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Master of Arts in Philippine Studies

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*Rethinking Bakla: A Keyword in Philippine Conceptual, Sexual,
and Social History*

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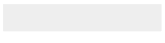
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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis titled "Rethinking *Bakla*: A Keyword in Philippine Conceptual, Sexual, and Social History" prepared and submitted by Gregorio R. Caliguia, III, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Philippine Studies, is hereby approved by the thesis committee and endorsed to the Dean.

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ABSTRACT

Rethinking *Bakla*: A Keyword in Philippine Conceptual, Sexual, and Social History

Gregorio R. Caliguia, III

Bakla signals “effeminacy” and “homosexuality,” which stigma signifies being “weak,” “fake woman,” and “unreal man.” This historical research interrogates the etymology of *bakla*, which etymology claims that *bakla* only became a label for gay identity since the 1960s. A newfound evidence, the Bienvenido N. Santos’ “Recollections” (1932), challenges this etymology; as the document used *bakla* to signify “effeminate” decades before the 1960s.

Mobilizing this newfound evidence alongside theoretical, historiographic, and archival data, this thesis asks: (1) How can the 1932 “Recollections” help explain the crystallization of *bakla* into a label for “effeminate homosexual male” identity since the 1960s? (2) What can socio-historical processes further reveal about the etymology of *bakla*, and why the word bears so much stigma? (3) How did “effeminacy” and male “homosexuality” become semantically linked with *bakla*’s historic senses? At its core, the study argues that sexism and political instability coincide in the social history of the *bakla*.

Contextualizing *bakla*’s semantic shifts reveals that the word’s stigma comes from its earliest meaning; besides “fearful and weak,” it was *bakla* as “deceptive.” While tracking *bakla*’s semantic links with the pre-existing terms for gay identity shows that *bakla* was forged alongside historical biases against women. These biases rendered gay men and trans women undesirable. And archival data uncover five (5) factors explaining why *bakla* crystallized into a gender label, which also offer insights on how *bakla* has been reclaimed and reworked, despite its persisting stigma, in more recent years.

The thesis exposes *bakla*’s status as a “keyword” in the Philippine conceptual, sexual, and social history. It undresses *bakla*, opens it to critique, and recognizes the importance its etymology can play in undoing *bakla*’s stigma, and its potential in rethinking Philippine history itself.

Keywords: *bakla*, *Philippine gay studies*, *LGBTQIA+ history*, *gender & sexuality*, *historical linguistics*

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