft and migratory criticism to be evidenced in many examples of diasporic and poststructuralist-inflected “postcolonial” deployments of American antihomophobic and/or Queer Theory. On the contrary, the kind of postcolonialism that this reading necessarily advances is one that seeks a renewed and critical remaking of the concept of the nation—a remaking that distinguishes oppositional nationalisms from mainstream ones (Lazarus, 2003), and that returns to, examines, and mines the great diversity and wisdom of anticolonial and national liberation theories and practices.⁷ Finally, this reading will seek to situate discursive and cultural struggles involving sexual and gender dissidence—which texts like *Zsazsa Zaturannah* may be said to espouse—alongside and within the complex and neocolonially imbricated political economies of the many nation-states comprising the increasingly immiserated regions of the Global South.

Conclusion

Finally, because it describes, among other things, a story of anticolonial resistance, *Zsazsa Zaturannah* uncannily reminds us that nationness is implicit and inescapable even or especially when we traverse the confusing networks and tortuous defiles of the local-global interface. National formations, national histories, national performativities in fact constitute localities in the 500-year-old cartography of capitalist imperialism. Certainly, for those of us doing anti-heteronormative work in the Global South, it would be much better if we were to render conscious and visibilize one of the grounding assumptions of our studies, rather than delude ourselves into thinking that this grounding no longer exists, or that it no longer

has any bearing on our findings at all. This caveat is especially significant in the case of a cultural site like the Philippines, in which the increasing visibility of LGBT political activism, and the increasing cultural productions by LGBT artists and writers who now possess a more political consciousness, find their greatest urgency and relevance within the framework of the Filipino people's continuing national struggle to free themselves from poverty's steady and annihilating grip.

Without the urgency and the benefit of this specifically anticolonial, critically nationalist, and postcolonial reading, the value of *Zsazsa Zaturnnah* (and, possibly, other such "campy" *bakla* texts) will primarily lie in the hyperbolic and theatrical pleasure that it imparts to its Filipino LGBT audience. And yet, this same audience will arguably be ill-served by it in the end, for, as has been the devastating (materialist) criticism that continues to haunt Western Camp to this day, our own "campy productions," by being tolerated by and fetishistically integrated into the capacious body of Philippine popular culture, can in fact lull the Filipino LGBT community into a kind of complacency—even as it dissimulates and legitimates its continued marginalization.

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End Notes

¹An early version of this paper was read by the author at the 8th International Conference on Philippine Studies, Philippine Social Science Center, 23 July 2008.

²Darna is the Filipino “Wonder Woman,” a superheroine created by local komiks writer Mars Ravelo in the 1950s.

³Following Moe Meyer’s lead, in this essay I will use Camp with a capital “C” in order to distinguish it from the apolitical “camp,” which is the mainstream pop sensibility that Susan Sontag first attempted to explain in her famous “Notes on Camp.” As a corrective to Sontag’s sanitized and urbane notes, Meyer defines Camp as “the total body of performative practices and strategies used to enact a queer identity, with enactment defined as the production of social visibility.” (Meyer, 1994, p. 5).

⁴These various arguments for and against the usefulness of camp in matters of political subversion have been summarized by David Bergman in his article for the glbtq online encyclopedia (Bergman, 1995).

⁵The “founding text” of gender performativity is, of course, Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*.

⁶For reviews of *Zsazsa Zaturannah Ze Muzikal*, see Manipon (2006), Martinez (2006), and Kwe (2006).

⁷According to Benita Parry, it is imperative that postcolonialism perform the following critical tasks, if it is to become truly relevant in these neocolonial and globalized times (Lazarus, 2004, p. 74):

...empirical investigations of economic migrants, ... the substantive and experiential situations of the majoritarian settled populations of the nation-states of Asia, Africa, and Latin America ... [of] the millions of people whose mobility is constrained; who are not part of the reservoir of cheap labor in either the home cities, the Gulf States, or the old and new metropolitan centers; who still engage in subsistence farming, or in extracting raw materials and producing goods for world markets.

J. NEIL GARCIA teaches creative writing and comparative literature in the University of the Philippines, Diliman, where he enjoys the rank of Artist II in the Artistic Productivity System, and where he serves as a fellow for poetry in the Institute of Creative Writing (corresponding author: jneilgarcia@gmail.com).