



Tropicality and Decoloniality: Sex Tourism vs Eco Tourism on a Philippine Beach

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Abstract

The small beachside town of Aplaya, Puerto Galera, on the island of Mindoro in the Philippines has a sex, beach, and diving tourist economy. Aplaya is considered a place of isolation, providing unspoiled tropical nature. Many foreign men discuss their desires for a Utopian paradise, a tropical beach that is imagined as uninhabited except for the necessary extras – the welcoming natives and compliant women. Foreign men depict the Philippines as a place where women are ordinarily sexually available, part of the natural excess of the tropics. This discourse of tropicality is here put into context with a discourse of decoloniality. The Philippines archipelago was colonised for over 400 years firstly by the Spanish, then by US colonisation, followed by Japanese occupation in WWII, and a return of the US until 1946 – after which post-colonial US influence continued. Despite this long and complex history, tourists who recount desires for a natural world and a nostalgia for a lost paradise in relation to the West help produce Aplaya as paradise found, rather than a particular version of paradise made. Amidst these ideas about natural women and traditional gender arrangements there are also ideas about the tropical natureculture, its natural state and cultural interventions. In Aplaya, a conflict is occurring between the development of sex tourism and environmental conservation through ecotourism. The domains of nature and culture, their articulation in the tropics, the environment, and development are produced and contested around this beach.

Keywords: Philippines, tropicality, decoloniality, postcolonialism, tropical natureculture, sex tourism, ecotourism

Introduction: The Perfume of the Tropics, or, Sex and the Beach

Journeys, those magic caskets full of dreamlike promises, will never again yield up their treasures untarnished. A proliferating and overexcited civilization has broken the silence of the seas once and for all. The perfumes of the tropics and the pristine freshness of human beings have been corrupted by a busyness with dubious implications, which mortifies our desires and dooms us to acquire only contaminated memories.

— Claude Levi Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, 1955, p. 37

The construction of tropical nature is always culture. This is just to say that nature is always culture before it is nature.

— Nancy Leys Stepan, *Picturing Tropical Nature*, 2001, p. 15

The beachside township of Aplaya, is nestled in a bay on the northern tip of the island of Mindoro, in the Philippines archipelago. Aplaya was a fishing and agricultural village forty years ago. Over time foreign tourism has become the main income generator. Tourism is based on the tropical beaches, scuba diving off the reefs, and what is advertised as 'nightlife'. Amidst a legacy of US military bases on the neighbouring island of Luzon, massively heightened during the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 70s, the provision of rest and recreation (R&R) services became normalised, including bars providing 'nightlife' which offered women for commercial sex to foreigners. After the war, and with budding tourism, local Filipinos of Aplaya realised that foreigners were bringing sex workers to the beach from ex-military base areas and they understood this industry as catering to natural male tourist desires. A few local entrepreneurs developed their own go-go bars, keeping money and subsequently political power, in their hands. But as these bar operators required local consensus, and later political votes, they ensured bar girls would be non-kin or outsiders. In this way Catholic values and family honour would be kept intact. Foreigners rarely understood the industry and women in it as being tied to a history of colonialism and militarism, and later an industry run by powerful local families, politicians, and sometime criminals. Instead, the Philippines in general, and the women were seen as naturally accessible, and an expected possibility of the natural excesses of the tropics. These foreign heterosexual men from Europe, the US, Australia, and later South Korea, often depicted Aplaya as a place where their desires – including heavy drinking, scuba diving, and buying sex from women – were natural. This was a nature and culture site in which articulations of these terms were used in the very processes of the production and performance of identity. Aplaya is a place where categories of identity such as nature/culture, local/foreigner, insider/outsider female/male are made and remade in every interaction.

In Aplaya the sex tourism economy is produced out of foreigners’ desires for a Utopian paradise, an empty tropical beach, an isolated island, imagined as uninhabited except for the necessary extras – the welcoming natives and compliant women. Foreign male tourists depict the Philippines as a place where women are naturally sexually available. Foreign men recount desires for a more natural life, with harmonious gender relations and a traditional sense of community. They depict these as having been eroded in the West by the scourges of modern life – industrialisation, commercialisation, feminism. This nostalgia for a tropical lost paradise in relation to their temperate lives back home, helps produce Aplaya as paradise found, rather than a particular version of paradise made. This image requires a great deal of effort to sustain. While foreign men seek an uninscribed island Utopia, they have inadvertently entered intricate political and kinship connections – and disconnections – with Filipinos and their environment. These contestations revolve around the agendas between different powerful families and other players regarding sex tourism versus ecotourism.

Figure 1. *The ‘deserted’ tropical beach*



It has taken a long and complex history to create this empty tropical beach. Photo by Author.

This paper explores concepts of decoloniality and tropicality in the development of sex tourism versus ecotourism as they converge around the beach of the town of Aplaya in the Philippines. To enter this debate, I firstly discuss decoloniality-postcoloniality, and how these concepts are used by Philippine scholars to address the persistence of colonialism and coloniality. Secondly, this debate of sex tourism versus ecotourism, requires discussing tropicality as it links with colonialism and its

continuing imaginaries of paradise and corruption. I then provide a brief history of Spanish colonisation followed by US colonisation, the Japanese occupation, and the US post-war use of the Philippines for military bases. I do this to contextualise the historical post-colonial military legacy of sex tourism in the Philippines and its collision with ecotourism development and the beach of Aplaya. My ethnography of sex tourism verses ecotourism addresses meaning making around the colonially and tropically entangled lush categories of nature and culture.

Decoloniality-Postcoloniality

The term 'colonial discourse' has been used to signify the meanings and practices which produced colonial relationships and attempted to define colonised identities as 'others'. Postcolonial studies originated in critiques of European colonial knowledge by scholars of the South, primarily South Asia, informed by post-structuralist theories. Edward Said's foundational discourse *Orientalism* (1978) applied Foucault on discourse analysis to examine colonial knowledge as a form of power. *Orientalism* focused on discourses from the Western humanities and the arts in the construction of self/other and West/Orient. Western discourse produced the West as superior; that is, self-defined, rational, cultural, masculine, and normative, by producing images of the non-West as irrational, natural, feminine, and pathological. Under a logic of binary oppositions, self and other appear independent of each other, however, the two terms help create each other, with the 'self' valued over the 'other'. He claimed that the West culturally constructed Orientalism to create the other, and in so doing, produce a sense of the self as cohesive, collective, superior – a 'natural' imperial power (1978, p. 201).¹ While Said analysed the Occident/Orient binary, he argued that the consequences for Africa and Latin America would have been the same.

Contemporary calls for decolonisation strive to further dismantle the ongoing project of colonial power. Decolonisation theory aims at a radical project of epistemic change in relation to colonial thinking, which depicted European knowledge as both universal and superior (Chambers & Buzinde, 2015). Its intellectual and political critique emerged as part of South American political movements' examination of the role of the European colonisation of the Americas, with a focus on indigeneity and the possibilities of liberation politics (Walsh & Mignolo, 2018). Ongoing colonisation is understood as the basis for the everyday function of capitalism, modernity, and

¹ Other notable postcolonial theorists include Gayatri Spivak *The Postcolonial Critic* (1990) who turned to subaltern studies to focus on history from below (see Guha, 1983) and used Derrida's strategies of deconstruction to deconstruct binaries (1991). Homi K. Bhabha looked at the vulnerability within postcolonial discourse including hybridity, ambivalence, and mimicry, using Althusser and Lacan (see Ashcroft et al. 2000). These scholars were all interested in the power and authority of the coloniser and strategies of deconstructing or undermining colonial discourse.

continuing imperialism (Betts, 1968). The movement therefore proclaims a more radical intervention than postcolonial scholars have provided. Postcolonial scholars were largely seen as being based in the academy and applying Western theories to understanding the workings of colonialism. Decolonial thinkers call for intervention from activists outside the academy and applying Indigenous and subaltern theories/knowledges to interrupt colonialism. This important move, however, inadvertently sets in motion new binaries with their hierarchies and separations such as decolonial/postcolonial, activist/academic. However, these binaries do not stand up once their histories and categories are explored, like all binaries, they are relational; they are decolonial-postcolonial.

Decoloniality and the 'coloniality of knowledge'

Contributing to the South American works of decoloniality, Aníbal Quijano (2000, 2007) argues that while formal colonialism has ended, 'the coloniality of knowledge' continues and is essential to the functioning of the 'coloniality of power'. He articulates how only Western knowledge has been depicted as rational and universal, subsequently becoming hegemonic through colonialism and capitalism. Consequently, if only Western culture is rational, only it can contain 'subjects'; other cultures are 'different', that is, unequal, and can only be 'objects' of knowledge. Western knowledge uses categories of meaning authorised by hierarchical binary oppositions between subject and object, carried over into analogous categories such as civilized/primitive, rational/irrational, modern/traditional (Said, 1978; Quijano 2007). Again, it is argued that the way to counter this Western knowledge, and thus the coloniality of power, is through subaltern voices.

This is similar, yet different, from the work that was carried out by postcolonial feminists such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991) who discussed being othered by the West, including by Western feminists. These feminist scholar/activists have further faced the difficulty of being doubly othered, by 'race' and gender. Mohanty's aim was to give 'Third World women' 'agency' and 'voice' – and in so doing challenge their absence within Western (feminist) discourse. Another postcolonial feminist, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1990) has addressed the issue of agency and voice as part of the Marxist inspired subaltern studies group, writing histories from below (Guha, 1983). Spivak has also been part of a poststructuralist tradition in her own practices of deconstruction and as Jacques Derrida's translator.² Spivak has argued for providing the voice of the other, acknowledging it as a form of 'strategic essentialism', politically necessary to produce history from below as well as being an effect of discourse.

² Spivak translated Derrida's *Of Grammatology*.

However, turning to European scholars can be depicted as being precisely the problem of colonisation and the difficulties of decolonisation. Yet, as the above feminist's show, boundaries are co-constructed and porous, intellectual histories co-create and deconstruct each other across colonial divides. The genealogy of scholarship can be used and interrogated in many ways. Derrida (1991) argued that there is no access to a pure, unmediated, authentic voice outside of contexts of power. Spivak concurred with this critique, but as an activist scholar gave voice to the subaltern woman. Said, based in New York, was influenced by the writings of Fanon on decolonization and deeply influenced by Michel Foucault on exploring a history of ideas and discursive analysis. Foucault on discourse argued that power/knowledge always exist together – there are no places outside of power to be depicted as pure liberation. This would include invocations by scholars in postcolonial theory, decolonial theory, coloniality of knowledge and the coloniality of power. This need not be seen as limiting, as all knowledge claims are situated (Haraway, 1991). It is only by entering the fray that that challenges to certain knowledge stakes and their legacies can be made. In this paper I turn to Philippine decolonial-postcolonial theorists, who, in turn, call upon Foucault and European poststructuralists on discourse and deconstruction in their use of, or refutation of, existing colonial histories and discourses.

Postcoloniality, Intersectionality

Filipina postcolonial scholar Nefertiti Tadiar engages with critical race theory, post-structural theory, postcolonial feminism, and Marxist critique. She argues that 'Empire' today means the global dispensation of power where capitalist accumulation by sovereign states has been reorganised. She therefore asks how can critical work on decolonization be done today? (2015, p.137).

Tadiar shows that 'race' is not natural, but culturally produced. Colonial histories of producing racial identities have meant that historically, the nationality "Filipino" was legally racialised during US colonial rule as "not Chinese" (2015, p. 142). She argues that empire studies is at risk of a similar imperialism when it uses the same narrative of imperial reproduction in the construction and self-making of the 'Filipino' as a racialised subject (2015). Even in critical work on empire and decolonization, where 'race' has the contemporary language of being "contingent, flexible, constructed" (2015, p. 141), the concept of a given race is more often continued than altered. Critical readings of race are therefore "a political imperative to attend to and continue the work of decolonization" (2015, p. 141). In discussing the ways forward Tadiar draws on postcolonial scholars such as Fennella Cannell (1999), who reveals how pre-colonial and colonial histories may present themselves in everyday "transformative performances" in contemporary Philippine life, demonstrating "histories from below" through "subaltern human pathways of transmission" (Tadiar

2015, p.156).

Tadiar writes that:

To decolonize thus means to ask, How do we mobilise other social analytics to bring into operation remaindered forms of social intelligence, imagination, and sensibility that might not only dispute what is given in empire and the very frames within which such things (like “race as difference”) are given but also, in doing so, how do we set the stage (create the platforms) for radical departure from the given conditions of life under empire now? (2015, p. 156).

Tadiar then turns to Anna Tsing’s (2005) work on globalisation and circulation as more-than-capital to include the “social conditions of that flow, the means and infrastructure of placemaking that circulation requires” (2015, p. 151). Such circulations are historically colonial and contemporary, and may be a way to approach the decolonial-postcolonial.

Philippines Postcoloniality

Charlie Samuya Veric (2019) asks what we might even mean by the colonial and the practices of decolonisation as he reveals the colonial production of postcolonial studies in the Philippines. Veric depicts decolonisation in the Philippines as a ‘culture war’ traversing the pacific. He shows historical and political complexity involving “priests, academics, administrators, operatives, and intellectuals” (2019, p. 523). As he explains:

In using postcolonial, I refer to the condition generated by the formal, legal, and political existence of the Philippine state after 1946. However, the term does not mean the end of colonialism, as the American interests in Filipino institutions of knowledge production would suggest otherwise, I therefore use the term to mean the persistence of imperial or neocolonial designs at the *heart of decolonizing dreams* (Veric 2019, p. 525, my italics)

Veric (2019) states that the postcolonial is signified by the end of World War II with the occupation of the Japanese and decolonization from the US in 1946. He describes the return of the Americans as the ‘quiet war’ that would occur under post-colonial conditions.

Returning in peacetime, they knew it would be a different war. There would be no mortars or tanks, no machine guns or aircraft carriers. It

would be a quiet war, the *culture war of decolonization* involving figures and institutions that produced the knowledge that gave form and substance to the new Filipino nation. (Veric 2019, p. 522, my italics)

Veric illuminates the institutional histories of the modern Filipino post-colonial university and knowledge production in the 1950s and 60s which in turn helped to sustain parallel production of the modern Philippine nation state (2019, p. 525). The American interest in the post-colony meant that it “embedded itself in decolonizing attempts to produce knowledge in and about the Philippines” (2019, p. 547). Through the complex politics of the Cold War, and the efforts to stifle communism in Southeast Asia, scholarly organisations such as the Asia Foundation had ties to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The influential American Jesuit scholar Frank Lynch became a founding force of Filipino studies and the institute that he launched at Ateneo de Manila University in 1960. At first these institutions were operated by White Jesuits but eventually there was a call for Filipinos to undertake these ‘decolonizing’ positions. The pushback against American interests at the Ateneo University demonstrated the contradictions at the “*heart of the culture war of decolonization*” (2019, p. 547, my italics). The resistance revealed the “radical side of decolonization as well as the staggering scope of American influence” (2019, p. 534). After the 1968 student protests which began in Paris and spread from Europe to universities in the Philippines, Filipino identity became a significant issue regarding who could authoritatively discuss Filipino identity and social life, and who became an object of study (2019, p. 535). While the Americans were focusing on the “*capture...of the decolonizing mind*” (2019, p. 547 my italics) and Filipino scholars were agitating for the ‘Filipinization’ of the University, another politics was to intervene. In 1972, Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law in the young democracy. Many scholars subsequently focused on the issue of development, how to get an agricultural country to move towards industrialization, and the capacity of (Western) knowledge to transform what had been an assumed emergent democracy.

Reynaldo C. Ileto (2001), who received his early education at the Jesuit run Ateneo, argues that in writing Philippines history, including the modern history of development, colonial knowledge is often assumed to be a past practice, thus leaving orientalist assumptions intact. Citing the classic work of Edward Said (1978), he advocates for histories of colonialism that reveal the ways in which colonialism continues in the present. Philippines postcolonial historian Vicente Rafael (1995, 2000) illustrates how an archipelago of largely independent islands connected to Southeast and East Asia became a colonial entity under three global empires: Spain, the United States, and Japan (and the United States again) (Pablo, 1953). He shows how the nation-state continues to be an imperial artefact even as it contends with its post-colonial condition. Adding to this critique, his work also draws on Filipino

postcolonial scholarship and literature. The collection of Nick Joaquin's (1972) stories in the book *Tropical Gothic* can also be read as an insightful postcolonial critique. However, it needs to be remembered that Joaquin as an ex-seminarian saw his mission as a "cultural apostle" to use Catholicism to counter the American colonial present. For Joaquin, the Gothic is medieval Spanish Catholic colonialism – trans/planted to a new world. Joaquin produces images of a gothic Spanish churches, its friars, and its language amidst the humidity and dense foliage of a new land, its people, and their vernacular. His writing invokes the Western gaze of tropicalism and its stereotypes, destabilising Western certainties and usurping their colonising tropes. Thus, Joaquin's Philippine Gothic is simultaneously a form of decolonial tropicality.

Tropicality, or Constructing Tropical Natureculture

Old terms for the equatorial regions, such as 'equinoctial' or the 'torrid' zone, began to be replaced by a new terminology of 'the tropics', designating a worldwide space of a particular type of nature.

— Nancy Leys Stepan, *Picturing Tropical Nature*, 2001, p. 17

Constructions of nature and culture have been used to produce 'the tropics' and the cultural discourse of 'tropicality'. The idea of tropicality as geographical discourse was formalised by Pierre Gourou's *The Tropical World* (1947), a fusing of science and exoticism to interpret the 'nature' of the tropical zone and its innate difference from the temperate world. These differences of the temperate and the tropical "were built on the shifting sands of twentieth-century history – empire and freedom, modernity and disenchantment, war and revolution, culture and civilisation, and race and development" (Bowd & Clayton 2019, p. 2). In a decolonial-postcolonial vein, tropicality refers to living entanglements in which the tropics are a site of nature-cultural inscriptions. The tropics as shifting signifier can represent a Garden of Eden, a heaven on Earth, a land of rich biodiversity, a tropical paradise, or a wild and/or dangerous unconquerable nature (Lundberg et al., 2021; 2022).

Several historians have developed discourse analyses of the tropics as a place of nature-culture fusion. David Arnold (1995) uses Said (1978) to address the term 'tropicality' to indicate the constructed or discursive representation of the tropics in modern geography. Warwick Anderson (2006) wrote extensively on the 'palm line' of the tropics, American colonisation of the Philippines, and the colonial imagery of tropical disease and pathology. Nancy Leys Stepan, a historian of science, also works with these concepts and provides a genealogy of the ways "tropical nature has been imagined, produced, and interpreted historically" (2001, p.13). These scholars, through their employment of discourses and genealogies, indicate their use of

Foucault (1991). Stepan argues for different articulations: “history shows us that there is no single map or picture of the natural world that increasing knowledge progressively fills in, but rather many different maps and representations, articulated and shaped by numerous factors of politics, culture and aesthetics, by beliefs about reality, codes of seeing and representational conventions” (2001, p.14). There is some possibility that Stepan’s nature as culture means that all nature is assimilated into culture, and thus culture again dominates nature. Nevertheless, her visual analysis provides insight into the imagery of the tropics, including the palm tree as a symbol of exotic presence rather than contemporary plantation.

Palm trees thus came to be valued in themselves, primarily as objects of nature. Over time, the palm-tree became the ubiquitous sign of the tropics, images of it instantly signalling less a botanical species than an imaginative submersion in hot places. (2001, p. 19)

Donna Haraway (2003) imploded the dichotomy of nature/culture through studies of natureculture to acknowledge that human and natural environments, including non-human and more-than-human worlds, are intimately entangled. Her term ‘natureculture’ describes entwined multispecies histories, thereby challenging ideas about boundaries and binaries and offering agency and connection. Attending to worlds that are more than human requires radically rethinking the methods, means, and stories we tell of ourselves and others (2003). Collapsing the artificial boundary between nature and culture means radically rethinking the domains of the social and natural sciences and their knowledge claims, as well as the colonial histories that have produced them. Tsing, who has an extended history of investigating nature and culture discourse in feminism and environmental issues, uses this merged term in ethnography.³ Her multi-species ‘assemblages’ survive and co-create natureculture in new environments. Tsing (2015, p.156) writes that natureculture worlds make each other possible.

Humans join others in making land-scapes of unintentional design. As sites for more-than-human dramas, landscapes are radical tools for decentering human hubris. Landscapes are not backdrops for historical action: they are themselves active. Watching landscapes in formation shows humans joining other living beings in shaping worlds.

³ Robin Theirs (2023), in *Tales of the Post-Plantation*, writes on banana plantations in Mindanao, in the southern Philippines. His project adds Tsing’s (2015) particular account of natureculture worlds, notably fungi, to talk about small-scale farmers, a fungus, and the banana as more-than-human articulations of plantations. There is a contemporary dialogue arising from the Philippines on decoloniality, postcolonialism, and natureculture – which intersect with tropicality.

Her words are suggestive of ways of watching the historical unfolding of the landscape of Aplaya in Puerto Galera. Involved in this landscape are colonial and tropical entanglements of: people – colonials, friars, pirates, indigenes, soldiers on R&R, male tourists, girls for hire, and the rich – islands, bays, money, military bases, go-go bars, the beach, electricity, and a fish. And these are all entwined in contestations of sex tourism and ecotourism played out through natureculture scenes.

A History of Colonial Encounters

Aplaya on the island of Mindoro came into existence through a complex heritage of historical events that continue to produce its image of isolation as a tropical island idyll. The Philippines was subject to over four hundred years of foreign colonisation; with Spain as colonial ruler for three hundred and fifty years from 1565 to 1898; followed by United States rule for fifty years from 1898 to 1945. The Spanish colonial church and state were centred in Manila on the island of Luzon. However, few Spanish settlers were sent to the Philippines to avoid the bloodshed that was inflicted in the Americas. As a result, the European population remained very small in relation to the indigenous peoples (Blanc-Szanton 1990, p. 361). Friar curates, who doubled as district administrators, were established in each pueblo (township), in lowland areas. Contact with European colonisers therefore took the form of Spanish missionaries who travelled to the more remote provinces, including Puerto Galera, to establish colonial order and convert people to Catholicism (see Fortes, 1997).

In 1898 there was a change of colonial power. Another Spanish colony, Cuba, became the site of conflict between the Spanish and the United States. Spain declared war on the United States, and the Philippines as a colonial outpost in the Pacific, was drawn into the conflict. After losing the war and Cuba, at the Treaty of Paris peace negotiations, Spain ceded the Philippines to the US for the price of \$20 million (see Stanley, 1974), thus ending three hundred and fifty years of Spanish rule. At first the Filipinos saw the Americans as playing the role of a liberating ally. The nationalist leaders who had been trying to end Spanish rule opened the second round of their rebellion against Spain with the use of modern rifles supplied by US Admiral Dewey, clearing the rural areas of Spanish troops and friars and setting up a republic (see Phelan, 1959). The Americans, however, took Manila from Spain and then turned to a war of conquest against the infant Philippines Republic. In contrast to the Spanish focus on religious conversion, the United States' fifty years of colonial rule focused on the regulation of civil government and the establishment of a military presence. On 8th December 1941, the day after the attack on Pearl Harbour, Japan launched a military offensive against the US's stronghold in the Philippines. The Japanese rapidly gained occupation of the island archipelago, causing the United

States to withdraw. The Japanese remained until the United States forces returned and helped the Filipinos defeat the Japanese in 1944. In 1946, with Manila still devastated by bombing, shelling, and fire, the Philippines became an independent republic (see Phelan, 1959).

Puerto Galera and the Island of Mindoro

The island of Mindoro is located below the northern island of Luzon and the colonial centre of Manila. The sheltered harbour of Puerto Galera with its nearby mountains served the first arriving Spaniards well, shielding them from the Moro (Muslim) 'pirates'⁴ and other possible raiders (Phelan, 1959). This early settlement, containing public and military headquarters, a hospital, warehouses, and a convent, was secured by several guardhouses and watchtowers on the top of the surrounding hills. There were few *haciendas* (large-scale crop plantations) due to Mindoro's mountainous topography. As a result, the resident population of Christianised Filipinos on Mindoro remained low, as most livelihoods were derived from subsistence and small-scale fishing or agriculture. In 1837, the Spanish administration transferred the islands' provincial capital from Puerto Galera to Calapan on account of that region's agricultural potential. This was also a shift from the great sea trade settlements of the islands (Phelan, 1959). Thus, the Spanish government officials largely left the town, with only the friars remaining as representatives of Spanish rule.

After the defeat of the Spanish, the Americans arrived in Puerto Galera to establish their version of settlement, planting early monocrop plantations, coconut and fruit trees, domesticating animals, and establishing schools (Schult, 1991). The Americans eventually succeeded in encouraging migration of Christian lowlanders to the thinly populated coast. While the coast was only ever sparsely settled, Tagalogs from Luzon came to dominate the Luzon-facing north coast, while Visayans from the central islands to the south came to dominate the south coast (Schult, 1991). These migrations by Christianised lowlanders led to land grabbing in settled areas. Mindoro's indigenous peoples, collectively called Mangyans, subsequently fled from the violence of coastal incursions to the interior mountainous regions (Gibson 1986, p. 19). Under the Americans, as under the Spanish, the Mangyans remained almost invisible, as attention was given to subduing the more powerful and resistant Muslims on the southern island of Mindanao, as well as the non-Christians on the northern island of Luzon, where there was greater colonial settlement. When the American administration attempted to settle the Mangyans on reservations (as they

⁴ Moro is a Spanish term for Moor (Muslim). The term was used for Muslims of Arab (Moorish) descent but then applied to indigenous people who practiced Islam. Spanish colonisation in the Philippines coincided with the Spanish Inquisition, when Spain was persecuting and converting Muslims to Catholicism. The Moro were not simply pirates, but were othered as pirates.

had done to Native Americans), both the lowlanders seeking land and the highland Mangyans, resisted these settlements (Gibson 1986, p.18). Flight to the interior of the island increased in scale during the Second World War when the Japanese invaded and occupied the coast, leading to further dispossession of the Mangyans (Schult, 1991). Christian lowlanders who fled from the coast at this time came to occupy the river valleys and practice wet rice cultivation, while the Mangyans occupied the ridges for swidden agriculture (Gibson 1986, p. 23). Thus, Mindoro and Puerto Galera have been subject to a history of encounters leading to complex battles over land. Colonial discourse largely described the area in terms of tropicality, and this discursive realm creates the identities of nature and culture, which are continually produced, contested, and reimagined.

A History of Sex Tourism

Small scale US military bases had operated in the Philippines since the change of colonial rule from Spanish to American in 1898. The US left when the Japanese occupied the Philippines in WWII, however, returned to help the Filipinos drive out the Japanese in 1944, with island-to-island fighting continuing until early 1946. Shortly after the defeat of the Japanese and the close of the war the first elections of the infant Republic of the Philippines were held (Stanley, 1974). It was during this transition period that the 1947 Military Bases Agreement was drawn up, in which the United States negotiated a ninety-nine-year lease for military and naval bases in the Philippines with U.S. authorities securing virtual territorial rights. An American military presence therefore continued after independence and its bases became a vital military stronghold for the United States when it engaged in war against North Vietnam twenty years later. Military-based 'rest and recreation' (R&R), or the provision of bars and prostitution, had long accompanied military life. With the Vietnam War the bases received an immense influx of United States and Allied Forces (including Australian) resulting in a massive increase of their accompanying R&R industries.

It was during this time that the provision of Filipinas for sexual service by foreigners became an industry. While the military bases scaled down after the Vietnam War ended in 1975, they continued to operate as a major US defence post in Southeast Asia. Despite the ninety-nine-year lease of the Military Bases, the agreement was terminated in 1992. The Philippines Senate made the decision not to extend the leases amidst Filipino nationalist calls for full independence and the United States' uncertainty about the viability of some of the bases damaged by the 1991 Mount Pinatubo volcanic eruption and lava flows. When the military left, the existing infrastructure of the bars, including the nightclubs, hotels, and prostitution services that had attracted foreign servicemen, refocused on attracting large numbers of foreign male tourists. These were situated on the neighbouring island of Luzon. The

famed names on sex tourist travel itineraries – Angeles, Subic, and Olongapo – all adjoined the military base areas. Angeles City was the site of Clark Air Base, home for the US Air Force; Subic Bay and Olongapo were the bases for the 7th Fleet of the US Navy. For servicemen entering and exiting the country, Ermita in Manila became the red-light district. Angeles, Subic Bay and Olongapo still exist as bar areas for sex tourists. In 1991, the highly visible red-light district of Ermita in central Manila was subject to a successful ‘clean-up’ campaign by Mayor Lim moving the sex work industry to the southern suburbs of Manila such as Pasay (see Law, 2000).

Foreign men had taken an active role in operating the prostitution/sex work industry catering to foreign men in Ermita, Angeles, Subic, and Olongapo. Aplaya, however, was far removed from Luzon’s military sites. Until the late 1970s, it was primarily a provincial fishing village. Foreign tourists first started to travel to Puerto Galera in the 1970s, with numbers increasing in the 1980s. While it was initially a backpackers’ destination with minimal tourist infrastructure, some foreigners who visited the US base bar areas also came for beach holidays and to scuba dive. Aplaya locals soon learned that some of the foreign men went to the ex-base bar areas to hire bar-girls to accompany them before they came down to the beach. In particular, one of the local families realised that by introducing their own bars and bar-girls they could tap into this industry to create their own go-go bars. Young women were recruited from nearby provincial areas to work in the bars. In ex-base areas, foreign men have been able to gain their income directly from running the go-go bars and the prostitution for which they front. In Aplaya, foreign men were numbered solely among the customers, not among the providers, of prostitution services. Unlike the base area, where a history of complex connections has occurred between politicians, police, and foreigners, in Aplaya, such illegal activities and the politics that give sanctuary to them are still orchestrated by locals all related by kinship. Until recently, no foreigners were allowed to run go-go bars. There are now South Korean entrepreneurs running resorts, bars, and the scuba diving industry. They have been able to become financially involved in the commercial sex industry in go-go bars, though they only manage indirectly.

Landscape One: Creating a Tropical Paradise

Sex Tourism in Aplaya

The most developed of the beaches is Aplaya on the eastern most side of the island. Most of the rooms are basic. The beach is not good for swimming or snorkelling, though the area has a lively nightlife.

— E. Peplow, *The Philippines*, 1997, p. 189

Tourism in Puerto Galera is promoted by descriptions of its natural beauty and its

diverse diving locations. Yet tourist guidebooks also describe Aplaya as 'loud' and 'hectic', with a mediocre beach, devastated coral reefs, and 'basic' accommodation. Aplaya is promoted for its 'nightlife', and this is where a great deal of its current tourist allure comes from. In most Filipino villages, the idea of promoting village nightlife would seem improbable.

Only a few families dominate land ownership, and have done so for many decades. Since the 1980s, another local family, through the new money provided by go-go bars and the drugs (*ice*, methamphetamine) accompanying the prostitution industry, has elevated itself to wealth and political opportunities. An additional economic and social force has emerged in the past four decades as the elite, extremely wealthy, Manila-based Locsin family has acquired most of the 'undeveloped' land in the Puerto Galera area to maintain as 'pristine'. In the last two decades, the Locsins' have become more directly involved in local politics. These political forces – the landed local families, the newly wealthy political family operating the bars, the Manila-based elites buying up 'undeveloped land', along with Western expats, and now South Korean entrepreneurs with their tourist businesses – are all vying for a stake in the area's sex and ecotourism industry possibilities (Wiss, 2011, 2013; Ekoluoma, 2017).

The Business of the Beach

Aplaya's beachfront is jammed with hotels, restaurants and dive shops. Rowdier than anywhere else on the island, Aplaya still has one or two quiet patches of paradise if you look hard enough.

— Lonely Planet, *Philippines*, 2003, p. 232.

Aplaya's beach was once a major access point to the sea and a mooring area for *bangkas* (outrigger fishing boats). It is now the prime location for tourist activities. Fishing, except for the recreational variety, has been greatly discouraged by local authorities as the diving industry has developed in the area. Dynamite fishing, which destroys coral beds, is prohibited and actively policed against in the Puerto Galera region. *Bangkas* are required to moor to buoys attached to permanent concrete blocks so that dragging anchors will not damage the coral. Former fishermen now primarily make their incomes by transporting tourists who come to observe the underwater marine life, which the fisherman once largely considered food. The marketing of 'ocean life' and an 'ocean view' is now part of the preservation, but also the creation, of images of tropical life as paradise.

Rather than being an empty, Utopian space readily inscribed as paradise, Aplaya's beach is a vital part of the community. It is still considered a collective domain – a place of public access and livelihood. The beach has increasingly become a thoroughfare as the available land in the village is filled with tourist businesses that

can only be reached through winding lanes. Aplaya's tourist development has been unplanned, and this shows in the mazelike pattern of the lanes. Previously, open spaces have been used to make small tourist enterprises, or *sari-sari* (mixed goods shops), which have sprung up in virtually every lane and on every corner. There are also larger provision stores opening up in the area. Increased tourism has led to motor fuel and effluents from unplanned resorts and accommodation centres polluting the beach and bay. Although foreign residents have largely accepted Filipino notions of the public use of the beach, for most tourists, however, the beach is considered empty. For these tourists, tropical beaches lined with palm trees represent the empty space of leisure, an image drawn from the beaches invariably represented in postcards and travel brochures as uninhabited. But to children en route to school, women on their way to church, people walking to various points in the village, men mooring *bangkas*, and diving instructors filling boats with divers, the sight of foreigners sunbathing on Aplaya beach is 'out of place'. These tourists appear to locals as being 'naked', lying exposed as they are in the middle of the public domain.

In contrast to ex-US base bar areas where foreigners have been able to run bars, in Aplaya, local political families still have power and thus exclusive control of the industry. The men (and their wives far more discreetly) from a previously poor local family have elevated themselves from bakers and vendors to owners of tourism enterprises – notably bars fronting prostitution. Other locals covertly describe the rise of this family as a move from being "barefoot bakers" to "owning land, even in Manila." As this family became increasingly wealthy, they were able to assure the political success of one of their own. In the past, several brothers openly ran the go-go bars while a family member took on political office. Today, his son fills the same political role and is therefore able to act in the interest of the bars in Aplaya and in the regional politics of Puerto Galera.

This family owns and operates several go-go bars, with over one hundred girls in each bar. Prostitution is officially illegal in the Philippines, and as Aplaya still operates within (or at least alongside) local Catholic village values, the go-go bars do not operate as brothels. The go-go bars cater solely to foreign men, as local men are not allowed to bar-fine (pay for) a girl. Local bar owners recognise that allowing local men to bar-fine would threaten marriages, and angry wives might endanger their girls' safety. Nor are local girls allowed to work in the bars. The owners of the bars rely on *barangay* (village) votes and therefore cannot countenance local patronage, and the disruption of families, or the dishonour of local girls. The girls are therefore recruited by mamasans from outside of Aplaya. In these ways, the prostitution industry is depicted as the domain of outsiders – foreign customers and non-local girls – and therefore, in some sense, disconnected from local values of kinship, honour, and Catholic propriety.

Most tourists who come to Aplaya are foreign men who have heard about the area from other foreign men who have travelled there. While some men come to Aplaya primarily to dive, many end up paying for sex with bar-girls. The chances of this are increased by the amount of time men spend in the area, specifically around 'expatriate culture'. In anthropological terms, it might be said that these men become acculturated to the local expatriate men's cultural assertions that prostitution is the most natural form of relationship a foreigner could have with a Filipina and that Aplaya is the ideal or natural location to fulfil this desire. Every day in and around the bars people talk of men, women, and sex. While gender and sexuality are continuously articulated as being 'natural', this is a narrative that is continually recited, indicating that these identities are being culturally produced and performed. The concepts of nature and culture here are highly complex and interactive in their creations of worlds and identities. These repetitions of identity are nevertheless subject to change, no repetition can be exact, it therefore involves difference and transformation.

Landscape Two: Creating a Tropical Environment

A Permanent Mooring in Puerto Galera

[The Locsins] made a determined vow to protect Puerto Galera bay from the excesses of humans. God gave us the bay, the Spaniards bestowed the name, and the Locsins were the ones to venerate it. By not building on their vast properties – they own more than half of the lands surrounding the bay – the Locsin family has maintained and preserved the unique allure of Puerto Galera bay which continues to charm tourists from here and abroad.

— *Puerto Galera Fortnightly* (PGF), 1997, 11 p. 4

"The Family" as the Locsin clan are known in Puerto Galera, are some of the super-rich and powerful who call the area home. The Locsin's are from Manila, but also own extensive land holdings in Puerto Galera. The richest man in the Philippines moors his US\$ 3 million yacht at his permanent mooring in Puerto Galera. The arrival and departure of members of the super-rich are announced by helicopters flying over the island.

In another history, in 1932, with the Philippines still under American colonial rule, the Manila-based University of the Philippines (UP) established a Marine Biological Station in Puerto Galera. Miguel Fortes, educated through the United Nations and currently a Professor at the Marine Sciences Institute at UP, became the predominant environmental expert on the Puerto Galera region. Fortes, in imagery worthy of Rousseau on the purity of nature, claimed that:

The people of Puerto Galera have an inherent, honest common vision for life best suited to their native environment. The municipal leadership is almost completely helpless against the moneyed class whose environmental guidelines are based largely upon the intervention of modern but inappropriate technology and their capacity to pay. This is one reason why the municipal government has been soliciting help from outside the town, especially from the academic and other non-political private establishments (1997, p. 21).

Fortes' claim for outside intervention is based on the idea of a local "moneyed class" with only a short-term, profit-based interest in the area. In contrast, he depicts the ordinary locals as having the natural honesty of villagers who live harmoniously with nature, along with the progressive environmental agendas of the Manila-educated classes, assumedly the Locsins. Fortes claims that from the early 1930s on, Puerto Galera's only interactions with 'outsiders' took place each summer when groups of University of the Philippines students arrived for environmental field study (1997, p. 11-12). In this way, the origin story of contemporary land claims between insiders and outsiders in Puerto Galera starts a mere sixty years beforehand, disregarding, if not denying, a history of tribal dispossessions and various colonisations, including Japanese military occupation. In 1954, the University of the Philippines sponsored a petition to the national government to declare the area around Puerto Galera a reserve (Fortes, 1997). A governmental report noted that the people of Puerto Galera refused to give their approval or support for the plan, fearing that they might be dispossessed. Despite this opposition, the reserve went ahead. In 1973, Under Marcos' dictatorship, environmental protection and self-interest concurred when a Presidential Decree meant Puerto Galera became a reservation area under the Man and Biosphere Program of UNESCO (Fortes, 1997, p. 6).

From the 1970s, Puerto Galera, which is only a few hours' travel by land and boat from Manila, became known in the national press as the Marcos' favoured 'playground'. The Architect Locsin and his wife Cecilia (*née* Yulo) joined the Marcos' on their trips to Puerto Galera and soon began to buy extensive areas of land as well as developing their own private retreats. 'The Family' is now the largest landowner in the area. Leandro Locsin, like Ferdinand Marcos, has since died, and his widow Cecilia, like Marcos' widow Imelda, has the status of a powerful man's widow and matriarch of a political family. Under Cecilia and her son, Leandro Jnr, the Locsins have become a dominant political force, and lavish financial patrons of Puerto Galera's politicians. The Locsins' vision for Puerto Galera has relied on the area remaining undeveloped and therefore 'unspoilt', by a process even supportive locals have called land-grabbing. The Locsins own nearly eighty percent of 'undeveloped' land in Puerto Galera, with much of their land planted with coconut trees right down

to the edge of the beach. Their employees maintain fences between the beach and the plantations. Guards armed with guns prevent local fishermen from squatting under the trees. The tourist view of an empty beach with swaying coconut palms is therefore maintained by private occupation, which is vigorously and sometimes oppressively enforced.

Sex Tourism v Eco Tourism

Brown Outs and Gun Shots

'Brown-outs', or electricity fluctuations and failures were ongoing in the Puerto Galera area and subsequently affected Aplaya's tourist industry. While debates about the environment, tourist infrastructure and a continuous power supply were occurring, electricity represented not just possibilities, but perils to many poor locals. The power was supplied by overhead cables running through the streets of Aplaya and was often not properly earthed. Every resort of any standing had to have a generator, and dozens of these usually filled the night air with diesel fumes and spluttering engine noises. Children playing at the basketball court and climbing trees had been electrocuted by the unearthed wiring that Aplaya's sporadic tourist development had produced, and in a year, several people from poor families were electrocuted trying to tap into the power lines of established tourist businesses. The mayor stated electricity supply was necessary for locals and especially for the further development of tourism. The Locsin's forcefully opposed the proposal of a power barge for electricity production as environmentally destructive.

Noe Lineses, the editor of the *Puerto Galera Fortnightly* (PGF) stated that local candidates had commented that "Puerto Galera is the Locsins' private playground," echoing past comments that it was the Marcos' private playground. A defeated pro-development candidate said, "The Locsins are environmental fanatics and anti-development" (PGF, 1997, 1, p. 6). Cecilia Locsin depicted the natural environment as including an ecosystem which valued people's 'traditional values', and the possibility of their degeneration.

As history shows in...Aplaya...and other places, many actions based on political and profit motives alone have had disastrous and almost irreversible long-term effects on the environment and the local population. In these areas, not only has the carrying capacity of the land, environment, and ecology been stretched to the limit, but the accompanying threats of overheated economies and unaffordable staples, communicable disease, drugs, petty and violent crime, and strained familial relationships have been realized (PGF, 1997, 1, p.7).

Manila money and political connections combined with claims to Puerto Galera as home, did not turn out to be sufficient to circumvent the webs and connections of local politics and agendas of sex tourism. Debates about the environment raged while local politicians were busy discussing the re-licensing of banned go-go dancing. The girls were returned to work as waitresses and wore modest clothing, usually their Sunday best.

As this political contest between development and environment escalated through regional, provincial, national, and international levels; local politics in Aplaya continued to operate through its own networks of patronage. While the Mayor had the provincial Governor's support, this was not sufficient to combat intense local politics. The Mayor was reportedly 'very upset' when Aplaya's *barangay kapitan* (village head) emerged victorious from the election gaining more power over other *baragays* in the area. Mayor Delgado, who had been drinking, fired a gun in the air several times. The police under the Mayor's rival, his own assistant Vice-Mayor, had him charged for breaking the ban on alcohol and weapon use in public areas on Election Day. The case was dropped, however, when the newly elected *barangay kapitan* refused to be a witness for the police. Presumably, this was when a deal was made to allow the bar girls to return to work.

The National Fish as Local Political Contender

The battle between the Locsin-led environmental crusade and the Mayor-led pro-development campaign was to go on to find new icons in this battle for authority. After pressure from Governor Valencia, an Environmental Compliance Certificate (ECC) was given for the mooring of the electricity power barge to go ahead. In turn, the Locsins launched a court case to oppose the ECC in the name of the *bangus* (milkfish) – the official 'national fish' of the Philippines (PGF, 1997, 9, p. 1). The complaint stated that allowing the mooring to go ahead was 'an act of ecological terrorism and desecration of the habitat of our national fish' (PGF, 1997, 10, p. 2). As journalist Jeffrey Trias reported:

The Bangus-goes-to-court issue...warrants a space in Philippine jurisprudence as the FIRST case in the country seeking the annulment of an Environmental Compliance Certificate (ECC). It is also the FIRST in the world seeking judicial enforcement of intergenerational responsibility in the animal kingdom.... (PGF, 1997, 10, p. 2)

The plaintiffs, 'The Family', on behalf of the fish, sought a temporary restraining order against the construction of the barge mooring facility, arguing that it violated several presidential decrees and the *Local Government Code* (Republic Act 7160) of

1991. The Locsins thus turned to two levels of governmental authority that, while having conflicting interests, were yet being used simultaneously. Both the Marcos Presidential Decree ordering protection and preservation of the region; and the reaction to the Marcos dictatorship, the *Local Government Code* of 1991, were used. The Locsins then went on to utilise international bodies, gaining an official eco-tourism destination status for Puerto Galera as the Philippines first Green Globe destination, a United Nations and the World Travel & Tourism Council initiative.

A town meeting was held in Aplaya about tourism and the environment, which was attended by expat resort owners, bar owners, locals with business interests, and some bored off-duty bar-girls. The meeting opened with a prayer from the Catholic Women's League offering religious blessings to the *barangay* that it should be cleansed by God. The *barangay kapitan* then immediately launched into his speech on the environment by discussing the 'working girls' and their 'disorderly behaviour', and the extra strain in keeping the *barangay* clean due to the nightclubs. A bar-girl next to me leant over and asked, "What's a working girl?" I answered the puzzled woman, "He means bar-girls." The expression 'working girl' was never used in the bar scene, where two amiable euphemisms were employed – bar-girl and dancing-girl – both of which evoked the pleasure and entertainment side of nightclub work.

The *barangay kapitan* then seemed to move onto the physical environment, saying that despite his many proclamations, he was still finding shit in the lanes that "did not look like it came from pigs but from people." Amidst amused yet embarrassed laughter, the *barangay kapitan* asked, "How can we have first-class international resorts if you keep shitting in the lanes?" Yet there were few public facilities. Many houses did not have sewerage systems or piped water, while the luxurious private resorts had toilets, hot water, electricity, and telecommunications. A solution was proposed to the 'pollution' of Aplaya, which was seen as being *caused* by bars. The *barangay kapitan* announced that bar-girls who were not working – those who did not have customers – would have to help clean up the town as the bars were adding to Aplaya's pollution. Subsequently, of an evening, if a girl did not have a customer, she could be seen sweeping the lanes around the bar area. Bar-girls were thus turned into 'working girls', cleaning and disposing of *basura* (rubbish). After a few days of doing this manual labour, most bar-girls made sure that they enticed a customer early so they didn't have to do any more degrading "hard labour." The girls' new motivation to find customers was a boon for the owners of the bars.

Conclusion: Tristes Tropiques?

For the first time I was on the other side of the equator in the tropics. By what major sign, I wondered, was I about to recognize this...mutation?

— Claude Lévis-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, 1955.

Stepan (2001) writes, while tropical representations have an extensive colonial history in orientalism and tropicalism they are nevertheless subject to transformation. Change occurs when we 'tropicalise nature', thus nature is always culture (2001). Finally, I turn to Lévi-Strauss' famed *Tristes Tropiques*, or *Sad Tropics* (1955), a book full of loss and nostalgia for a tropical world seen as being destroyed by contact with the West. For Lévi-Strauss, cultural difference represents a structure, a pure, underlying order. According to this notion, when cultures mix, adulteration and disintegration occur. As such, Lévi-Strauss writes:

Humanity, however, if not resigned to becoming the sterile consumers of the values that it managed to create in the past, is capable only of giving birth to bastard works, to gross and puerile inventions, and must learn once again that all true creation implies a certain deafness to the appeal of other values, even going so far as to reject them if not denying them altogether (1955, p. 24).

For Levi-Strauss, deliberating on contact, he appropriately uses an image of kinship, though an illicit one – bastard. To continue this imagery, the West is old, weary and lecherous; native cultures are innocent, and their mixing brings about tainted and illegitimate offspring. In this imagining, the maintenance of boundaries is necessary to keep the pure uncorrupted. As such, travel and communication are the harbingers of too great a change.

It is important to note the historical context of Lévi-Strauss' commentary, though he notably neglected historically specific contexts. Lévi-Strauss' critique of such cultural contact is a condemnation of the impact of colonialism upon the tropics. For Lévi-Strauss in 1955, European colonialism as a cultural force corrupted and reduced both the colonising culture and the colonised culture – the relationship went both ways. I address these ideas of nostalgia, and the relationship between the West and the non-West, because it is precisely these ideals of innocence, of a purer order and nostalgia for these lost traditions in the West that many foreign male tourists continually recite. These are narrated in discourses about a paradise lost, an isolated tropical island, and the need to rediscover, or re-establish, an unspoiled natural world. These are also the tropes of the tropics that are critiqued through analyses of decoloniality and tropicality, and through the tropical natureculture of the Philippines. It is also useful to remember, however, that Lévi-Strauss's nostalgic reveries of the sad tropics was itself an eloquent critique of colonialism and the effects of travel and tourism on the environment.

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