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Keeping and Challenging Familial Attachments: The Bakla within Contemporary Mainstream Filipino Film

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Keeping and Challenging Familial Attachments: The Bakla within Contemporary

Mainstream Filipino Film

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Abstract

Throughout Filipino television and film, it is difficult to ignore the almost always apparent *bakla*. The *bakla*, often portrayed as either an effeminate gay man or a trans woman, largely appears as a side character in many Filipino films. Many depictions of this queer figure in the past have cast them as merely comedic relief or perverted figures. However, within the past two decades of the 21st century, many Filipino films have been produced with a central *bakla* character. Through an analysis of five mainstream films from the years of 2013-2023, this project is seeking to answer how mainstream depictions of the *bakla* in the 21st century both reproduce and challenge the dominant conception of the nuclear family in the Philippines. Despite heteronormative portrayals of the *bakla* in older films, I have found that more recent films positioning the *bakla* as the main character largely challenge and disturb our dominant understanding of the nuclear family. Although the depictions of these characters often reproduce the nuclear family, these women find agency in their negotiation and challenge to this seemingly fixed family structure. This research is important in bringing attention to how queer people challenge forms of oppression and expand our notion of belonging in the world through reformulations of kinship and renegotiations of family ties.

Keywords

Queer studies, Contemporary Film, Kinship, Philippines

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Puig Maria de la Bellacasa says "knowing and thinking are inconceivable without the multitude of relations that make possible the worlds we think with" (de la Bellacasa 2017, p. 69). I would first like to thank my family for supporting me throughout my academic journey and accepting me for who I am. I would also like to give thanks to my classmates in the Honors Thesis course for helping me revise my work. I would like to especially thank Professor Giglioli for guiding and aiding me throughout this project. I would like to thank my thesis discussant, Professor Quỳnh N. Phạm, for their deep insight and kind support. Additionally, I want to thank various professors and instructors from the University of San Francisco, University of Copenhagen and Danish Institute of Study Abroad for exposing me to new ways of thinking in the world. I would like to thank Professor Geoffrey Ashton, Jakob Due Lorentzen, Morten Egholm, Lærke Posselt and René Rosfort. I would finally like to thank Dylan Mitchley, my boyfriend, with who I feel at home in the world.

Introduction

In Philippines society, the *bakla* person seems to be present in public settings, television dramas, game shows and cinema. Filipino gay culture scholar J. Neil C. Garcia defines the *bakla* as "clearly gender-transitive: inverted men (that is, inward women)" (Garcia 1996/2009, 21). However, through the portrayals and representations seen within these five films, there is a clear push for these *bakla* characters to be recognised as women and not merely inverted men.

I first became interested in queer representation in Filipino film after watching a Filipino noir drama, *Manila in the Claws of Light* (1975) directed by Lino Brocka. In this film, I saw the depictions of gay men and *baklas* openly expressing their sexuality and gender identity within a crowded and smokey room. But what happens when this queerness is able to escape the confines of the secretive room?

What led me to mainstream film was a desire to see how representations of queer people exists in media forms that are already easily accessible to consume by large quantities of people. What I found most striking about these films were their unique modes of humor and fluid representations of gender. When I first embarked on this research project, I was expecting these films to reproduce harmful stereotypes of the *bakla* that position her as merely an abject figure. However, after viewing these five films, I have found a serious deliberation and discussion of the hardships and struggles many queer people face in the Philippines. Most importantly, I have also seen how positions within the family and familial structures can be constantly contested through the queer character's own failure to normatively inhabit their assigned category.

This enquiry into mainstream film representation of the *bakla* is largely influenced by Sara Ahmed's claim that "Queer lives do not suspend the attachments that are crucial to the reproduction of heteronormativity, and this does not diminish 'queerness' but intensifies the work that it can do. Queer lives remain shaped by that which they fail to reproduce" (Ahmed 2014, 152). With this research project, I hope to show how media representations of *baklas* do not necessarily suspend normative ways of relating to and constructing one's family. But rather, I suggest that it is in these seemingly normative practices and structures that queerness breaks open a world that was previously foreclosed by various normative frames.

This research project is an analysis of five films that have a central or main character who identifies as *bakla*. The following films are *Girl, Boy, Bakla, Tomboy* (2013) or GBBT; *Beauty and the Bestie* (2015) or BTB; *Mamu: And a Mother Too* (2018) or MMT; *Born Beautiful* (2019) or BB; *The Panti Sisters* (2019) or TPS. In my findings section, I will analyse the unique ways the *bakla* inhabits the role of mother, daughter, sister and partner in their given family. The last section focuses on the blurred lines of the biological and chosen family present within the films. Through my analysis of these five films, I suggest that the *bakla* within these films both reproduces and challenges the nuclear family in their attempt to conform, confront and renegotiate their positions within the family.

Literature Review

Introduction

In this literature review, I will begin with an overview of an understanding of sexuality, gender and queerness through Michel Foucault's discursive production of sexuality and Judith Butler's theory of performativity. This theoretical explanation is needed because of the naturalised model of sex/gender as two separate modes of identification and assignment. This will provide a theoretical basis for how I will explore the constructions of gender/sex and sexuality in the Philippines. I will then introduce literature on how the heterosexual family is reproduced in relation to the queer subject and under capitalism. This section will primarily draw on the ideas of Sara Ahmed and Søren Mau for framing the conversation on producing difference within our contemporary world. Lastly, I will be covering the specific conditions of queer lives in the Philippines and how their bodies navigate spaces and various discourses in the contemporary Philippines. This section will primarily reference J. Neil Garcia as a means for framing contemporary relations and existences of queer people in the Philippines. Although many of the referred texts do not explicitly use the term 'Queer' to refer to members of abject sexualities and gender identities, I will use this term as a means of bringing attention to that abjection and subjection.

Understanding sexuality, gender/sex and queerness

Prominent discourses on modern sexual repression claim that during the Victorian Age sexuality became carefully confined and privatised into the home (Foucault, 1978, p. 3). Michel Foucault troubles this hypothesis that claims that sexual behaviour — especially behaviour outside of the monogamous heterosexual frame — is silenced and excluded from discourse

(Foucault, 1978, p. 4). In response to this hypothesis, Foucault argues that discourses on normative and abject sexualities have not been silenced, but have multiplied and flourished. Instead of silencing and repressing those sexualities that have been produced as deviant and pathological, producers of discourse on sexuality have actually magnified and brought abnormal sexuality under the control of multiple regulatory systems. This documentation and scientific study of abject sexualities has made these sexualities documentable and recognisable in accordance with the terms put forth by the producers of dominant discourse (Foucault, 1978, p. 20). From this, Foucault claims that "these discourses on sex did not multiply apart from or against power, but in the very space and as the means of its exercise" (Foucault, 1978, p. 32). This shows how the "exercise of power is not just negative, prohibitive, or repressive, but also productive of knowledge" in the way that subjects present themselves as open to restructuring and disciplining in conformity with the regulatory functions of social norms (Chanter, 2007, p. 57). The discursive production of knowledge reveals how the regulation of gender/sex and sexuality is informed by those discursive forces that create these very categories.

This can be further explored through Judith Butler's research on the sex/gender distinction. Butler takes issue with the sex/gender distinction that holds that sex is biological and gender is socially/culturally constructed (Butler, 1990, p. 8). This distinction is troubled through Butler's analysis of Dr. David Page's article "The Sex-Determining Region of the Human Y Chromosomes Encodes a Finger Protein". Butler's critique of this article claims that Page "designates the external genitalia, those anatomical parts essential to the symbolic action of reproductive sexuality, as the unanimous and a priori determinants of sex assignment" (Butler, 1990, p. 150). This reveals a problem in the gender/sex distinction. Although one may hold

biological sex to be an objective mode of assigning gender/sex identity, one can see how Page's search for a biological understanding of sex is mediated by his own cultural understanding of gender that takes the phallus as a sure sign of maleness, even in the presence of an XX chromosomal pairing. This presents a problem for the starting point of his supposedly neutral scientific enquiry. Multiple feminist philosophers such as Tina Chanter have pointed out the problem with the scientific claim to objectivity. While one must not completely dismiss modern scientific enquiry, one must be critical of the cultural interests and interpellations of the so-called objective scientists. Although the biologist may be positioned as the objective bearer of truth, it would be troublesome to assume "that what constitutes the body, or sex, has boundaries that are fixed in space, stable over time, or immune to social and political change" (Chanter, 2007, p. 71). This notion that sex/gender are distinct from each other must be disturbed in understanding the complex gender and sexual identities in the Philippines. By denaturalising the sex/gender distinction,

> The presuppositions that we make about sexed bodies…about the meanings that are said to inhere in them or to follow from being sexed in such a way are suddenly and significantly upset by those examples [intersex people] that fail to comply with the categories that naturalize and stabilize the field of bodies for us within the terms of cultural conventions (Butler, 1990, p. 149).

These gender identities and expressions that do not conform to the normative cis-gender and heterosexual frames are often de-legitimised and considered unreal by those normative frames of knowledge.

Foucault goes on to discuss the discursive regulation of homosexuality and other sexual orientations that are deemed taboo. The point of his argument is not to condone bestiality, infidelity, etc. but to show how particular acts or orientations are produced as abnormal with recourse to a supposed natural law that upholds the ideal and normalised heterosexual pairing (Foucault, 1978, p. 38). Here, the notion of natural law is troubled by the consideration of various cultural/political forces that constitute the frame for normative gender and sexuality. These normative frames delimit the proper form and actions of a human life.

The production of the queer person is formed by those same normative frames that produce the normal heterosexual/cisgender person. In *Bodies that Matter,* Butler analyses how the term "queer" is used as a paralysing slur that produces the "user of the term as the emblem and vehicle of normalisation" (Butler, 2011, p. 169). The very utterance of the term acts as a discursive regulation of the boundaries of sexual legitimacy. The queer does not exist naturally as an a priori category, but rather as an abject object that is produced in relation to the normalised cisgender heterosexual.

From this, Butler establishes their theory of performativity. "Performative acts are forms of authoritative speech: most performatives, for instance, are statements that in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power" (Butler, 2011, p. 171). Here, the utterance of the normalising vehicle is reinforced by a repeated discourse that is often accompanied with force. Ahmed explains performativity as depending on the future and on the sedimentation of the past: "the performative is futural; it generates effects in the constitution of that which is 'not yet'…[and] depends upon the sedimentation of the past; it reiterates what has already been said…it recalls that which has already been brought into existence" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 92-93).

This relates to Foucault's theory of power that places emphasis on institutional structures and practices through which "relations of domination are produced on the micro-level of everyday life"; this allows for Foucault to state that the paradigm locus of power is rooted in the entire social network rather than in a centralised state (Mau, 2023, p. 34). The abject status of the queer is sustained through repeated and daily reminders that the queer stands outside of the frames of what constitute a normal and ideal human. "No matter how 'out' you may be, how (un)comfortably queer you may feel" repeated enforcement of normalised gender categories and sexual orientation can be experienced as bodily injury as this enforcement positions the queer subject as that subject that has failed to live in accordance with the cisgender/heterosexual norm (Ahmed, 2014, p. 147). The repeated enforcement of these boundaries are not enacted merely by academic discourse, but also by everyday enactments that serve as a reminder of the abjectness of one's identity.

These standards and norms create a habitus that becomes engraved into the body and reactivated by garments, cosmetics, the symbolic universe, language, and representations (TV, cinema, magazines, urban advertisements, pictorial traditions) (Zamfira, 2018, p. 24). These reminders that one is not able to conform to normative scripts partially produces the queer. By taking into account how the formation and recognition of the human person is situated within a nexus of power and knowledge, one can also see how the status of what constitutes a human being is constantly under contestation. Butler argues that discourse on human rights is constantly "in the process of subjecting the human to redefinition and renegotiation" (Butler, 2004, p. 33). The very notion of what constitutes a human being within the cisgender-heterosexual frame

distinguishes the normal human being from the queer, who often finds themselves dismissed from the frames that constitute the human being.

Producing the Nuclear Family

Forms of love that depart from normative existence can stand as a threat to the nuclear family. The existence of the queer subject in relation to the nuclear family — headed by a father and a mother — stands as a threat to that nuclear family. Ahmed claims that "Queer desires become an injury to the family" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 107). The queer stands in opposition to a normalised heterosexual life and the means that heterosexuality attempts to reproduce itself — through the family. This can be further contextualised through Freud claims that the process through which gender identity is developed is social and produced through the workings of the nuclear family (Kingsley Kent, 2012 , p. 35). Investments in protecting the heterosexual and cisgender identity of the family are so great because it is the site where dominant values of social and sexual division occur (Zamfira, 2018, p. 25). This brings attention to how nuclear families reproduce particular ideals and norms that idealise the cisgender and heterosexual pairing through the existence of the abject queer.

Furthermore, cisgender identity and heterosexuality can become subsumed to reproduce structures beyond the family. Ahmed draws on Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner by considering how compulsory national heterosexuality acts as a mechanism by which a core national culture is thought of as a comfort zone (Ahmed, 2014, p. 147). In opposition to the security of the comfort zone are the gays and lesbians who are positioned as phobic objects in the heterosexist imaginary as a threat to straight lifestyles (Chanter, 2007, p. 67). It is in proximity to queer bodies that the heterosexual fears "that forms of civilisation (the family, the community,

the nation, international civil society)" have degenerated (Ahmed, 2014, p. 78). This narrative is consequential to queer lives because it forms the queer person and whatever kinship connections they may form as a threat to not only the heterosexual family, but the larger community that subsumes it — the nation-state.

It is important to draw attention to the specific conditions that are produced by capitalism because it is the current economic system that has managed to take hold of and sustain its grip on contemporary social life. The power of capitalism in social and everyday life is not always revealed through the use of outright force. Although there are cases that show the presence of overt state and corporate power in the suppression of queerness from the public space, economic power is discrete in its force. Søren Mau describes power under the capitalist economic model as a form of power that is "impersonal, abstract, and anonymous…embedded in the economic processes themselves rather than tacked onto them in an external manner — mute compulsion, or…economic power" (Mau, 2023, p. 3-4). It is with this understanding of economic power or mute compulsion that Mau claims that "The aim of capitalist production is surplus value, and as long as norms, practices, ideologies, natural processes, lifestyles, and so on do not interfere with this aim, there is no reason why capital would want to eradicate or change them" (Mau, 2023, p. 250). This follows the line of thought pushed forth by many socialist feminists who have argued that the family has been used to reproduce the required labor force necessary for capitalism to continue (Kingsley Kent, 2012, p. 51). In line with Mau's marxist theory of the *mute compulsion* of capitalism, Rosemary Hennessy argues that capitalism has even commodified the queer, "which means that queer pleasures can be profitable within global capitalism…the opening up of non-familial desires allows new forms of commodification; the 'non' of the 'non-normative' is

not outside existing circuits of exchange, but may even intensify the movement of commodities"
(Ahmed, 2014, p.163). This does not mean that our understandings of gender/sex and sexuality
are solely determined by the economic power of capitalism over social life, but it does mean that
capitalism finds its optimal capacity within family life through the reproduction of the
heterosexual family while seeking to commodify the queer.

Furthermore, the heterosexual family is a "place of reproduction of the resources
necessary to maintain or improve one's place in the social division of labor, i.e., the reproduction
of economic capital" (Zamfira, 2018, p. 25). This relationship is most clear when the ideology of
separate spheres is upheld claiming a distinct separation of "the public realm of politics and
economy as exclusively male and the domestic realm of home and family as the exclusive
domain of women" (Kingsley Kent, 2012, p. 28). Although this particular distinction may not be
as apparent in some contemporary contexts, differential social expectations and standards based
on gender/sex continue to manifest themselves today in television, films, etc. By positing the
nuclear and heterosexual family as a means through which capital production and accumulation
effectively operates, the queer and their unique modes of kinship can be determined as unable to
carry out the necessary economic strategies for capitalism. This de-legitimisation of queerness
and queer kinships in relation to the legitimised heterosexual family is made in recourse by
presupposing the queer's inability to successfully and efficiently reproduce capital and continue
inheritance. Furthermore, Mau argues that "capital has an inherent and necessary tendency to
nurture and reproduce social differences" (Mau, 2023, p. 171). In relation to the queer subject
and the heterosexual family, the heterosexual family's phobia of the queer subject can become
exacerbated and utilised for the benefit of capital production. Shame can often serve as a means

of this exacerbation. By inhabiting the "'non' normative, queer bodies take on identities that are already read as the origin of 'our shame'" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 107). While this shame may not find its origin in capitalist production, this shame can be used to further nurture and reproduce those social differences that allow for an everlasting increase of capital's hold over social life.

Queer Lives in the Philippines

In the Philippines, members of the Queer community are severely restricted in their rights and protections. The government does not legally recognise same-sex marriage and gender transition (Equaldex). Senate Bill No. 1217, "Anti-Discrimination on the Basis of Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression" has been stalled in the Congress of the Philippines since 1999 (Abrina, 2020, p.1). This protection is needed because "People belonging to the LGBTQ+ community have been prejudiced and stigmatized" (Abrina 2020, p. 2). Even though there is wide portrayal and openness about queerness in the Philippines, queer people are still unable to utilise the same rights and protections that their heterosexual and cisgender Filipino and Filipinas enjoy.

Much of what is published on pre-colonial understandings of gender/sexuality in the Philippines comes from documentation by Spanish missionaries and soldiers. Spaniards, as shown through the *Manila Manuscript* took note of the predominance of female shamans who were to mediate between the spiritual and human realm as well as male shamans "who dressed and 'performed' as a woman" (Brewer, 1999). These male shamans are called either *bayog* or *bayoguin* in Tagalog and *asog* in Bisayan (Brewer, 1999). Alaina attempted to find an anatomical answer for the biological sex of these *Asogs* to decide "whether the asog constituted a third hermaphroditically-sexed group" (Brewer, 1999). This was done by following the logic that if

this person's gender presentation was ambiguous, then their anatomical markers must also be ambiguous. Alcina was already working with a notion of sex/gender that assumes that one particular set of genitals disgraces one's gender/sex identity.

Throughout the world, there are multiple conceptions of sex/gender and sexuality. One cannot assume that the terms that one uses to take account of a person will be able to apply to all peoples throughout the world. In the Philippines, "gay culture is almost completely peopled by 'feminine' (gender-transitive) homosexual men who are made to suffer from minority action by default" (Garcia, 1996/2009, p. 20). This means that *bakla* and homosexual cannot be used interchangeably because the signified of this term is an identity associated with the feminine, while 'homosexual' within the dominant western conception strictly refers to those with same-sex attraction. Additionally, male homosexuality in the Philippines "as a form of deviance is largely feminized…the construction of the gay identity is clearly gender-transitive: inverted men (that is, inward women), binabae, bakla" (Garcia, 1996/2009 21). This can find resonance with Butler who argues that although sexuality does not unilaterally determine gender, heterosexuality operates through the stabilisation of dominant gender norms and homophobia operates through the "attribution of a damaged, failed, or otherwise abject gender to homosexuals" (Butler, 2011, p. 182). This shows how one's sexual orientation is deeply intertwined with external perception of one's adherence to their assigned gender identity.

Furthermore, "non-effeminate (gender-intransitive) and so-called macho homosexuals do exist in local gay culture too, although they are not marked as gays or *bakla* precisely because they are masculine" (Garcia, 1996/2009, p. 20). For Garcia, the term "gay" as it is currently used in the Philippines "charts the effects of the intersection of bakla and homosexual…which is both

a way of denoting the extent to which the Western discourse of homosexuality as inversion has been mapped over and valorised the indigenous conceptualisation of bakla" (Johnson, 1997, p. 120). The usage of this term connects with Butler's performative theory in the way that this term distinguishes the effeminate gay from both the masculine gay and the cisgender heterosexual by means of discursive regulation. Furthermore, in response to Garcia's distinction between *bakla* and gender-intransitive gays, Johnson claims that male sexuality in the southern Philippines is defined not by who their sexual partners are, but more on the position one assumes in a sexual relationship as the penetrator or receptor: "The sexuality of the *bantut* (the Tausug cognate for bakla) on the other hand is defined both by their alleged impotency and their receptor role in same-sexual intercourse" (Johnson, 1997, p. 119). As shown through these discussions, one cannot always assume that the terms used to define a particular person are uniform throughout all social and cultural contexts.

Media representations of queer people in the Philippines can reveal the stereotypes directed toward queer people. The portrayal of gay characters tends to be inhabited by the role of the *bakla.* It is without a doubt that queer people play a visible role in Filipino films, television and game shows. The *baklas* within film are excluded from the normative through western conceptions of transgenderism, "social class, normative conceptions of masculinity, and the exercise of male (homo)sexuality" (Inton, 2014, p. 1). In media portrayals, "Stereotypes of the loud and funny faggot… for a long time now, [are] the only images heterosexuals have had of homosexuals, and more tragically, the only images homosexuals have had of themselves" (Garcia, 1996/2009, p. 13). While effeminate gay people must be celebrated and represented in media, we cannot take all representation as appropriate, respectful, and universal representation.

Furthermore, this portrayal of the *bakla* points to a complete 'humorisation' that has rendered topics concerning homosexuality unsuitable for academic discussion (Garcia, 1996/2009, p. 12). This points to a de-legitimisation to the operation of queer studies and existence of queer people in the Philippines. This relationship between media portrayals and academic study of queer subjects reveal how media and academia reproduce dominant norms and values.

What remains in contradiction to these various de-legitimating discourses is how "Filipinos seem to accept the notion of homosexuality within the realm of media" (De Leon and Jintalan 420). De Leon and Jintalan further claim that "When people assume the role of audience in a variety show, the reaction expected from them is to project an expression of tolerance towards an entertaining manner" (De Leon and Jintalan, 2018, p. 421). From this, they claim that the acceptance of homosexuality in the Philippines seems to be tolerated in media, but homophobia shows in the way Filipinos "treat issues like same-sex marriage" (De Leon and Jintalan, 2018, p. 422). The dissonance between widespread media representation and hateful actions toward queer people reveals how popular representations of queer people do not necessarily come with queer rights or liberation.

Research Gap

In my review of literature, I have been able to see how media representations of queer people in the Philippines position the queer as abnormal through Inton's research and how they are received by audiences through De Leon and Jintalan's insight. However, there is a gap in how the *bakla* finds themselves situated within a family structure and how they reproduce and challenge aspects of the nuclear family in contemporary media representations. My research will seek to examine how the *bakla* comes to renegotiate their place within the family and create new

forms of family. In particular, I will be researching how depictions of the *bakla* reflect, reproduce and challenge the dominant conception of the nuclear family in the Philippines.

Methodology

For this project I asked "How do mainstream film representations of the *bakla* reproduce and challenge the dominant conception of a cisgender and heterosexual nuclear family?". For the purposes of this project, I defined media representation as the way certain forms of media present gender, ethnic, racial and sexual identity. The study population for this project were film representations of *bakla* people in the Philippines. In order to curate this study population, I searched through lists of queer Filipino films, film lists from Queer Filipino film festivals, and the films of prominent queer Filipino actors and actresses. I decided to focus on films instead of television shows because of their more compact narrative structure.

I began my search for films beginning in 2013, three years before the election of the country's first openly transgender congresswoman, Geraldine Batista Roman. Although this is not the focus of my study, I chose to view films within this timeline to possibly view more positive representations of queer people rather than plainly stereotypical depictions. I hoped that more nuanced representations will allow me to see the complex ways the *bakla* works within the family instead of as a figure that is cast aside and irreconcilable with any notion of family. Additionally, the narratives of these films center a Queer character. I chose to study films that have a main *bakla* character to observe the specific family roles a *bakla* character inhabits and challenges as the center of the narrative, as opposed to the many films with this figure as a side character. In total, I analysed five films and saw how the *bakla* in these films inhabit different family roles and given family structures. While the *bakla* cannot represent all Queer identities

within the Philippines, the representation of this gender and sexual identity is the prime way through which Queer people have gained visibility within media in the Philippines. The work of actresses like Vice Ganda and Iyah Mina has paved the way for further queer representation in Filipino media.

The *bakla* within this project is discussed as a woman instead of an effeminate gay man. This is because throughout the five films, I have seen how these characters have asserted themselves as women when referred to as men. Additionally, when I refer to the dominant conception of the nuclear family, I am referring to a family consisting of one mother and one father with children. This pairing of the mother and father is already assumed to be heterosexual and cisgender.

For the sake of this project, the mainstream films were primarily selected from the top three media production companies in the Philippines: ABS-CBN, GMA, VIVA. I have chosen to only study mainstream films because they are the films that are most widely distributed and consumed across the Philippines. This search for films began with a comparative study between mainstream and art house depictions of the *bakla*. However, I found that the majority of these art house films portrayed characters that are largely typed as masculine gay men. With these five mainstream films, I saw how the *bakla* character negotiates their positions within their given family as a mother, daughter, sister and partner. These analyses end with a discussion of how the *bakla* finds herself within new modalities of the biological and chosen family. To analyse these films, I primarily used the theories laid out by Judith Butler and Sara Ahmed to analyse how these characters suspend, challenge and sustain particular familial relationships and roles.

Positionality

I am a queer and Filipino-American man. Although my identity as a member of the LGBTQ+ community may be similar to the characters in many of these film, I do not expect to have the same experiences of all queer people in the Philippines. I am also enculturated within a society that primarily fixes a binary on gender/sex. Although this binary is present in the Philippines, I want to be careful in the ways I label and categorise those unique gender/sex identities and sexual orientations that continue to exist in the Philippines. At times, I refer to the *bakla* as a transgender woman. However, the *bakla*, within Filipino culture, is often associated with an attraction toward men. I understand that this is not the universal case for transgender women. Additionally, my nationality as an American puts me at a distance from the experiences of many people in the Philippines. As a Filipino-American, I do not expect to have first-hand knowledge of the struggles and experiences of queer people in the Philippines. It is with these considerations that I hope that I can be critical of and held accountable for my subjective biases and prejudices in my research.

Findings and Discussion

Introduction

Throughout the observed films, the *bakla* inhabits multiple roles within their given family lives. Often times, the roles they inhabit and perform can disrupt our conception of the traditional family through their various relationships and actions. The various roles that the *bakla* inhabit often attempt to adhere to the same standards and norms functioning within the nuclear family. However in their struggle for recognition within normative frames, this same figure can also challenge and disturb the fixity of the nuclear family structure. The following films that I have

discussed center one or multiple *bakla* characters. The following films are *Girl, Boy, Bakla, Tomboy* (2013) or *GBBT*; *Beauty and the Bestie* (2015) or *BTB*; *Mamu: And a Mother Too* (2018) or *MMT*; *Born Beautiful* (2019) or *BB*; *The Panti Sisters* (2019) or *TPS*. Despite the comedic nature of these films, I suggest that these specific film representations of the *bakla* take seriously the many issues transgender women in the Philippines experience and that normative practices and structures in their families can reproduce, but also disturb the fixity of the nuclear family structure.

Movie Summaries

Girl, Boy Bakla, Tomboy (2013) follows the story of quadruplets who were separated shortly after birth. Girlie (Girl) and Peter (Boy) are taken with their wealthy father to the United States. Meanwhile, Mark (*Bakla*) and Panying (Tomboy) stay in a rural province in the Philippines with their mother and four other adopted children. After the entirety of their childhood separated from one another, the two pairs of twins come to know of each others existence because Peter comes to need a liver transplant. When they meet each other, the two sets of estranged twins come into multiple conflicts with each other as they find a way to live together.

Beauty and the Bestie (2015) is a story about a transgender woman, Erika, who struggles to make money through her photography studio. Additionally, she assumes the role of mother to her two nephews who were abandoned by their biological mother. This precarious situation is amplified when she struggles to pay for her nephew's medical bills. She is then recruited into a spy agency where she has to pretend to fill in the place of an abducted pageant queen, Ms. Uzeklovakia.

The story of *Mamu: And a Mother Too* (2015) centers around a transgender woman and sex worker named Mamu. Mamu unexpectedly becomes a mother when she adopts her orphaned niece, Bona, a transgender teenager. Throughout the film, Mamu is challenged with parenting her adopted niece while she struggles to make a living as an aging sex worker. Mamu's work and commitment to this child also presents a challenge to her relationship with her partner, Vincent. Although Vincent leaves for a period of time and Bona continuously rebels against her new mother, Mamu keeps the family together through her work and sacrifices.

In *Born Beautiful* (2019), Barbs, a pageant queen begins to believe that her two sisters were killed because God was angry with their identity as transgender women. Additionally, she breaks up with her boyfriend, Gregory, because he abuses her and refuses to leave his girlfriend. With this new fear and breakup, Barbs goes to conversion therapy and begins a new life as a straight man. She eventually re-transitions and comes to find herself in two romantic relationships with Michaelangelo and again with Gregory. To add complexity to this romantic situation, Barbs becomes a mother to a child through a past experimental relationship while she was in conversion therapy.

The Panti Sisters (2019) follows the story of three queer children who are called to return to their estranged father, who has a terminal illness and an inheritance of P300 million. However, this inheritance can only be gained by becoming heterosexual/cisgender and producing him a grandchild. The three sisters struggle to find ways to 'overcome' their sexual orientation and gender identity so that they can have a share in his inheritance.

The Bakla as Mother

In the films, *Born Beautiful* and *Mamu: And a Mother Too*, the *bakla* mother is placed in situations where they choose to become a mother. The becoming of a mother within these films position motherhood, not simply as a situation into which one falls, but rather as a particular choice made to create and sustain a relationship between mother and child. In *BB*, Barbs goes to conversion therapy. Part of the process of the program involves going to a strip club. At this strip club, each member of the conversion therapy group will have sex with a woman in an attempt to overcome their queerness and become heterosexual. Barbs, under the new name 'Bob', has sex with Yumi while unknowingly and unintentionally impregnating her. Later in the film, Yumi searches for 'Bob' only to find that 'Bob' is now known as 'Barbs'. At first, Barbs resists becoming a mother by trying to disprove how it would be impossible for her to impregnate Yumi. Ultimately, through a long conversational attempt to disprove her parentage, Barbs ends up coming to care for both Yumi and her future child. The relationship Barbs creates with Yumi and her future child challenges how motherhood is simply positioned as a biological imperative for women.

This theme of motherhood as a choice and process of becoming continues in *MMT*. From the very beginning of the film, Mamu is seen saving up for breast implants. She frequently takes on a mother-figure for other trans women in her community by providing them food and shelter until they are able to find a stable living situation for themselves. This is shown when a fellow sex worker tries to pay compensate Mamu when she is prepared to leave Mamu's home. Mamu ultimately refuses to accept the money. Mamu's maternal care for others outside of the nuclear family reveals a notion of kinship that challenges the establishment of the family solely through

a biological kinship and obligation between mother and child. It is with this practice of taking care of other transgender sex workers that Mamu crosses a strict boundary that delineates one's sphere of community made in relation to gender identity/work and a supposedly private sphere of family life.

Mamu's maternal role becomes most apparent when Bona, her orphaned transgender niece, enters her life. After Bona's entrance into the narrative, Mamu's life is drastically changed. Her goal of getting breast implants becomes lowered in her list priorities as she is suddenly thrown into a world where her own personal goals become subverted and are sacrificed for the sake of her adopted niece. This is explicitly revealed when Mamu breaks open her savings jar, containing the money for her breast implants, in order to pay for Bona's medical expenses. Although Mamu has biological ties to her niece, there is a new formulation of kinship being made here that extends past mere biological obligation.

These two films show how queer motherhood can reproduce and diverge from the set path of normative motherhood that positions motherhood as destiny for women. In *BB*, Barbs becomes a mother through very unconventional means. This process of becoming a mother does not happen in relation to a husband. Instead, she becomes a mother in relation to another mother, Yumi. This relationship that Barbs establishes and sustains with Yumi contests the definition of parenthood by positing the possibility of parenthood outside of the proposed legitimacy of a heterosexual and cisgender marriage. The relationship that Barbs and Yumi have with each other challenges the normative conception of parenthood with this pregnancy, not only occurring outside of marriage, but through the lack of any actual desire for Yumi to be her romantic partner. When Barbs sustains this relationship with Yumi and her future child, she confronts and

challenges a standard that expects sexual attraction and heterosexuality of the parents. This largely contrasts with the cisgender and heterosexual family structure that establishes the cisgender mother with the cisgender father as the legitimate parental paring.

This finds resonance in Butler's claim that when community ties between various modes of relating with others like "ex-lovers, no lovers, friend and community members. The relations of kinship across the boundaries between community and family can sometimes redefine the meaning of friendship as well" and that when these modes of intimate association produce sustaining webs of relationships, they constitute a "breakdown of traditional kinship that displaces the presumption that biological and sexual relations structure kinship centrally" (Butler 2004, p. 26). This presents Barbs and Yumi's parenthood as a challenge to this family structure insofar as it occurs between a transgender woman and cisgender woman, outside of sanctioned marriage and outside of a sustained sexual/romantic relationship. This challenges a compulsory family structure by displaying a parental relationship that exists outside of these given bounds that sustain the identity of the normative conception of the nuclear family.

Queer mothers, similar to mothers situated within a traditional family structure, can also serve as transmitters of various norms. Mamu teaches Bona how to cook various Kampampangan dishes by giving her cooking advice and including her within her informal catering business. This shows how traditional gender norms that establish women as the carers of the home are reproduced, even in a queer family. This reproduction of traditional gender norms also becomes apparent when Mamu buys 'feminine' clothing for Bona, so that Bona no longer has to wear 'masculine' clothing. Here, the mother transmits these signs of womanhood to her adopted daughter. However, to say that this is merely a reproduction of cisgender codes of dress

would miss how Mamu's purchasing of these feminine clothes for Mona allows Mona to express herself in her own gender identity. Sandra Bartky offers us an analysis of the "production of femininity is accomplished through a vast array of disciplinary regimes, which regulate appearance, body shape, size, configuration and ornamentation" (Chanter 2007, P. 62). While it may seem that Mamu is merely reproducing a cisgender conception of femininity through clothing, this action of giving Mona clothing that fits with her gender identity is received with Mona's enthusiastic reception of the new clothes. This finds resonance in Butler's definition of performativity as "being implicated in that which one opposes, this turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power" (Butler 1993/2011, p. 184). We cannot simply reduce this transmission of cultural norms to a reproduction of cisgender femininity. But rather, we can see how cisgender femininity is disturbed through a transgender mother imparting feminine clothes to a transgender daughter within a world that denies the gender identity of both these women. Although these norms use traditional conceptions of femininity as referents, when these practices are replicated by queer individuals there is a clear disturbance to the fixity of the dominant cisgender family.

Additionally, Mamu's occupation as a sex worker and her role as a mother disturbs a normative understanding of femininity that rests upon the separate-sphere ideology of "perceived sexual organization of women, who were construed to be either sexually comatose or helplessly nymphomaniacal" (Kingsley Kent 2012, 28). Mamu is not positioned as inhabiting either of these categories. However, Mamu's occupation and parenthood come into a complete contradiction with separate-sphere ideology by blending the two ideally separate categories of the "revered wife and mother, or that of despised prostitute" (Kingsley Kent 2012, p. 28). Mamu

often shows herself as the strict and caring mother, while also working as a sex worker during the night. This reveals how these distinct binaries between motherhood and sex work are blurred through Mamu's performance of both of these categories. Being able to inhabit both of these roles disturbs the fiction of a world that holds motherhood and sexuality/sex work as two incompatible spheres. Both Barbs and Mamu, uphold aspects of the normative family structure while also disturbing the very fixity of the roles they inhabit.

The Bakla as Daughter

In the films, *Girl, Boy, Bakla, Tomboy* (2013) and *Mamu: and a Mother Too* (2018), Mark (GBBT) and Bona (MMT) both inhabit a similar role within their respective family. Even though both are *bakla*, their position and roles as daughters are naturalised and not questioned by their parents. This is shown through their gender identity, as women, corresponding to a traditional role within the family as a helper to their mother's housework. Mark's role as a daughter is accompanied with a prescribed role as her mother's helper. In various scenes, Mark is shown washing dishes and preparing food for her family. This follows a family setting in which the daughter is ultimately taught how to be a 'good wife' by helping her mother complete the tasks of the household. Although Mark's mother never explicitly tells her how to be a good wife or even to be a wife, this normative script becomes implicit within the everyday housekeeping tasks that Mark performs. This dynamic between Mark and her mother shows how the supposed duty to become a suitable housewife can be passed down to transgender daughters. This points to a re-evaluation of how transgender children in the family can partake in normative and traditional roles that align with their gender identity.

Bona, follows a similar role as a helper in Mamu's household. Bona is treated as a helper within the family and after recently adopting her, Mamu and her partner, Vincent, explicitly describe Mona as "extra help" around the house. Mamu and Vincent's prescription of Mona as a helper plainly reveals how daughters help maintain the inner workings of their families through their labor. Although both of these situations seem quite normative and reproduce the woman as a housekeeper, the fact that their transgender daughters are treated as and inhabit the same roles as a cisgender daughter creates a disturbance in who gets to inhabit particular roles within the family. In fact, Mark is shown to fulfil the role of the care-taking daughter even more than her cisgender twin sister, Girlie. This points to a disturbance in the way each person is never able to fully inhabit the normative scripts provided to us. This representation shows how even cisgender identity can not neatly conform to given scripts of how to be a good daughter within a traditional family structure.

However, should Mark and Bona's adherence to the traditional script of the daughter's role as the mother's helper be the means of legitimating their identity as a woman and a daughter? It is important to note that the caretaking role of daughters in the family should not remain uncontested and then imposed on transgender daughters. However, with the inhabiting of their roles, we can see how the two daughters disturb the fixity of who with a particular gender identity gets to inhabit the role. As previously said, failures to fully perform our roles in accordance with the normative scripts provided to us can transgress the seemingly fixed lines of the family structure. Here, in the case of Mark and Bona, they fail to become 'real' daughters in the perspective of a society that privileges the cisgender by placing people in the roles that are prescribed according to people's gender/sex assigned at birth. Through these two examples,

Mark and Bona are formed by a power dynamic shaped by the dominant conception of the nuclear family while also working against the cisgender formulation of that family with their own inhabitance of their role as daughters. From their gender identity and their place within the family, we can see a renegotiation of what it means to be a daughter in relation to the transgender identity of these two characters.

Additionally, the three sisters from *The Panti Sisters* show what it means to be a daughter in relation to a father who refuses to recognise the gender identity of his children. This dynamic will be further discussed in the following section to highlight the coalitional nature that comes about through sisterhood in the surrounding context of their father's bigotry.

The Bakla as Sister

This section will primarily focus on how the gender identity of transgender women are contested by their surrounding society. Within the films, *Girl, Boy, Bakla, Tomboy* (2013) and *Beauty and the Bestie* (2015) the failure to recognise Mark and Erika's gender identity becomes apparent through their relationship with their cisgender sisters. In *GBBT*, Girlie—Mark's cisgender sister—-tries to steal Mark's boyfriend, Harry, by claiming that Mark is not a 'real' woman because Mark "pees while standing up" (Deramas, 2013) . The use of this insult as a means to steal Mark's boyfriend through delegitimating her identity as a woman can reveal how the family, specifically sibling relationships, can become a site of aggression against transgender individuals. While Mark is portrayed as facing occasional misgendering, Mark's experience of being misgendered by strangers is usually corrected by asserting that she is a woman. However, Mark's conflict with her sister remains salient because it shows a deliberate and manipulative attempt to delegitimise Mark's identity as a woman for an ulterior motive.

In order to fully understand the norms at work in *GBBT*, we need to return to the birthing scene of the quadruplet siblings. In this introductory scene, gender/sex is only conferred by the doctor to the cisgender pair of twins, Girlie and Peter. Meanwhile, this discursive conferralist of gender to the two transgender siblings is left to Mark when she begins to voiceover the scene and assign gender to her and her siblings: "That's girlie, the girl. Peter, the boy. And that's me, Mark. Pretty right? And Panying, that's my tomboy" (Deramas, 2013). Here, even Mark's assignment of her own gender identity is left to ambiguity. It may very well be that Mark's own gender identity escapes the binary distinction of gender/sex through her own ambiguous self-assignment of gender at the birthing scene. However, as the film progresses, Mark is shown asserting her identity as a woman to various store workers and police officers when they misgender her.

When she comes into contact with her cisgender sister, Mark is confronted by Girlie's frequent misgendering. Through Girlie's misgendering, Mark is positioned as the abject *bakla* as opposed to the idealised cisgender woman. This attack on Mark's gender identity is blatantly laid out when Girlie is trying to take Harry away from Mark by saying "You're male! You pee in the men's room while I go to the ladies' room. And I pee sitting down, while you do it standing up" (Deramas, 2013). While Girlie does not explicitly call Mark *bakla*, the working of this term remains implicit within this insult. This conversation positions Girlie, as the supposedly 'real' and cisgender woman and Mark as transgender and therefore a 'fake' woman. Within the context of trying to breakup Mark and Harry, Girlie's delegitimisation of Mark's gender identity reveals how the bakla is constructed in relation to the normalising vehicle, a cisgender woman. Girlie is positioned as that normalising vehicle that "puts into effect the relation that it names" (Butler 1993/2011, 170). This performance draws its force through Harry's breaking up with Mark in

order to be with Girlie. This performative act is not just a singular and deliberate action. But rather, it reveals a "nexus of power and discourse that repeats or mimes the discursive gestures of power" (Butler 1993/2011, p. 171). In relation to previous misgenderings Mark suffers at the hands of various store workers and police officers, Girlie's attack on Mark's gender identity repeats and puts into action a set of norms that exists outside of her as the individual. Although Girlie does not explicitly reference this queering in relation to previous misgenderings, this instance reveals how de-legitimations of the gender identity of transgender individuals cite a repeated force and set of norms beyond the individual. This act of misgendering and transphobic insult reproduce a cis-normative structure that positions the cisgender sister as the 'real' woman in relation to the 'fake' and *bakla* woman.

The case between Mark and Girlie also relates to the sibling relationship between Erika (*bakla*) and Edith (cisgender) in *BTB*. At the beginning of the film, Edith is shown leaving her two children to run away with her boyfriend. When reuniting with Erika, Edith continues to call her *kuya* meaning big brother. In response to this, Erika repeatedly mispronounces Edith's name until Edith begins to call her *ate* meaning big sister. This dialogue between Erika and Edith show how transgender women struggle for recognition of their gender identity within their own family. Here, we can see the *bakla* questioning the norms of recognition through a repeated mispronunciation of her cisgender sister's name. Through Erika's insistence on the proper usage of gendered kinship terms in order to properly recognise her gender identity, she begins to ask what these kinship terms leave out and "what they might be compelled to accommodate" (Butler 2004, 23). This reveals a social dimension of particular naming conventions that fail to properly recognise Erika's gender. It may be that Edith forgot that her sibling is a transgender woman, but

Erika's apparent feminine presentation shows the absurdity of even attempting to call her *kuya*. This dialogue between the two sisters seems to present Erika, the transgender sister, and Edith, the cisgender sister, as two women. The mispronunciation of Edith's name is equivocal to calling Erika, *kuya*. The mispronunciation and misgendering that is present within this dialogue show a failure to recognise the person in the terms they would like. This dialogue presents a challenge to a normative family structure that positions the *bakla* sister as abject in relation to her cisgender sister. While these two situations in *GBBT* and *BTB* seem like two localised accounts of misrecognition, these iterations of gender conferral both occur between two sisters: one transgender and the other cisgender. While the former example rests with the *bakla* as abject and the latter presents the *bakla* as a woman, they both reveal the struggle of transgender women to be recognised in accordance with their chosen terms.

Additionally, sibling relationships can become sites of contesting the limited frames of humans recognition. In *TPS*, Gabbi, Dane and Samuel present their sibling relationship as a site of coalition against their transphobic father and strangers. While the two previously discussed films display a relationship between one cisgender sister and one transgender sister, this film shows the development of a relationship between three gender-queer sisters. The beginning of the film begins with a meeting between the father and the three sisters. The father, Don Emilio, tells his three daughters that he is suffering from a terminal illness. With this he presents them with the opportunity to share in his inheritance, if they become men and provide him with a grandchild. However, these three sisters ultimately fail to meet this requirement. After failing to live up to their father's expectations, the three sisters conclude that their father will never accept them. During their conversation, Dane says that their father "watched every move we made. We

weren't allowed to be effeminate. We learned all kinds of martial arts, but he still wasn't happy"

(Lana, 2019). Despite their best attempts to conform to their father's expectations, they were

continually refused acceptance. Additionally, Gabbi and Dane never saw Samuel as their 'real'

sister because she has a different mother. However, after realising their shared struggle for their

father's recognition, Dane apologises to Samuel for not previously accepting her as their sibling.

This points to how sisterhood is not merely founded through biological ties.

Shortly after this conversation between the three sisters, they find themselves in a parking

garage where they come into conflict with and defeat a group of transphobic men who harass

them for being *bakla*. These two separate instances of facing bigotry and uniting in response to

that bigotry reveal how their shared precariousness can transform into a site of coalition. While

their sisterhood and their eventual acceptance of their father at the end of the film may reproduce

the nuclear family, it also shows how the nuclear family can become inclusive of transgender and

other gender queer identities through coalitions that extend the frames of human recognition.

Gabbi and Dane's acceptance of Samuel as a fellow sister questions how lines of kinship are

drawn and redrawn to accommodate those who were not previously accommodated. Through

their unique sibling bond, the three sisters present us with a sibling relationship that contests a

nuclear family that refuses to admit the queer.

The Bakla as Partner

Although all of the observed films display the romantic lives of *baklas* characters, I have

found that Barbs' romantic life in *BB* serves as a paradigm of challenging a nuclear family

structure that consists of a husband, wife and children. Barbs' romantic connections are not

presented as promiscuity, but as serious relationships that she forms with both men and women.

Through the formation of these relationships, there seems to be a redefinition of the lines through which kinship connections are drawn.

In the first part of *BB*, Gregory is introduced by his own absence. Gregory was supposed to accompany Barbs as she walked through the town during a pageant queen parade. It is later revealed that he had to miss this event because his wife did not want him to be taken away by Barbs. This ends with Barbs breaking up the relationship, Gregory physically abusing her, Barbs stabbing her breast implants and then leaving to go to conversion therapy. However, Barbs' relationship with Gregory re-sparks when he is standing at her doorstep as she returns home after winning a beauty pageant.

Michaelangelo, her second love interest, is introduced when Barbs leaves the conversion therapy camp. When she stumbles out of the premises, she comes across Michaelangelo, who offers to drive her home. After a series of dates and sexual encounters, this romantic relationship becomes complicated when Michaelangelo introduces Barbs to his daughter and his wife. Barbs' relationship with Michaelangelo runs the risk of presenting Barbs as a deviant mistress in contrast to Angela, Michaelangelo's lawful wife. Despite this potential risk, a new possibility in kinship ties is formed in Barbs' engagement with Michaelangelo's family. Within Michaelangelo's own family, there seems to be a reworking of the family structure that permits Barbs to participate in his family without being cast as an abject and pathological figure. Barbs becomes heavily involved in Michaelangelo's family life. She attends Michaelangelo's daughter's birthday party, pays for his daughter's medication, and even eats lunch with Angela. There seems to be a polygamous conception of family at work here that allows Barbs to participate within and contribute to Michaelangelo's family. This polygamous relationship and

family structure does not clearly pose a challenge to the nuclear family in that it may end in preserving Angela as the lawful wife and Barbs as the deviant mistress. However, this polygamous family structure at work within Michaelangelo's own family unit reveals a disturbance to the dominant conception of the nuclear family that presents the pairing of the sole husband and wife as the ultimate legitimate pairing.

But, what can be said about the family construction between Barbs, Gregory, Michaelangelo, Yumi and her future child? The husband and wife relationship of the nuclear family is challenged through a polyandrous relationship formed by Barbs. Barbs forms a unique mode of partnership with Yumi, Michaelangelo and Gregory. Throughout the second half of the film, Michaelangelo and Gregory compete for Barbs' love and attention. Despite a long series of arguments between Michaelangelo and Gregory, the two end with resolving their issues. The final scene of the movie presents these two men cuddling Barbs, one on each side with Yumi on the outskirts by Gregory. While there is not a romantic and sustained sexual relationship between Barbs and the pregnant Yumi, she is nonetheless included in this final scene. This presentation of a polyandrous relationship with one woman (Barbs), two men (Michangelo and Gregory) and another woman (Yumi) challenges a nuclear family structure that posits the wife in relation to her sole husband. Barbs claims the reason why she has two romantic partners is because "love has no limits, my heart never becomes full" (Intalan, 2019). This presents a problem to both patriarchal and polygynous nuclear family structures because it asserts the woman as the one to have multiple partners. While many societies throughout the world practice polygyny, polyandry still remains quite limited (Welsch and Vivanco, 2020). The romantic relationships Barbs forms

within this film cannot be concluded as promiscuity, but rather a formation of entanglements that involve serious commitment to Michaelangelo, Gregory and Yumi at the same time and place.

When Michaelangelo and Gregory discover that Barbs has been pursuing a relationship with both of them, they begin to find ways to impress and have her for themselves. However, Barbs refuses to be exclusively 'taken' by either one of them. While this may seem as if she merely wants to avoid full commitment to a single person, the ending of this film shows otherwise. As previously mentioned, Barbs, her two boyfriends, and Yumi are shown cuddling with each other on a floor mattress. This presentation of a relationship between a transgender woman and two cisgender men and a cisgender woman disturbs the everydayness of the dominant nuclear family. But this challenge to the nuclear family is not done through the two mens' relationship with a transgender woman. We must be careful to not position Michaelangelo and Gregory as homosexual. But rather, the sustained romantic relationship Barbs has with the two men challenge the nuclear family through their bonds that go beyond the bounds of legal recognition. Barbs says "I'm just thankful that you're all here sleeping beside me…If I wake up with all of you beside me, I'm going to rejoice" (Intalan, 2019). In Judith Butler's "Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?" they argue that when new modes of "intimate association produce sustaining webs of relationships, they constitute a 'breakdown' of traditional kinship" and that "Sexuality becomes open to a number of social articulations that do not always imply binding relations or conjugal ties" (Butler 2004, p. 26). Barbs leaves the decision to remain in this relationship up to her partners, further emphasising how these relationships are bound by something beyond the constraints of the law. This freedom that Barbs allows for her partners to come and leave as they please presents us with a re-evaluation of the boundaries drawn by legal

marriage. Instead of creating a partnership that constructs an impermeable boundary around her family, Barbs presents a conception of the family that is sustained through affective ties.

This set of entanglements presents us with a new mode of relating to the cisgender and heterosexual world. Barbs' creation of a family within the terms of polyandry and a parental relationship with Yumi portrays a family that lives outside of a strictly monogamous and conjugal frame. This relationship is shown contained to Barbs' private bedroom. In relation to a cisgender and heterosexual world, Barbs' polyandrous relationship remains outside of the bounds of the legal and normative. When relationships like these are brought to the attention of the normative world, these relationships are "considered unreal, and their loves and losses less than 'true' loves and 'true' losses. The de-realization of this domain of human intimacy and sociality works by denying reality and truth to the relations at issue" (Butler 2004, p. 26). With this representation of Barbs and her ties to her partners, what is previously thought as unreal becomes real. Although this assertion to reality occurs within the confines of Barbs' private bedroom, this scene is brought to a public audience and is the striking final scene of the film. The public assertion of this relationship outside of the traditional lines of monogamy calls into question those lines that exclude particular relationship from reality and places this reimagined formulation of the family at the threshold of the known and unknown.

The Biological Family and the Chosen Family

Biology is not destiny. Biological kinship within these selected films reveal how the biological relations of the nuclear family do not necessarily lead to feelings of belongingness and inclusion. Instead, many of the *baklas* within these films find abjection and unfamiliarity within their biological families. As a result, they create their own chosen family. Chosen families are

kinships based on voluntary association and can "provide the 'life-line' that the biological family, it is believed should provide, but often cannot or will not for its sexually different offspring" (Weeks et al. 2001, p. 11). What I have found in these films is a blurring of the lines between these seemingly two distinct notions of family: the biological and the chosen. Ultimately, I suggest that many of these representations of the *bakla* within the family reproduce aspects of both of these family forms. Through this, I hope to bring attention to how these lines can become complicated in the *bakla's* renegotiation of their place within the family.

Throughout these films, the construction of family ties based on biological relations is troubled through conflict between the transgender woman and transphobic family members. In GBBT, Mark's relationship with her cisgender siblings presents us with a tension and unwillingness to simply accept a person as a family member solely on biological ties. When first introduced to her cisgender brother, Peter, Mark says "who told you he's going to be my brother" (Deramas, 2013). This presents us with a critique of a simple acceptance of family ties on the basis of shared genetics. Instead of presenting this sibling relationship as foreclosed from questioning, Mark questions the terms by which these familial relations are drawn.

The questioning of biological ties can also be observed in the early parts of *TPS* between the three sisters and with their own father. As iterated before, the three sisters struggle for their father's acceptance and recognition of their gender/sexual identity. Additionally, Samuel struggles to be recognised and treated as a fellow sister by Gabriel and Dane. Although this treatment may be characteristic of a half-sibling relationship, we can see how biological ties are only translated into feelings of familiarity when they begin to bond with each other and form a coalition against anti-queer individuals. From these two examples, the production of familial

feelings and belongingness involve a particular choice made to sustain a relationship. These two examples are sites of a deconstruction of traditional kinship by displacing the presumption that biological relations are central to the structure of kinship (Butler 2004, p. 26). Even though the siblings from both of these examples have biological ties to each other, these biological ties are not automatically given value. Rather, they suggest how these lines are open to renegotiation and reformulation. While these two examples ultimately reproduce a nuclear family structure through the eventual coming together of the siblings under their biological parents, the process by which these biological sibling relationships are questioned largely challenges the seemingly stable and biologically legitimated nuclear family.

Despite these two examples leading to a reproduction of the nuclear family, these representations of sibling relationship with a queer person or between queer people need not be dismissed as contiguous extensions of a cisgender and heterosexual family structure. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed suggests that

> Queer lives do not suspend the attachments that are crucial to the reproduction of heteronormativity, and this does not diminish 'queerness' but intensified the work that it can do" or in other terms, "queer lives shape what gets reproduced: in the very failure to reproduce the norms through how they inhabit them (Ahmed 2014, p. 152)

The standards and expectations of being a proper sibling that are placed on these characters is already disturbed by their transgender identity. This is because of their "failure" to exist and act in accordance with their assigned sex/gender at birth. But, it is further disturbed by their unwillingness to simply accept relation with their sibling on the basis of a biological relationship. When these bodies fail to become comfortable within their given biological family, their

relationship with their potential siblings reveals a gap between the legitimacy of biological

relationship and our failure to orient ourselves in the direction of those relatives on the mere

basis of the biological. .

With this discussion of the biological family in mind, the chosen family of queer people

is often seen as an alternative sphere that is completely separate from the normative conception

of the nuclear family. Here, I will argue that the chosen families that are formed in these selected

films both reproduce and challenge this nuclear family structure that is maintained through the

primacy of biological ties. In *MMT*, when Mamu visits her hometown to pick up Bona, she tells

her friend that she was kicked out of her parent's home when she was a teenager. As mentioned

before, Mamu regularly takes in other sex workers to live with her while they get their financial

situation settled. Even before Bona is introduced into her life, Mamu is seen creating family

relationships with other women. This notion of chosen family becomes even more apparent

when, despite estrangement from her own sister and parents, she adopts her sister's transgender

daughter, Bona. Together with Vincent, Mamu learns how to become a mother and creates a

family with these two. With Mamu being the main source of income, this family is financially

held together through her work. Not only does this challenge separate-sphere ideology, this also

reproduces a family structure that is able to economically sustain itself. However, to pose this

family as a mere reproduction of a family that is sustained solely for economic gain would fail to

consider the very necessity of acting in accordance with the given limits of society in order to

survive. The inner workings of Mamu's family appear to mirror the dominant workings of the

nuclear family in the way that this queer family can become a site of economic efficiency and

traditional assignments of household tasks. However, this reduction of Mamu's family to a

simple extension of the nuclear family must be troubled by thinking of how to be recognised "'like any other family' might not simply be strategic, but necessary for survival" (Ahmed 2014, p. 153). This assimilation into the surrounding economic system cannot be labelled as a simple choice to embody dominant social norms. Instead, this attempt to appear 'like any other family' is met with a failure to fully live up to the standardised model of the family. This failure to fully appear as the standard nuclear family may extend and multiply this power structure in their striving toward this ideal. But, it may also produce unanticipated ways of rethinking and doing the family.

In *BB*, Barbs, Gregory, Michaelangelo, Yumi and her future child create their own chosen family. This creation of a chosen family is left to the end of the film and leaves ambiguity for what is to happen next. To add even more depth to this chosen family, prior to Barbs' relationship with these three partners, Barbs is already living with two other transgender sisters and Mama Flora. Barbs' first chosen family consisted of her, her sisters and a maternal figure. What remains salient from this film is how this notion of chosen family is transmitted across two generations of transgender women. The practice of creating one's own chosen family is transmitted between Mama Flora and Barbs. This creation of the chosen family even follows the dominant convention in the Philippines of multiple generations of family inhabiting a single home. Additionally, These two families share a common identity through their operation as families that exist beyond the bounds of legal recognition and recognition within other normative frames. Here, even though Barbs and Mama Flora may act as a figure of authority of their family members, it is not a mere reproduction the nuclear family structure as we have come to know it. Instead, the reproduction of the chosen family between these two women and mothers reveals a disturbance in our

normative conception of the family being transmitted among cisgender parents and simply along biological ties.

Throughout these five films, the distinction between the biological and chosen family appears to be blurred. Queer characters within these films find new ways to negotiate and re-negotiate the lines by which their family structure is drawn. Here, we do not find a sense of complacency in the family structure or a simple reproduction of it. But rather, queer people in both their assimilation and transgression find ways to belong within a given family structure and create unanticipated forms of kinship. These new articulations of the family structure, their potential to extend heterosexual and cisgender regimes, reveal how what is knowable and performable is constantly under contestation.

Conclusion

Through my analysis of these five films, I have found that despite seemingly normative roles and actions of the *bakla* characters we can see how they disturb the very fixity of the traditional family structure. The *bakla* mother may pass down particular gender norms to their children, but even when these gender norms are passed down they confront and challenge the rigidity of who gets to inhabit these fixed categories. When she occupies the role as the daughter or sister, she can often be relegated to being the mother's helper or the abject queer version of the cisgender sister. Despite this, the daughter or sister finds ways to negotiate her place with her mother and among her siblings. And when she becomes the partner to one or multiple people, we can see how new modes of both biological and chosen families are created and blurred.

For this project, I hoped to answer the question of "How do media representations of the *bakla* reproduce and challenge the dominant conception of a cisgender and heterosexual nuclear family in the Philippines?". This project focused on films that are centred on the story of a *bakla* character. For a more encompassing view of queer representation in films, a potential project could include films that have *bakla* supporting characters and a cisgender/heterosexual main character to see how when represented as a side character the *bakla* participates in the reproduction of the family. This research question could also be extended to representations of the *bakla* in television shows. Potentially, a comparative study could arise between film and television representations in order to examine the points they meet and converge in the reproduction of the nuclear family.

It is impossible to produce knowledge that is clear of all prejudices and biases. I hope to remain open to and learn from criticism of where I fall short in my analysis of representations of the *bakla*. With this being said, I am a gay man who was born and lives in the United States. Although I am part of the queer community, it is important to note that this coalitional community is not a monolith. There is not one single queer experience, but multiple. As Sara Ahmed has shown even "queer spaces may extend some bodies more than others (for example, some queer spaces might extend the mobility of white, middle-class bodies)" (Ahmed 2004, p. 151). I have not experienced the same struggles and dealt with the same prejudices experienced by many transgender women, especially those in the Philippines. Additionally, I watched all of these films with English subtitles. Many of the words may have been lost in translation as translation fails to always carry the same signified meaning.

These findings and analyses show how we can never fully suspend the attachments of the world we were born into. This is not an excuse to remain complacent or ignorant of various oppressive structures or limiting categories. But it is a recognition of the horizon of possibilities that are present to us. This horizon is constantly under contestation and when queerness challenges the limitations of our current horizon, we can begin to imagine new possibilities and ways of relating with others. I have found that these five films challenge the fixity and rigidity of a traditional family structure that is founded and legitimated through biological kinship, heterosexual partnership and restrictive cisgender norms. The queer characters within these films show the possibility of renegotiating restrictive lines of recognition through their unique way of relating and making relations with others. As shown through the characters' ability to diverge from set paths and orientations expected to be fulfilled by their surrounding society, the term *bakla* is not merely "controlled by the one who utters or writes, since such productions are not owned by the one who utters them. They continue to signify in spite of their authors, and sometimes against their authors' most precious intentions" (Butler 1993/2011, p. 185). Throughout these films, I have found a world that is 'becoming' through these women who challenge various norms and scripts.

Prior to watching these five films, I presupposed that these representations would simply reproduce the *bakla* as an abject figure in relation to the humanised cisgender person. However, these films have revealed to me how representations are never fully under the control of the normalising vehicle. The terms we deploy can become redeployed in various fashions. A term that was previously used to shame and injure can become a term of pride and coalition. I hope to have spoken to Butler's question of "how is it that those who are abjected come to make their

claim through and against the discourses that have sought their repudiation?" (Butler 1993/2011, p. 170). Although members of the family and the institution of the family can be a source of shame for many queer people, these representations show how queer people have asserted themselves and caused trouble to our normative frames. Queerness finds ways to leak out of containers and cause trouble. As countless feminists and queers have shown "Trouble when it leaks from its containers, *throws everything into question*" (Ahmed 2015, p. 182). I do not think that this project has completely dismantled the primacy of cis-normativity, heterosexuality, and the nuclear family. But, I do hope that it has caused containers to leak and create a mess.

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