

PERSPECTIVES

Precarity and Motherhood in Philippine Trans Cinema

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In this short essay, I reflect on representations and themes in trans cinema in the Philippines. I examine the emerging and intersecting themes of precarity and motherhood in two recent films—Rod Singh’s *Mamu and a Mother too* (2018) and Isabel Sandoval’s *Lingua Franca* (2020). I look at how economic and social precarity tends to pervade the lives of trans women, and how transness itself becomes a form of precarity under the legal system’s lack of accommodation to trans rights. I also examine trans motherhood and argue that while it destabilizes biology as the root of motherhood, it also reifies traditional tropes of Filipina motherhood that center it on self-sacrifice. Finally, I look at how precarity and motherhood intersect in Philippine Trans Cinema.

Keywords: Trans Cinema, Precarity, Trans Motherhood, Transgender Studies

Introduction

The body of scholarship on Philippine trans studies has grown exponentially in the last few years. The field began with some anthropological studies on trans women in the country mostly by white cisgender scholars who often collaborated with trans communities and activists in their publishing and research. One of the earliest ones was Mark Johnson’s ethnographic study of Tausug and Sama Muslim trans women in Zamboanga and Jolo—whom he mislabels

as “transgender men” in his 1995 article published in the *South East Asia Research* journal (46). Sam Winter collaborated with some of the founders of the Society of Trans Women of the Philippines (STRAP) in their paper on “Transgendered Women of the Philippines”. It was STRAP that coined the term “transpinay” in 2008 to localize the transgender concept and set it apart from the bakla label colloquially, a move that I have critiqued in my own work (“The bakla and the silver screen” 7). Emmanuel David further writes about the genealogy of the term and examines its complex

history—a history that is inevitably framed and tied with the history of trans movements in the Philippines (*Transpinay* 4).

Trans academics and scholars have also played a prominent role in the emergence of trans studies in the country. “Transpinay” has recently been published as an entry into the SAGE Encyclopedia of Trans Studies (Alegre *Transpinay* 876). The short article traces the history of transness in the Philippines and links it with that of the bakla and the babaylan—not as a progression or evolution from male-bodied to female-minded, but as an expansion of identity categories available to gender diverse individuals. The entry was written by Brenda Alegre who also writes about the daily struggles of young trans girls navigating the education system (*From bakla to transpinay* 864). Jaya Jacobo examines the complexities and intersections of history, language, and gender in literature and the broader humanities (*Where her breast*). I, myself, have written about the interactions between globalized conceptions of transness and localized performativities of kabaklaan, arguing that kabaklaan offers a decolonized way of understanding transness, purged from its history of medicalization and pathologization (*Bodies in Transition* 917).

In this short essay, what I would like to look at is Philippine trans cinema and the question of trans representation. How do films talk about trans lives? How do trans characters in these films navigate their struggles and their social relationships? What common themes are emergent in trans films from the country?

Philippine Trans Cinema

Representations of transness have been present in Philippine narrative cinema since its inception—from the comic *bakla* characters of Dolphy in the ’50s and ’70s (see Inton 2018) to the immensely popular films of Vice Ganda, characters that may be read as trans are prolific in Pinoy movies. One might make the argument for trans cinema as a genre separate from queer cinema. Helen Hok-Sze Leung (2014) looks into this very question in a short contribution to *Transgender Studies Quarterly* (86), where she makes the argument that trans cinema is, as Susan Stryker puts it, queer cinema’s evil twin, in that trans-centric approaches to cinema allow audiences to see the fore-fronting of gender variance over sexual identity. Leung also looks at questions of auteurism—trans directors and

filmmakers “consciously construct a complex relation between their trans identification and their aesthetic signature on screen” (87).

Leung also questions whether trans cinema should include non-Western films that portray practices and identities that “do not neatly differentiate between same-sex desire and cross-gender identification” (88). In this paper, I would argue that very broadly, yes, trans cinema can include films from the non-west that center gender variant characters in their narratives, regardless of whether or not they are articulated as trans. I acknowledge that questions of articulation are complex, especially when put together with questions of translating language and identity in the post-colonial context. So here I must also make the concession that the film characters described here I am reading as trans, though they may not use the same language to describe who their identities.

In the West, there has been a proliferation of films that center various transgender experiences in their narratives (Steinbock 21). These representations are, of course, never unproblematic. Tired tropes of “transness as deceit” run rampant in western films—from *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* (1994) to *The Crying Game* (1992) and *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999), Hollywood has created an image of trans people as inauthentic and out to deceive people (Gender 7:45-7:50). These films also serve a secondary purpose—as a warning to trans people—once your transness is inevitably discovered, your punishment will be severe.

Another trope common in western trans cinema is the Transition Story (Gender 9:05). From *Transamerica* (2005) to *Danish Girl* (2018) to *Girl* (2018), these films center experiences of gender dysphoria and medical transitioning as the essence of the transgender experience. The way these films speak about transgender lives is that in order to be transgender, one must transition. Transitioning is the only option and is coded as the panacea for all trans troubles. Transitioning becomes the very center and purpose of trans life. The Netflix documentary, *Disclosure* (2020), outlines many other problematic tropes that have become pervasive in mainstream depiction of trans lives.

In Philippine cinema though—we rarely ever encounter these tropes. This is not to suggest that these are not completely absent in Philippine trans cinema; there are some films that feature a semblance of these tropes. But I also do not want to argue here about the

existence of such a filmic genre in Philippine cinema since no film actually refers to any of its characters as transgender or transpinay, only transsexual in the rarest of cases. And this is to say nothing of the absence of transgender men in the Philippine filmic milieu. I am less concerned about arguing for the existence of Philippine trans cinema as a genre, and more concerned about the kinds of representations we have in films that can be read as trans-themed. Suffice it to say that trans representation is rife in Philippine cinema, and there is much to be said about how these films talk about trans lives.

In my own work, I've examined films like *Zsazsa Zaturannah Ze Moveeh* and have argued that the way we understand transness in the Philippines is vastly different from the way it is thought of, understood, and theorized in the West. I use much of Neil Garcia's writings on the interiority of the self in this critique of Western transness, and I've argued that reading transness from the perspective of kabaklaan decenters the West's framing of transness as a function of gender dysphoria and allows us to think of transness as something that is not pathologized (*Bodies in transition* 941). This is perhaps why stories of transition are not quite as pervasive in Philippine cinema as they are in the West.

This is not to say that transition stories are not present in trans-centered movies in the Philippines. Jun Robles Lana's *Die Beautiful* (2016) is almost completely centered on one trans woman's struggle to transition and live her life as authentically as possible. Even in death, Trisha's struggles with transitioning are evident in the battle between her biological family and chosen family's control over how to present her body at her wake. Ada literally transforms into a (cis) woman in *Zsazsa Zaturannah* (2006). But more often, these transition stories are tangential to the actual conflict in these films. In one of the first mainstream films that features a trans character in its lead, Gil Portes's *Miguel/Michelle* (1998), the primary conflict is not the need to transition—Michelle returns to her rural, provincial hometown eight years after she moves abroad to work as a nurse. In these years away from her family, she has transitioned—socially, medically, and legally. The film's primary conflict, however, is that she had kept her transitions from her family, and so her return "as a woman" comes as a shock to everyone. Throughout the film, she works to earn back her family's trust and affection, empowering her

childhood best friend to come out as gay in the process, but also learning that trans women need not compete with cis women for a place in society.

For this essay, I would like to explore two other themes that trans cinema in the Philippines takes on—precarity and motherhood. In particular, I want to examine two films made by two trans-identified writer/directors, Isabel Sandoval's *Lingua Franca* and Rod Singh's *Mamu: And a Mother Too*. Both films also feature trans actresses in their lead: Sandoval acts in her own movie and actress Iyah Mina plays Mamu in Singh's film.

Perpetual Precarity

Judith Butler's book, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, examines how queer people become susceptible to becoming subjected to state and social violence. In this book, she examines US state policy and discourse post-9/11 and argues that marginalized people—people who are non-white, non-Christian, non-heterosexual—have become more easily targeted by right wing forces and media. Queer living conditions have entered a state of heightened precarity, that is instability when it comes to being protected from discrimination socially but also by the state. Amber Hollibaugh and Margot Weiss (2015) examine queer precarity further in the US and present compelling arguments for movement building that is more intersectional and mindful of the economic and social injustices within the LGBT/Q populations. In their short piece, they challenge the myth of Gay Affluence—one that was perpetuated mostly by marketing researchers seeking to capitalize on a newfound niche market. The reality is that even in the US, LGTB/Q folks remain marginalized, working minimum wage jobs, and live in states that do not prohibit employment and housing discrimination based on perceived or actual sexuality. Particularly vulnerable are disabled, trans, and queer of color folks, whose struggles have been eclipsed by the Supreme Court decision on Marriage Equality in 2015.

In the Philippines, these struggles are mirrored by our own trans community. Economic inequalities are apparent in LGBTQ populations and result from intersecting injustices. Trans children are often driven out of school or severely punished by an education system that enforces dress codes even in public school (UNDP 9). Trans people are also often discriminated

against in employment due to our legal documents not matching our gender expression. Even in the business process outsourcing (BPO) industry, which is very often touted as an accepting industry that values trans people and their labor, “purple collar” trans women workers are marginalized. Their behavior at work is often policed by colleagues, both trans and cis—“Trans subjects often expected to produce queer value through their performance of a specifically Filipino queerness, a lightheartedness that yields comfort workplace teams” (David *Purple Collar* 188). Trans women in the workplace are expected to be respectable, “proper,” and “professional,” which puts them in a state of precarious acceptance.

This sense of precarity continues to be pervasive in the less formal labor sectors (UNDP 9). Trans women have long been engaged in the sex industry in the Philippines, which puts their physical and mental health at risk (UNDP 53). Sex work is also highly criminalized in the country, and trans women are often targeted by outdated laws, like the anti-vagrancy law, which are meant to curb the sex work industry. These precarious conditions inevitably take a toll on mental health, as demonstrated by a study done by Raine Cortes (A285).

Migration is an interesting field of studies, particularly when it intersects with trans studies. Tricia Okada writes about transpinay entertainers in Japan who have emigrated from various parts of the Philippines. Okada describes how working as entertainers in a different country comes with both its specific pleasures as well as risks—dealing with immigration policies and legal procedures for securing a work visa often place a high toll on transpinay entertainers (48–49). And yet, living and working abroad is also affirming for these trans women’s sense of womanhood. I know, anecdotally from the stories of my friends and my own experiences, how living as a trans woman abroad can be quite strangely affirming. Many of Okada’s respondents made trips between the Philippines and Japan during their tenure as entertainers, with some of them choosing to stay abroad and make a life for themselves outside the Philippines because they perceived the country and its laws and society as hostile to trans women (48).

This is not to say that migrating abroad offers an end to this stifling sense of precarity. Isabel Sandoval’s *Lingua Franca* (2020) eloquently speaks to these experiences of precarity in a foreign land. In the film,

transpinay caregiver Olivia navigates her life as an undocumented migrant worker living in New York under the Trump administration. We see her diligently performing her duties for Olga, an elderly woman who suffers from dementia, but complications arise when Olga’s grandson, Alex, moves in with the two women.

The film begins, quietly, with establishing shots of Brooklyn before dawn. Olivia lies in bed, woken by a call on her cellphone from her mother in the Philippines. She speaks Cebuano as the scene cuts to more shots of Brooklyn—the iconic New York City subway, Coney Island boardwalk. Olivia’s mother gently asks her when she can expect her monthly allowance—a scene not at all unfamiliar in OFW themed films. We also see Alex, freshly out of rehab and wanting to reconnect with his family, trying to settle in with his grandmother. Olivia prepares to go out to meet her friend, Trixie, who also happens to be trans. Trixie and her boyfriend are at the city clerk’s office trying to secure a marriage license. The clerk balks at Trixie’s passport and wonders aloud why her name on her legal documents is different. This scene, quiet and unobtrusive and quick as it is, sets the tone for the rest of the film—Olivia’s legal status is in constant jeopardy while she is living in the US.

This precarity in their legal status is further explored in another scene: Trixie apologizes to Olivia for not being able to help her get a fake passport that reflects her lived name and gender. Olivia mentions, almost in passing, the passage of a law in the Philippines that made it much more difficult to change one’s legal documents. In the past, it was much easier to change legal documents in the country—until 2007, when the Supreme Court decided on Mely Silverio’s case. Silverio had petitioned the courts to make changes to her legal documents, arguing that she should be able to change her birth assigned sex marker and name because she had undergone gender confirmation surgery (UNDP 23). The Supreme Court had decided against allowing changes to be made, arguing that Silverio’s documents should be kept in line with her “biological nature.” This absence of a gender recognition law in the Philippines keeps trans people in a state of constant precarity—because our documents do not match our gender expression, our identities are questioned every time we deal with institutions that require legal documents. Dysphoria can also be triggered or exacerbated in trans people who suffer from this mental condition.

Olivia and Trixie begin to strategize ways of getting

out of this precarious legal situation—relying mostly on Olivia’s plans for a sham marriage with a local man she has hired to pose as her boyfriend. This is not something novel in OFW themed movies set in the US. In the next scene, after Alex drives Olivia to the post office so she can send her *balikbayan* box home, the pair stumble on an on-going ICE raid. Olivia is visibly shaken, and Alex pulls her away. On their way home, she explains to him about her undocumented status, and how her plans of getting married to get a Green Card have failed. When Alex asks how much time she has left, her answer is terse: “I don’t know. A year. Four months. A week. I can wake up in the morning and they’ll be parked outside waiting to arrest me.”

Olivia and Alex’s closeness deepens after this interaction and they begin a sexual liaison, but Olivia remains aloof. Her undocumented status keeps her in a constant state of tension, which is further heightened when she discovers that her passport had gone missing. The movie keeps the audience—and Olivia—in this state of heightened tension by peppering its scenes with constant news alerts over the TV and radio about ICE raids and anti-immigrant rhetoric. All these play out in the background as Olivia goes about her daily chores. And while she and Alex continue to grow closer, her undocumented status keeps leaving her feeling unsettled.

As the film transitions to its third act, we see Alex trying to make things easier for Olivia. Alex meets her in a bar one night, and they engage in a little role playing—pretending to be strangers meeting for the first time. Olivia playfully gives Alex her “real” name, Isabel. As they dance, Alex declares, “I’ll marry you.” Olivia tries to tell him of her trans status but he dismisses it, saying that it doesn’t matter. She insists that it does, but he tells her that he wants to get married the next day. Olivia says that she can’t get married because she doesn’t have her passport, with the barest hint of panic in her voice. He lets slip that he has it and tells her not to worry about it. The pair continues dancing and the camera zooms in on Olivia’s emotionless face resting on Alex’s shoulder. She looks catatonic, traumatized. The shot shifts to Alex, his expression blissful, hopeful.

The film is quiet; the minimal scoring emphasizes this silence. But this is not the kind of silence that is hopeful, pregnant with promise. This is the kind of silence that is tense, built on fear and danger—breaking it would call attention to oneself, making one a target.

In this respect, the film outdoes its use of dialogue; it is the same kind of silence that women like Olivia are forced to endure—a silencing in the vain hope that one will be allowed to pass unscathed, unnoticed, as Jaya Jacobo says. It is the silence of a precarious life.

Olivia, like most trans people in the Philippines and abroad, lives with a sharp sword dangling over her head—not only because of her immigration status, but also because Philippine law refuses to see who she really is. The lack of legal gender recognition in the country keeps trans people from affirming their identities, and they become stuck in the limbo of having to live lives with documents that are unable to reflect who they truly are. And while migration to a different country seems a viable option, with some countries even having Legal Gender Recognition laws, this is not true for the vast majority of trans people living in the country.

The precarity experienced by transpinoy and transpinays because of their legal status also leads to many trans people being discriminated against in terms of access to education and employment opportunities. There has been much documentation about this which seems to suggest that the precarity experienced because of legal documents leads to other precarious conditions, like economic instability. Precarity, then, is not only a minority condition (Doogan 45) but also a minoritizing condition.

Trans Motherhood

Many trans centered films in the Philippines also speak to themes of motherhood. You see time and again how the trans women in these films often perform the role of motherhood for children who are often not their own biological nephews or nieces. If you look at Lino Brocka’s *Ang Tatay Kong Nanay* (1978), we see one of the earliest depictions of the *bakla* as mother in Philippine cinema. Coring’s former lover, Dennis, returns to her with a huge favor. His most recent lover has abandoned him with their baby, and he asks that Coring raise the boy as he works abroad to support him. In order to raise the child, Nonoy, Coring detransitions, hiding her queerness from the boy. This does not stop Coring from mothering him though, doting on him and spoiling him, but also trying to teach him to be a “good boy.” The conflict begins when Nonoy’s biological mother returns from Japan, where she worked as an entertainer and had married a

rich businessman who recently died and left her with all his fortune. The conflict between Coring and Mariana is portrayed as a conflict between biological mother and surrogate mother (Inton *Dolphy Bakla* 592). The child, stuck in between, has to choose. Mariana is a stranger to him, and while she also spoils and dotes on him, Nonoy, in the end, chooses Coring. The film's title is often erroneously translated into English with its international title, *My father, My mother*. A more apt title would be, in my opinion, *My Father who is my Mother*.

In Eduardo Roy's *Quick Change* (2013), Dorina works as a beautician who moonlights as a "doctor" offering collagen injectables to trans pageant girls and sex workers. It's an interesting take on trans motherhood—Dorina barely earns enough to sustain herself, her boyfriend Uno, and her nephew Hiro. When a contact offers her a side hustle selling injectable collagen, she does it mostly for her family. We see her going about her rounds doing make-up and injecting collagen into the faces, breasts, and asses of trans girls working for *The Amazing Show*—Manila's cabaret follies that features trans women. She meets with her clients in hotels and beauty salons, often with Hiro tagging along. Part of the film's charm is this young schoolboy who accompanies his *tita* on these rounds. We see Hiro acting as Dorina's assistant, carrying her kit for her, arranging and sanitizing needles, preparing bandages for her clients. In these interactions, we also see how Dorina nurtures him, picking him up from school, buying him treats when he performs well in his "assistant" duties, and in one scene quizzing him on Philippine History and Math to help prepare him for his exams.

Hiro is very much Dorina's anchor. Her relationship with Uno is sexually frustrating for her, and he has been cheating on her with another trans woman, Hazel, because he prefers post-op trans women to pre-op. Precarious economic conditions lead her to peddling unsafe beauty products; she later learns that she had been injecting tire black into her clients and not collagen. When one of her clients has a seizure as she injects her with the "collagen," Dorina flees the scene in panic. Her mothering of Hiro, it seems, is the only thing that keeps her grounded and secure. While virtually all of her relationships in the film are tenuous, Hiro is the sole constant in her life.

Mamu: And a Mother Too (2018) is a darkly comic take on trans motherhood. "Mamu" is itself a term of

endearment used in queer communities to refer to "non-biological maternal figures" (Jacobo *Woman, Mother* 2). Mamu, a trans sex worker in her 40s, manages to get by doing sex work in Olongapo, catering to foreigners coming through the nearby military base. She lives with her long-time partner, Vincent, a straight cisgender man, whom she financially supports. Her young teenaged niece, Bona, also a trans girl, enters the household when Mamu's sister dies. The film is part-family drama, part-coming of age story, told through the deliciously dry humor of a queer and trans writer/director Rod Singh.

Throughout the film, Mamu's life-long dream of getting breast implants comes into conflict with the economic practicalities of raising a teen and sustaining a household on a limited income. The film opens with a quick montage of the bustling streets in Olongapo. Sex workers roam the streets enticing foreign customers. We hear a voice over of Mamu, with its distinctive rasp, checking in on the girls that she manages. Then the camera shifts to a tracking shot that follows Mamu as she walks down a crowded street. She asks a foreigner if he wants a blowjob, and he turns asking if she wants fuck instead. Mamu turns around, and the camera zooms in on a close-up of her face. "If the price is right," she says as she takes a drag on her cigarette. In the next scene, she has booked a white customer who complains about her lack of "boobies." He asks her to kiss his feet offering to double her price, but Mamu, outraged, yells at him: "I'm a puta not a foot spa."

This opening sequence sets the tone of the entire film—it is wildly irreverent, but also stunningly honest about the plight of sex workers in the country, both cis and trans. Mamu values her work, but she also values her dignity. The film doesn't fuss about the morals behind sex work; there is no need to. It's just a job that people do to earn money so they can live. But Mamu is generous to a fault—not just to Vincent or her close friends, but she takes in random girls as well, offering food and shelter. As Vincent complains, if Mamu were to rent out their spare bedroom, it would bring in more income. Mamu responds, in her signature sass, "*Anda lang 'yun, kikitain din 'yun.*" ("It's only money, I can always earn more.") The film significantly highlights Mamu's mothering—of other sex workers, her own younger lover, and other bakla friends. It is in the same spirit the Mamu takes on her niece, Bona.

Mamu takes on a few side-hustles to make ends meet, doing camgirl work but also selling food and

snacks hawking them around town with Bona. Bona is adjusting to her new life, making friends and exploring her budding sexuality. She also begins to become closer with Vincent, often acting as confidant. He has decided to leave the household to take a job in Manila and earn his keep. He attempts to leave secretly without Mamu knowing, but she has overheard his plans. She gives him the money she had been saving for her breast augmentation, with her constant refrain of “it’s just money, I can earn more.”

Bona becomes entangled with a cis boy who cheats on her with another trans girl. In her misery, she is easy prey for foreign men with an interest in children. She begins engaging in sex work herself in what Jaya Jacobo calls “the ghost of maternal reproduction... in Bona’s reproduction of Mamu’s primary life of labor” (*Woman, Mother* 4). When Mamu discovers this, she confronts Bona and pleads that she stop doing sex work and finish her studies. Bona points out the hypocrisy in her pleading. Their confrontation becomes heated and Mamu slaps Bona—a scene that seems to be mandatory in Philippine melodramas that center on Mothers and Daughters.

Bona becomes gravely ill soon after this confrontation. Her young body is incapable of enduring the demands of sex work, and she develops sepsis. Mamu—in a daze—does everything she can to raise funds for Bona’s hospital care. The film shows the sex workers that Mamu formerly took care of taking care of her in turn. But in an ultimate act of immolation, Mamu allows herself to be debased by a client—from refusing to even lick someone’s feet, she now has to endure as a foreign man performs unspeakable perversions on her body. At the end of the act, he asks her name. She stomps out of the room—“Erna. Ernalyn for short.” The film, even with its biting humor and insistence on not taking anything too seriously, falls in with many other films that speak about Motherhood. To be a mother is to make sacrifices. In Mamu’s case, it is her dignity that is sacrificed, but like her catchphrase “pera lang ’yan, kikitain din ’yan,” her dignity and her self-respect is something that she works to earn back.

Broadening representations

Motherhood and precarity, economic and otherwise, seem to be intertwined in trans cinema in Philippines. In these films, we have seen how our precarious legal status leads to other minoritizing conditions that keep

us in a state of a seemingly inescapable perpetual precarity. Whether we are at home or abroad, our documents cannot be changed to reflect who we truly are. Society’s indifference to trans issues, reflected in the lack of protections for LGBTQIA+ people, keeps us in this liminal space: unable to make a living in most conventional settings, trans women are often pushed to work in unsafe conditions, risking body, health, and in some cases happiness to earn a meager living.

And while many of these films speak about trans motherhood and can be read as a destabilizing of the imperatives of biology, trans motherhood in these films is not divorced from its traditional requirements. Like cis mothers, trans mothers must sacrifice for their children. Even in *Die Beautiful*, when Trisha adopts a young girl, her friends joke about how self-sacrificing she is. Despite her poverty, she takes in the child so that she and her partner can mirror an appropriation of the nuclear family. Heteronormativity still pervades these trans films, it seems, with trans mothers and their cis-straight male partners and their adopted children.

But trans motherhood isn’t just centered on children. Trans mothering is broad and wide-ranging. In *Die Beautiful*, we see trans actress Mimi Juarez (who plays Dorina in *Quick Change*) performing a different kind of motherhood. She is *Mama-san* to Trisha and Barb, guiding them in their pageant journey and teaching them tricks of the trade. To a great extent, Mamu’s friend and conscience, Petite, mothers her. While Mamu goes around taking care of fellow sex workers and other “strays,” Petite takes care of Mamu. Petite offers her advice and support but is also jarringly honest and doesn’t sugar coat her opinions. It is sisterhood as motherhood, and here I think is where the potential of trans motherhood lies—mothering is not only about children, but also chosen families, friends, lovers, and sisters. It is the kind of motherhood divorced of cis-heteronormative expectations.

Both films examined in this essay cast trans actresses in their lead roles—a move that is still seen as controversial in mainstream Western films. And while I believe that their transness lends more authenticity and credence to their performances, the recognition they get as women seems lacking especially in the local Philippine context. Iya Minah is the first trans woman to win Best Actress at the Cinema One Originals Award (*CNN Philippines*) but she was nominated under the category of Best Actor for the Guild of Educators, Mentors, and Students Awards. In the same

way, actress Mimi Juareza was the first openly trans actress to win at the Cinemalaya Independent Film Festival under the category of Best Actor in 2013. She was also repeatedly misgendered by the jury in their announcements and by the press in their interviews with her (San Diego). Clearly, the refusal to see trans women as women is not limited to the legal context.

I also think there is great potential in looking at the trans auteur. As trans-identified writer/directors, Sandoval and Singh's respective oeuvres speak very differently about the trans experience than does non-trans directors like *Die Beautiful*'s Jun Robles Lana. For one, the ethics of casting cis male actors in trans women roles is misguided if not for anything else but that trans roles are already in short supply. Neither Sandoval nor Singh come off as treating transness as caricature or costume in the way that Lana crafts his characters in *Die Beautiful* and also in *Panti Sisters* (2019). Isabel Sandoval has repeatedly said in interviews that films that feature trans characters have the imperative of crafting characters who are complex and multi-dimensional (Ramachandran). Both Sandoval and Singh manage to do just that with their films—Olivia is undocumented but finds solace in being able to provide for her family back home; Mamu is sex worker, entrepreneur, and mother. Both writer/directors hark to the possibilities of trans cinema created by trans auteurs.

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- Lingua Franca*. Directed by Isabel Sandoval, 7107 Entertainment, 2019.
- Mamu: And a Mother Too*. Directed by Rod Singh, C1 Originals, 2018.
- Quick Change*. Directed by Eduardo Roy, Jr., Cinemalaya Foundation, 2013.
- Die Beautiful*. Directed by Jun Robles Lana, The Idea First Company, 2016.
- Ang Tatay Kong Nanay*. Directed by Lino Brocka, Lotus Films, 1978.