

# WRITING PICTURES, DRAWING STORIES

## A Caregiver Comic Book

By Haseena Manek

**W**HAT DOES IT MEAN TO CARE FOR another person's child when your own is far away? What does it mean to exist in a country only as long as you are employed by citizens of that state? What is it called when you work 24 hours a day caring for a family that becomes your family, because you live with your employer?

According to two Toronto artists, Althea Balmes and Jo SiMalaya Alcampo, it is called a labour of love. The Live-in Caregiver Program (LCP), one visa option under Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker Program, is where the politics of labour meet the politics of love.

Balmes and Alcampo are the creators of LCP Comics, and the project *Kwentong Bayan: Labour of Love*.

"In the Filipino language, *kwentong bayan* is the literal translation of 'community stories,'" reads LCP Comics' website. And the subtitle "Labour of Love" reflects the artists' belief that community-based artwork, and caregiving work, are rooted in love, are valuable, and deserve respect.

The not-yet-released comic book engages with the experience of Filipino women who come to Canada on LCP visas, and the complex relationships that develop as a result of one of Canada's more problematic immigration policies.

The LCP is a temporary foreign worker program that allows workers to enter and work in Canada as live-in caregivers for children under 18 years of age, elderly persons (65 years of age or over), or persons with disabilities. Caregivers must either work full time for 24 months or complete 3,900 working hours in a minimum of 22 months. Four years from their arrival they can apply for permanent residency.

While everyone, including live-in caregivers, who has to leave their family to find work abroad experiences a sense of loss and hopes for reunification, LCP-ers are handed a surrogate family that they often grow to respect and care for, who is also their employer. This is one of the many complex aspects

of the LCP experience that Alcampo and Balmes hope to explore with *Kwentong Bayan: Labour of Love*.

Other aspects include community relations, family reunification, and the convoluted labour politics of the LCP. Any temporary foreign worker program is problematic, in that a participant's immigration status depends on their employment status. This puts their employer in a position of power that can go totally unchallenged. If your right to exist within Canadian borders, your ability to feed your family, is contingent on you being employed, you'll be less likely to defend your rights as a worker. As a result, many migrant workers are regularly exploited. With "fear of being fired" equaling "fear of deportation," temporary foreign workers are intimidated into silence. They have to be willing to do whatever it takes to keep their jobs.

Now imagine being a migrant who has to live with your boss. The LCP not only requires employment for status, but also requires the workers to live with their employer. This makes it difficult for LCP migrants to



Artists Jo SiMalaya Alcampo (left) and Althea Balmes (right) are creating a comic book, *Kwentong Bayan: Labour of Love*, with and about live-in caregivers.

PHOTOGRAPH: HASEENA MANEK

**KWENTONG BAYAN:  
LABOUR OF LOVE  
PRESENTS**



**GANGNAM ELVES**

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Aside From China and India, the Philippines is one of the biggest sources of migrant labour serving the global



economy. The Central Bank of the Philippines reported that total remittances from Overseas Foreign Workers (OFWs)

ILLUSTRATIONS: ALTHEA BALMES AND JO SIMALAYA ALCAMPO



All of the illustrations that accompany this article are from the comic book project **Kwentong Bayan: Labour of Love**. LEFT: The writer and artist place themselves right in the story.



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create any other kind of life outside of their job. Their job is their life and they are on call 24/7.

Unfortunately, institutionalized support for program participants has decreased in recent years. Previously-existing organizations like Intercede (a Toronto-based organization that intervened on behalf of domestic workers, caregivers, and their families) are no longer in operation, leaving a gap in support for caregivers that has been filled by members of the community and the Philippine diaspora.

Intercede was funded by three levels of government, and they provided services to caregivers, says Alcampo. "Nothing like that exists on that level now in Canada. We're hearing so much about the temporary foreign worker program, but there isn't so much talk about how to support the folks that are coming and experiencing struggles within it. But, what I learned from my mentors at Intercede is, you don't have to wait for government to fund these things; it can come from community."

Balmes and Alcampo wanted to work in solidarity with the caregivers, and to make a collaborative effort to understand what their experiences are like.

The artists first met at the Kapisanan Philippine Centre for Arts & Culture, a creative hub in Toronto's Kensington Market area for young Filipino Canadians. They first worked together on Alcampo's project "Singing Plants," an interactive art installation with plants that sang when you touched them. Alcampo commissioned Balmes to illustrate buttons for her to give out at a conference in the Philippines, where she was to give a talk about her project.

"Jo pushed me to do the buttons," says Balmes. "From there, it felt natural to want to collaborate more and so I asked her if she was interested in making a comic book."

Both Balmes and Alcampo were experienced *artists* by this point (artists who use their art as part of their activism). Alcampo is a volunteer with the Caregiver Connections, Education and Support Organization (CCESO), which advocates for care-

## Imagine being a migrant who has to live with your boss

givers and newcomers to Toronto. She is also a member of the Kapwa collective, a group of Filipino Canadian artists and critical thinkers, and she has worked extensively with the Carlos Bulosan Theatre, which produces plays reflecting on "social and political issues affecting the Filipino and broader community." Balmes is an independent visual storyteller who once worked as a community organizer with the Toronto chapter of Anakbayan, which she helped establish. Anakbayan, as its website describes, "seeks to unite the youths from different sectors of society to advance national freedom and genuine democracy in the Philippines."

Neither Balmes nor Alcampo had ever worked on a comic before, though the accessibility of comics as a means of communicating appealed to them. "As a medium it's a very interesting way to tell a story," says Balmes. "It's digestible, anyone can read it, from little kids to an adult."

"Live-in caregivers have been talked about a lot in newspaper articles," she says, and in academia. "A lot of scholars have tackled the complexity of the program: family reunification, the injustices that happen within the program, and the power dynamic between female employers and employees. But you kind of have to be educated to be able to digest it. Reading a scholarly work is not for everybody. With comics, you don't need to do a backstory; you don't need to learn how to read a comic. Everything is there."

Using this medium, the creators of *Kwentong Bayan* also straddle an interesting intersection between Philippine history and culture and the current lived experience of Filipina caregivers, their families and the greater Filipino-Canadian community. In the Philippines, there is a rich history of comics that

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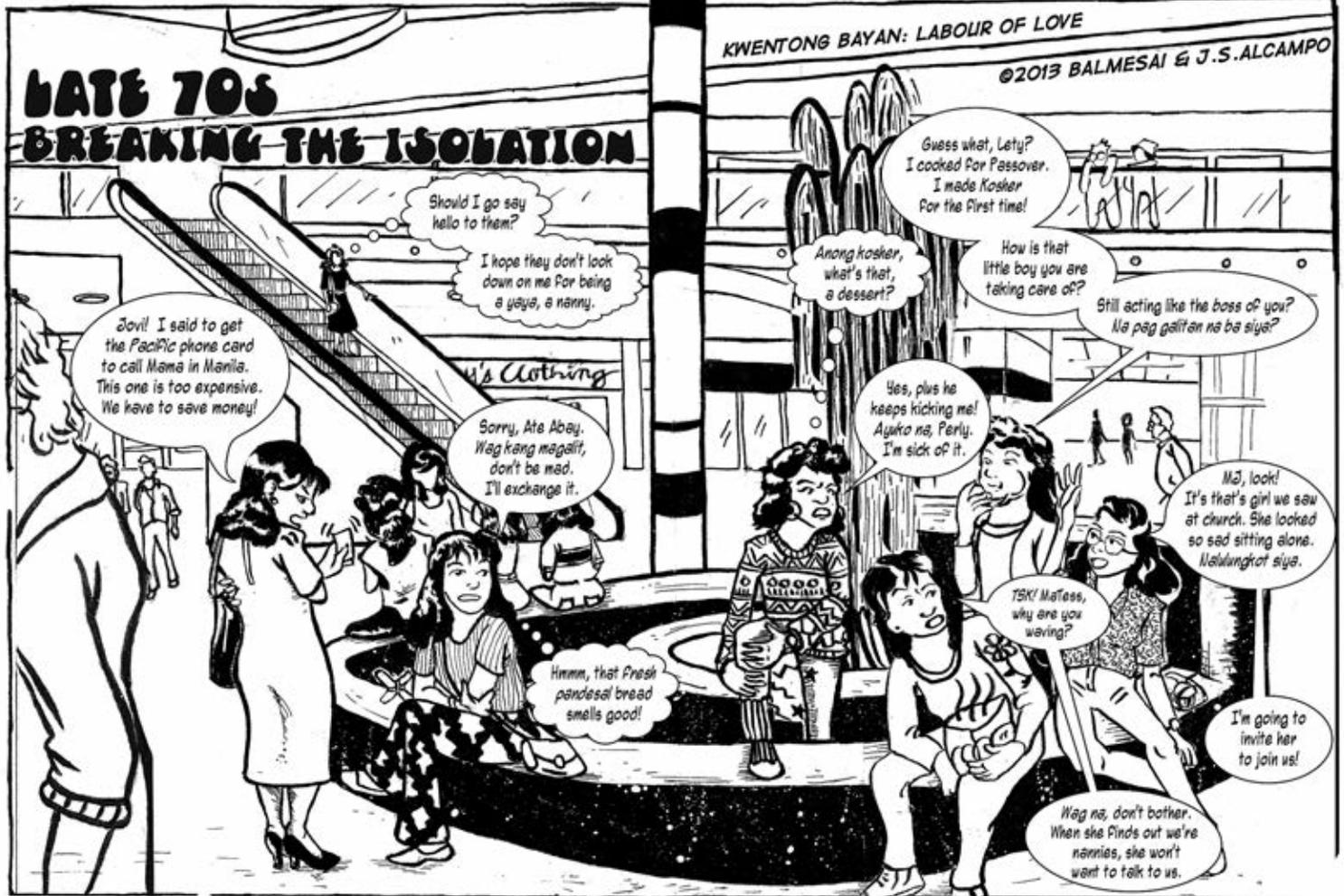
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In 1973, the Canadian Federal government introduced the Temporary Employment Authorization Program. It permitted domestic workers to come to Canada as short-term migrant labourers. But unlike European domestics, they were not granted landed immigrant status, so had to leave their families to work abroad.

By the late 70s, Filipino community leaders in Toronto began to notice more and more young Filipinas arriving without their families. They met at churches and malls on their days off. These informal gatherings sparked the creation of the first social support and advocacy groups. It began with caregivers reaching out to each other.



In the Philippines, there is a rich history of comics that engage with social and political issues.

ILLUSTRATION: ALTHEA BALMES AND JO SIMALAYA ALCAMPO

engage with social and political issues, something Balmes spoke about as part of her work with Anakbayan Toronto.

"I grew up with *Pugad Baboy* and I wanted to know more about these old comics," she explains. "I wanted to trace how it started and see who the main players were." *Pugad Baboy* (translation: "swine's nest") is a comic strip created by Filipino cartoonist Apolonio "Pol" Medina, Jr. which covers everything from domestic life, adventure and drama, to political issues.

"It was interesting to see the cultural significance of comics and how it played into Filipino culture," she said, of her research. "A lot of the comedy, a lot of our humour, began in the comics."

In a presentation she made called, "Filipino Komiks: 100 years of history and its contribution to Philippine culture," Balmes covered the unique role Filipino *komiks* have played both as a source of entertainment and as a platform through which the Filipino public can engage with social, political and economic issues of the time — in both urban and rural

communities, and across class and institutionalized education divides. In that same spirit, the two artists want *Kwentong Bayan* to be an accessible, easily digestible and visually interesting way for the Filipina caregivers to have their story told.

"When we first talked about it, we wanted the project to be for the general public and for LCP employers, to better understand Filipino culture." However, as they began to interact more with community members on the topic, Balmes and Alcampo realized that *Kwentong Bayan* could be a resource for caregivers as well.

"A lot of the time they don't know their rights, they don't know how to navigate the political system and Canadian culture, because they weren't really prepared for it," says Balmes.

In this way, *Kwentong Bayan* lives up to the rich history of Filipino visual literature, which overcomes social boundaries by serving as a resource for multiple communities, while also engaging audiences through a creative medium. "It's broad enough that it would also be for people like us — advocates



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and allies — and people in general who are interested in the topic and Filipino culture," says Balmes.

*Kwentong Bayan* is a more nuanced social instrument than even *Pugad Baboy*, because the creators place themselves right in the story. "The comic book is not just about the women in the program. It is about us," says Balmes. "We are drawing ourselves and writing ourselves into the story, so that there's more accountability in where the story is coming from — from what perspective. It's also a way for us to share our own adventures in learning more about these women. Our history affects how we engage with these women and with our culture. There's no way to avoid it."

"For me I think about indigeneity" (of being indigenous), comments Alcampo. "That means looking at things critically, but from within a culture. Some caregivers' stories are heartbreaking, some stories are infuriating. We try to reflect on that from within our culture and decide, politically, how the stories are going to be presented, how they are going to be seen by certain audiences. The comic book is for everybody, but we don't shy away from our own location within a culture."

*Kwentong Bayan* has been in the works for almost two years now, though Balmes and Alcampo formally started work, as illustrator and writer, respectively, at the beginning of last year, when the two were invited to observe and participate as artists in an eight-week advocacy and leadership training program for Filipina live-in caregivers. It was organized by former live-in caregivers and allies who volunteer with Caregiver Connections (CCESO).

Balmes and Alcampo navigate storytelling, community engagement and cultural observations as they share the experiences of caregivers, their families and community members in their soon-to-be published activist manifesto. "The community constantly teaches us and inspires us as to what the possibilities are," says Alcampo.

Indeed, it is their research approach that makes this book-in-progress even more special. The artists work with the live-in caregivers, workshopping ideas and allowing the women to have a direct voice in how their stories are told. Says Robin Folvik of the Graphics History Collective, "It really is a community story, with the two who are working on the comic bringing people together."

In July of this year, as part of the Graphic History Project, the Graphic History Collective published a mini-comic by LCP Comics on key turning points in the history of the Live-in Caregiver Program. The full-length comic will be published in 2015.

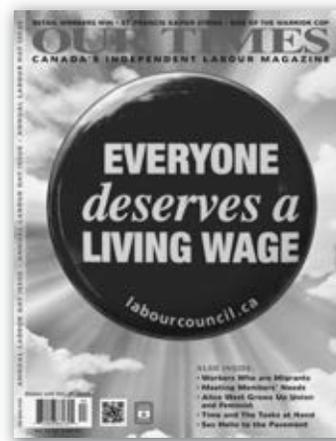
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