



Provincial Drag in the Philippine Tropics: Towards a Decolonial Queer Tropical Aesthetics

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Abstract

Drag, in its neoliberal permutation, has become the most consumed queer art form everywhere in the world. The popularity of drag is often attributed to the burgeoning empire of the *Drag Race* franchise. While the cultural phenomenon that is *Drag Race* has constructed a platform for drag to thrive in the mainstream scene, it has also created a limited and hegemonic understanding of drag as simply glamour and superstardom. This essay problematizes what has become “homonormative drag” and outlines the need to turn to pluriversal drag aesthetic praxes. It is argued that deploying a decolonial queer tropical lens, following Rolando Vazquez’s decolonial aesthesis and Samantha Noël’s tropical aesthetics, opens our understanding of drag to situated local experiences in the tropics. This essay, unpacks the aesthetics of what I call “provincial drag,” found in the digital content produced by queer subjects in the Philippine provinces, to illustrate and re-locate the critical function of drag not simply for gender subversion, but also to laugh at neoliberal and colonial projects.

Keywords: provincial drag, decolonial aesthesis, tropical aesthetics, queer performance, decolonial queer, tropical queer, queer Philippines

Category is: Tropical Drag?

The promotional materials for the second season of *Drag Race Philippines*, a franchise of the reality drag competition *Rupaul's Drag Race*,¹ which originated in the U.S., featured the drag contestants in their tropics-inspired ensembles set on a tropical island (presumably resembling the Philippine archipelago). Most of the queens donned flower-embellished outfits, while others served camp, wit, and humor, such as Arizona Brandy in tropical vodka sunrise (a cocktail of vodka and orange juice) couture, Hana Beshie in street fruit vendor couture, and OV Cünt as a bedazzled *kalabaw* [water buffalo]. However, as I extended my glance at the poster, there were lingering thoughts about how monotonously polished the drag queens appeared. I asked myself: Has this become the default and normative aesthetic of drag in the Philippines? In Philippine drag's subsumption under Rupaul's empire, what is left of drag's subversive potency? Could we re-imagine a tropical drag aesthetic from below? These initial queries are the impetus for this essay.

To put this in a broader context, what I am trying to understand through the questions posed above is how drag in the Philippine tropics has been subsumed by a neoliberal ethos. Despite being a self-professed consumer of the franchise, I harbor concerns that understanding of drag has been delimited by the glamorous and hyper-feminine styles depicted within the mainstream drag scenes. Recent scholarship on *Drag Race* from the Global North notes how the reality competition produces a legible modality of doing drag and eliminates those that do not conform to it (Brennan, 2017; Collins, 2017). In some instances, the drag styles presented in the show also re-inscribe certain modes of femininity that fold the gender-fuckery of drag back into the binary (LeMaster, 2015). This manifests in how the show privileges hyper-feminine styles of drag via the judges, who reinforce the need to "proportionize" body dimensions, wear appropriate wigs, and bring "runway-worthy" outfits to the stage.

I acknowledge that the recent mainstreaming of the drag scene in the Philippines has offered economic mobility to some drag performers, particularly those bestowed with fame from their participation in the show. I also do not aim to discredit the possibilities engendered by representation, although visibility politics merits its own problematization. However, it is imperative to analyze how this homonormative

¹ The mainstreaming of drag is attributed to the global popularity of the reality drag competition *Rupaul's Drag Race*, which originated in the U.S. and has franchises across the globe, including in Thailand, the United Kingdom, France, Spain, Mexico, Belgium, and the Philippines, to name just some of the countries. The show follows a simple format. The contestants must participate in a weekly challenge where the bottom two queens have to lip sync for their lives, and whoever loses must sashay away from the competition. These weekly challenges continue until one emerges as the next Drag Superstar. *Drag Race* has also had multiple spinoffs, such as *Drag U*, *Celebrity Drag Race*, and a couple of Christmas specials. The show also holds its annual *Drag Con*, where fans get to meet their favorite queens and see some of them perform. As Kareem Khubchandani (2023) describes it, RuPaul Charles, the host, creator, and producer of the show, has created an empire, or better yet, an industrial complex of drag.

narrative of drag performers becoming self-made entrepreneurs foregrounds the neoliberal ethos of individualism and the free market (Duggan, 2002). Zeena Feldman and Jamie Hakim (2020) emphasize this paradox of what they call the “celebrification of drag,” which is “girdled by neoliberal imperatives and commercialised online platforms, wherein the transgressive drag collectivities captured in earlier media epochs have been displaced by the logic of individualism, competition and the market” (p. 387). Homonormativizing drag may also exacerbate unequal relations experienced by drag performers with lower economic and social capital. The celebrification of drag nonetheless transforms how drag is to be perceived and subsumes drag within the logic of capital accumulation, which, in turn, may obfuscate the subversiveness of drag. Judith Butler (2006) reminds us of the potential subversiveness of drag, for such practice reveals that gender is constructively performed (see also Stokoe, 2019). José Esteban Muñoz (1999) also reminds us, via his work with Vaginal Davis, that drag is a performative practice of minoritarian survival and a way of disidentifying from dominant oppressive ideologies.

Heeding Kareem Khubchandani’s (2023) warning that the folding of drag into the neoliberal ethos “decimates collectivity, uplift[s] individuality, and reinscribe[s] whiteness” (p. 99), this essay problematizes the burgeoning of homonormative drag in the Philippine tropics. In what follows, I survey previous scholarship that has shown that drag cultures in the tropics are pluriversal and typically contingent on locally situated gendered practices. In emphasizing pluriversal drag cultures, I attend to how postcolonial queer subjects navigate this “globalizing” trend of homonormative drag and situate othered local drag practices and gendered performances as projects that laugh at modern/colonial projects. In this essay, I take examples of “alternative” drag performances in the Philippines as my point of departure. In applying quotation marks to “alternative”, I remain open to interrogating what an alternative to the mainstream implies through focusing on the alternatives to what the mainstream constitutes as “alternative” drag. I attempt to map how so-called “alternative drag” performances in the Philippines perform a tropical aesthetic differently from the homonormative and legible drag presented in the poster I cited in my opening to this essay.

Taking up Pedro Paulo Gomes Pereira’s decolonial queer lens may open our understanding of drag to situated local experiences in the tropics. Pereira (2019) asserts that decolonial queer allows for local experiences from multiple sites of struggle to elaborate their articulations of agency. Deploying a decolonial queer sensibility allows us to encounter othered and invisibilized modalities of doing drag that speak back, revise, and critique the hegemonic homonormative way of doing drag. It should be noted that this case of Philippine drag is not to be taken as an exemplar of decolonial queer tropical aesthetics; rather, it may illuminate one of the multiple aesthetics that often invisibilized subjects perform to negotiate their subject positions within a globalized context of homonormative drag that renders their practices

illegitimate. Following my brief survey of drag in the tropics, I propose a conceptual frame of thinking through a decolonial queer tropical aesthetic lens. I use Samantha Noël's (2021) notion of tropical aesthetics and Rolando Vázquez's (2020) decolonial aesthesis to envisage a decolonial queer tropical aesthesis. Then, I proceed with presenting "alternative" drag performances, which I characterize as provincial drag, to illustrate the limits and possibilities of "alternative" drag in the Philippines. The aim here is not to suggest a theory of decolonial queer tropical aesthesis, nor do I wish to foreclose what it should look like. Rather, this essay hopes to potentialize how a decolonial queer tropical aesthesis can re-assert the political potency of drag in the tropics as a community-based, subversive, and radical artistic practice.

Locating "Drag" in the Tropics

It is imperative to contextualize drag, particularly in the tropics, where drag is not always the vernacular describing transgressive gendered practices. The tropics, after all, is not a homogenous region but is comprised of an assemblage of nation-states, sovereign or not, that are bound by the commonality of their tropicality—not merely in their literal climate but more so in their shared ongoing climate of coloniality (Lundberg et al., 2023).

In the Puerto Rican context, Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes (2021) destabilizes "westernized" drag through the *transloca*—a neologism for "queer" and trans embodiments embedded in multiple practices (of mostly working-class folk) that include but are not limited to arts practices, expressions of gay/cuir/queer/trans/non-binary identities, and cabaret performances.² Describing its local specificity, La Fountain-Stokes enumerates that *transloca* performances constitute an array of "performative gender practices" by cross-dressing "effeminate cisgendered gay or queer/cuir men", transgender individuals, and cisgendered women "in theatrical hyperfeminine attire...or who dress in a masculine way" (2021, p. 4). La Fountain-Stokes illuminates that transgressive gendered practices in Puerto Rico, or what they call *transloca* performances, expand rhizomatically across the tropics and its diaspora, complicating boundaries between the practice of drag and gay/cuir/queer/trans/non-binary embodiments. La Fountain-Stokes (2021) adds that *translocas*' deployment of drag necessitates the practice as a tactic of survival and a way of advancing the calls of disenfranchised cuir/queer/trans people of color, among many other political motives.

² *Transloca* is a portmanteau of the prefix "trans-" (which implies elements of convergence but also transformation) and "loca" (which implies being hysterical or crazy but also as a term of endearment among the community of *maricón* or faggots).

Extending La-Fountain Stokes' work, M. Myrta Leslie Santana (2022) urges us to consider what *transformistas* do, rather than what it means. Santana (2022) narrates the story of Blaccucini, a Black *transformista* in Cuba whose participation in the practice of *transformismo* is implicated in economic and racial formations—*transformistas* can earn more than doctors in postsocialist Cuba, and she stands as a representation for Black *transformistas* in Santa Clara, Cuba. In explaining the *transformismo*'s role in her life, Blaccucini mentions that *transformismo* made her realise her trans-ness, that she is a *travesti* [loosely translated as transsexual] (Santana, 2022). Blaccucini's narrative informs Santana of the necessity to consider overlaps between sexual subjectivities and racial and economic distinctions in understanding gendered practices in Cuba, and across the Caribbean tropics. As Maria Ochoa (2014) further explains, while *transformistas* fit the general conception of trans-ness, not all transgender and transsexual people would identify as being *transformista*. Hence, *transloca* and *transformista* performances as sites of drag practice in the tropics can be seen as a negotiation not only of gender/sexuality but also a class/race/nation nexus.

Similar nuances in the appearance of drag can be observed in the South Asian tropics. Sandeep Bakshi (2004) traces the differences between "western" drag and the Indian *hijra*—considered as a third gender, many of whom describe themselves as impotent (sometimes castrated) and are culturally regarded as religious figures (descendants of Shiva) who perform at Hindi wedding and birth ceremonies to guarantee fertility (see also Cohen, 1995; Nanda, 1999). Bakshi (2004) compares "western" drag to *hijra* performances based on their sanctions. Drag queens usually perform to subvert gender dichotomies, while *hijras* are culturally and religiously obliged to perform ritual duties. Despite these duties, *hijras* nonetheless struggle with sexual minoritization, are met with verbal assaults, and live in impoverished conditions. However, their performances, like those of drag queens who engage in gender-fuckery, engage in unsettling gender dynamics in the Indian social sphere. Particularly, the raising of their *saris* during performances operates as a reveal (or not reveal) of genitalia, making visible "the 'incongruity' of sexual and gendered identity" (Bakshi, 2004, p. 219). *Hijras* illustrate how the local specificity of religious difference can also transform understandings of drag in the tropics according to geopolitical contexts and locations.

Moving across geopolitical contexts, we may notice how gendered performances in the tropics blur and complicate the distinctions between gender, sexuality, race, economic relations, and religious and artistic expression. These locally situated practices are not specifically inscribed as "drag"; however, they elucidate how gendered practices in the tropics may transform how we understand drag. They are palimpsestic glimpses of locally situated practices that destabilize the rigidities of a "westernized" notion of performing gender and sexuality, and more so, drag. In Khubchandani's (2023) terms, drag is "a genre of performance practiced in

entertainment, nightlife, and festival contexts by and or/for gender and sexual dissidents—primarily the people who fall under the umbrella categories of queer and transgender, but also many others at the margins of normative gender and sexual configurations” (p. 26). Expanding Khubchandani’s (2023) definition of drag, transgressive gendered practices in the tropics consider how drag as a performance genre of/for gender and sexual dissidents are also informed by racial/class formations, trans-subjectivity, and/or religious sanctions. This implies that drag in the tropics is not defined merely by the practice of cross-dressing or forms of hyper-presentations of gendered expression; rather, it sits in the complicated terrain of overlapping gender/sexual/race/class/religious subjectivities.

Drag in the Philippine Tropics

Similar to the discourse presented above, limiting an understanding of drag in the Philippine tropics as cross-dressing may risk conflating gendered embodiments as a performative practice of drag. As J. Neil Garcia (2000) elucidates, conflating the Tagalog *bakla* as drag perpetuates an orientalist gaze. Previously, the *bakla* of the Tagalog-speaking regions strictly described a working-class effeminate cross-dressing assigned male at birth with the heart of a woman [*pusong babae*]. Garcia (2000) draws from this construction to argue that the *bakla*’s practice of cross-dressing is a corporealization of a “kind of psychospiritual inversion” (p. 279), a way of making visible the *loob* [inside, the *pusong babae*] to the *labas* [outside]. However, in recent decades, the *bakla*’s social construction has evolved to become a conflation of effeminacy, homosexuality, transgenderism, and trans-femininity. This explosion of meaning-making is usually attributed to the globalizing discourses on queerness, trans-ness, and homosexuality (see Garcia, 2008; Manalansan, 2006; Tan, 2001). In understanding drag in the Philippine tropics, one must think through the overlaps of gender/sexuality/class/religion. I suggest that a survey of pageant stages, street festivals, parades, and public displays of transgressive gendered embodiments, nightclubs, and mainstream media, may illuminate how drag in the Philippines exists at the intersections of the embodied and performed.

Within the popular imaginary, the portrayals of *bakla* in cinema illustrate the entrance of “drag” into public consciousness (albeit not labeled as “drag”). I clarify, however, that it is not the *bakla* characters’ crossdressing that implies the practice of drag; rather, it is the cross-dressing performed by cisgendered heterosexual men portraying *bakla* characters that I consider “drag.” Film and media scholar Mikee Inton (2018) notes that the *bakla* characters portrayed by cis-heterosexual actors and comedians Dolphy (Rodolfo Vera Quizon) and Roderick Paulate perform stereotypical tropes of the *bakla* as an effeminate cross-dressing man with an interiorized femininity whose social script often preordains her as a beauty salon worker or *parlorista*. In *Facifica*

Falayfay (Carlos, 1969), Dolphy's *bakla* character Facifica cites herself as "*isinilang na isang bulaklak*" ["born as a flower"] and a "*diwata*" ["fairy"], echoing the pervasive idiom of the *bakla* as someone with *pusong babae* [the heart of a woman]. In *Jack & Jill* (Tores, 1954), Dolphy portrays Goryo/Glory, an effeminate cross-dressing *bakla* who performs domestic work. In the same film, Dolphy acts alongside Lolita Rodriguez, who portrays the role of butch tomboy Luisa, whose familial role is to provide for their needs. Meanwhile, Roderick Paulate's portrayals of the *bakla* continue these tropes found in Dolphy's *bakla* cinema. For instance, in *Bala at Lipstick [Bullet and Lipstick]* (Delos Reyes, 1994), Roderick plays the roles of twins separated at birth, where one is an effeminate *bakla* and the other is a cisgendered macho man.

In the above-mentioned films, I understand drag as a performance of gender, where the gender being performed does not correlate to one's gender identification. As earlier mentioned, both actors identify as cisgendered heterosexual men, therefore signifying that their performances as *bakla* in cinema indicate a practice of drag. They break cis-heteronormative gender dichotomies to perform *kabaklaan*, or the *bakla*'s performativities and social scripts. Here, rather than the westernized notion of drag as female impersonation, cisgendered actors Dolphy and Roderick instead perform "*bakla* impersonation," where they embody conceptions of the *bakla*, albeit stereotypical, to manifest a gendered performance of messing with cis-heteronormativity.³ Additionally, Lolita Rodriguez's dragging as a butch tomboy also signifies a performance of what Jack Halberstam (1998) might call female masculinity, where she expands the repertoire of performing masculinities within the Philippine context. In Lolita's performance, drag then appears via her embodiment of the "butch."⁴

Surveying other films that starred both Dolphy and Roderick, we may also find the *bakla*'s potential performance of drag as hyper-presentations of gender and female impersonation, particularly in the *bakla* characters' gendered performances in nightclubs and even in the everyday. Here, I illustrate that drag in the Philippine tropics that is performed by gender non-conforming bodies can also be found across many stages in the archipelago. In *Markova: Comfort Gay* (Portes, 2000), a film based on the real-life story of Walterina Markova—a *bakla* forced into sexual slavery during World War II—the *bakla* appears as a nightclub singer and entertainer (Inton, 2018). In the film *Ded na si Lolo [Grandpa is Dead]* from director Soxie Topacio (2009), June

³ In contemporary times, other examples of such drag performed by cisgendered heterosexual bodies can be found in the "*Kalyeserye*" segment of the popular noontime show *Eat Bulaga*. In the said segment, cisgendered hosts Wally Bayola, Jose Manalo, and Paolo Ballesteros cross-dress as three *lolas* [grandmothers]. Such practices of dragging can also be contentious, particularly when done elaborately to mock the lived experiences of the *bakla* (see Cao, 2017).

⁴ Throughout the essay, I focus on male-to-female and hyperfeminine practices of drag. This does not, however, aim to invisibilize the existence of drag kings and butch performers who also transgress gender / sexuality / trans / class / race/ nation/ religious subjectivities.

(portrayed by Roderick) enters their grandfather's wake dressed in a red ball gown sporting a bob-cut wig with red streaks. Inton (2017) describes Junee's entrance as a drag performance. This becomes evident when Junee's sister stops her climactic fainting and dramatic wailing. Junee reveals that it was indeed part of a show when she utters, "*Pambihira naman eh. Hihimatayin na eh. Andoon na eh.*" ["What the hell. I was about to faint. I was almost there"]. In this scene, Junee, who also works as a club entertainer, demonstrates drag in the everyday through the performance of exaggeration and over-the-top theatrics. These cinematic representations of the *bakla* inform us not only of the presence of *bakla* nightclub entertainers from the 1940s and beyond, but also unravel the "dragging" practices of the *bakla* both on the stages of nightclubs and in the everyday. The emphasis of this understanding of drag is on the excessive theatrical performances produced by the *bakla* and her other trans and gender non-conforming sisters such as the *bayot* and the *agi*, to name a few.

Extending this survey of drag in the Philippine tropics beyond cinema, we may find other sites of dragging where the *bakla*'s theatricality is staged, such as pageantries. Ferdinand Lopez (2023) notes the practice of *mujeran*, which they translate as "drag balls and pageants" (p. 81), found in the 1970s. This implies that practices of drag thrive in *barangayan* scenes [pageant scenes in small towns], for instance, in the "*Gaya Gaya Puto Maya* Lip Synch Competition" rampant around the late 1980s to the early 2000s, where contestants perform female celebrity impersonations and other creative interpretations of popular music. The said *barangayan* competition originated from a segment (in the 1980s) of the noontime show *Eat Bulaga*, which had spin-offs over the years such as "*Gayang-Gaya Kaya?*" and "*Gayang-Gaya! Siyang-Siya!*" One instance of such a drag performance on the *barangayan* "*Gaya Gaya Puto Maya*" pageant stage is the infamous "I Will Always Love You" interpretation, where the contestant appears in a black mourning ensemble and creepy white face make-up.⁵ Throughout the performance, the contestant reveals themselves as a ghost and incorporates screaming and ghostly sound effects into the music and smoke-effect-like theatrics using powder. The use of theatrics reveals the practice of drag in the *barangayan* pageant scenes.

Class, too, is crucial to understanding drag in the Philippine tropics. In Nick Deocampo's 1983 film *Oliver*, we meet Reynaldo Villarama (known in the clubs as Oliver), a lower-class, cis-gendered presenting homosexual male who performs in the nightclubs of Ermita, Manila, as a female impersonator. While drag here is understood as female impersonation, it is imperative to consider the economic implications of why some Filipinos engage in drag. In particular, within the context of *Oliver*, the Marcos regime's promotion of body capital—the capitalization of bodies in service-oriented

⁵ The cited famous performance of Whitney Houston's "I Will Always Love You" has been re-made in various *barangayan* competitions over and over again, from the *Gaya Gaya Puto Maya* Lip Synch competitions to the *Miss Gay Pangkalawakan* [Universal] talent segments.

industries, which include nightclub entertainments—exacerbated the fantasy of social mobility through capitalized bodies (Tolentino, 2009). This implies that when considering drag in the Philippine tropics, one must be attentive to economic rationales. It is imperative to clarify, however, that the classed experience of drag is not a general experience across nightclub entertainers. The group of female impersonators called the Paper Dolls, who were also popular in the 1970s, were mostly part of the elite circuits in Metro Manila, as they primarily performed in the financial district of Makati and wore costumes designed by esteemed designers of the 1970s (Grana, 2022). Some of their members are fashion designers themselves who work for Shoe Mart (now SM) and Rustan's, studied in reputable elite schools like Ateneo de Manila University, and performed in the Cultural Center of the Philippines—all indicative of their elite status.

Within the Catholic-dominated Philippines, understandings of drag overlap with gendered performances of faith. Patrick Alcedo (2007) notes that the *agi's* practice of cross-dressing is not simply a gendered expression or embodiment of interiorized femininity but a gendered practice that signifies a performance of faith and religiosity. In his work on the Ati-Atihan festival in Kalibo, Aklan, a festival in the Visayas region that honors the Santo Niño, a Catholic religious figure of Jesus Christ as a child, Alcedo (2007) introduces us to *Tay* August (*Tay* implies the honorific for an elderly man). Wearing “baby pink feathers and studded with purple rhinestones” and alongside his other *agi* devotee friends, *Tay* August participates in the street dance parade during the Ati-Atihan festivals, performing as if they are part of the Folies Bergère chorus girls (Alcedo, 2007, p. 111). Alcedo (2007) elucidates that drag can also be understood as a complicated imbrication of sexual subjectivity, religiosity, and theatrical performance. One may extend Alcedo's interventions with the participation of *bakla* and trans individuals in the Santacruzán—a street procession and Catholic tradition that celebrates Queen Helena's [*Reyna Elena*] discovery of Christ's cross—where they dress as the key figures in this biblical myth. As Martin Manalansan (2006) argues, theological relevance is entrenched in Filipino spectacles.

Throughout this brief survey of gendered performance practices that informs how we might understand drag in the Philippine tropics, it is revealed that Philippine drag is more pluriversal than at first imagined. Drag in the Philippine tropics operates differently within a gender/sexuality/class/religion nexus, often blurring boundaries between gendered embodiments and sexual subjectivity, theatrical gendered performance, and the performance of religiosity. It may manifest through over-the-top dramatics in the everyday and on various stages such as *barangayan* pageants and cultural street parades. While gender non-conforming individuals (such as the *bakla*, *agi*, *trans*) dominate the drag scenes across various stages, cis-gendered heterosexual men and women also participate in Philippine drag cultures.

Inevitably, the contemporary drag scene in Metro Manila reflects homonormative depictions of drag as hyper-presentations of gender. It is undeniable that the popularity of *RuPaul's Drag Race* influenced the burgeoning drag scene in the Philippines, particularly after the country had its own franchise of the reality competition series and produced a local drag reality competition, *Drag Den*, that pays homage to *barangayan* pageant scenes. While female celebrity impersonations, rooted in the *Gaya Gaya Puto Maya* lip synch competitions, remain via Lady Gagita (most notably as Lady Gaga and Katy Perry) and Taylor Sheesh (as Taylor Swift), more drag queens are attempting to develop their own brand and character of drag, such as Marina Summers (as the tropical diva from the Philippine seas) and Arizona Brandy (the vape-obsessed alcohol-drinking camp performer), to name but a few. These are manifestations of what Kareem Khubchandani (2023, pp. 85, 98) might call the “neoliberalism” of drag that sutures drag with the “economic ethic of choice and free will,” obfuscating the culturally specific notions of dragging. Nonetheless, this contextualization of drag in the Philippine tropics hopes to have illuminated how one must be attuned to the different assertions of drag across the Philippine archipelago and consider the locally situated context in which one’s drag is practiced.

Thinking through Decolonial Queer Tropical Aesthetics

How might we envisage a decolonial queer tropical aesthetics? Summarizing the above survey of pluriversal drag practices across the tropics, it can be argued that a decolonial queer tropical aesthetics looks at how drag is performed differently across multiple contexts in the tropics. However, while this may perhaps refer to what I mean by a decolonial queer tropical aesthetics, I propose that it must be understood beyond a simplistic assertion of heterogeneity. Allow me to first elucidate via Rolando Vázquez (2020) and Samantha Noël (2021) respectively, how I perceive decolonial aesthetics practices and tropical aesthetic practices before we conceive of decolonial queer tropical aesthetics.

Rolando Vázquez (2020) defines decolonial aesthetics as the artistic practices that enunciate the colonial difference. Seen this way, they serve as the antithesis of a Western aesthetic that determines what is legible, legitimate, and recognizable. Decolonial aesthetics makes visible how the geopolitics of knowledge shapes aesthetic judgments over artistic objects. The obvious refusal to use the T in “aesthetics” in this decolonial artistic option emphasizes the move to return to processes of sensing and perceiving. As Mignolo and Vázquez (2013) explain, “If aestheTics is indeed modern/colonial aestheTics and a normativity that colonized the senses, decolonial aestheSis has become the critique and artistic practices that aim to decolonize the senses, that is, to liberate them from the regulations of modern, postmodern, and altermodern aestheTics.”

Meanwhile, Samantha Noël (2021) defines tropical aesthetics as visual and performative representations that respond to and critically re-imagine the tropics through the lens of minoritarian subjectivity. The tropics, within the Caribbean context, have been portrayed in colonial documents as picturesque getaway islands, romanticizing the white sand and palm trees to invisibilize colonial histories and Black subjectivities (Thomson, 2006). As a tactic against the touristic gaze, tropical aesthetics illuminate how artists and performers mobilize the tropical landscape to speak from the point of difference, and to liberate the tropical islands from capitalist exploitation and neocolonial regimes (Noël, 2021). Tropical aesthetics thus serve as visuals and performatives that articulate alternative forms of imagining tropical landscapes vis-à-vis the world.

Conjoining decolonial aesthesis and tropical aesthetics into the context of drag elucidates that a decolonial queer tropical aesthesis of drag focuses on how representations of the tropics might be mobilized to reveal colonial wounds—esthetic invisibilization and erasure, capitalist exploitation, and class-related, racialized, and gendered oppression. Returning to the tropics-inspired *Drag Race Philippines* poster I cited in the introduction, we thus find how drag has been subsumed by the neoliberal ethos, regulated by whiteness, and folded into the binarism via the privileging of a hyperfeminine style of drag over gender-fuckery and locally situated assertions of drag. A decolonial queer tropical aesthesis refuses this homonormativization of drag. Rather than yield to the market and perform normative standards in doing drag, a decolonial queer tropical aesthesis performs otherwise. Khubchandani (2023) notes that a decolonial approach to drag “focuses on the multiple ways gender is co-constituted by race, migration, class and disability and the potential for audience and performers to explore these issues through the ribald and playful performance genre” (p. 24). Similarly, a decolonial queer tropical lens for understanding non-normative and alternative drag aesthesis focuses on how drag becomes an experimental ground to play with, mess with, disrupt, and fissure the coloniality of drag and gender.

Before reading drag performances via this hermeneutic, it is imperative to reiterate Pereira’s (2019) assertion that for queer theory’s potency to be realized, it must be open to being changed by other-theories—the locally situated experiences that inform the lens of “queer” on how other/ed transgressive gendered practices mess with the coloniality of gender. Here, queer becomes a verb that may mean to mess with rather than a noun/adjective or identifier of bodies (see also Manalansan, 2013). If this lens is indeed locally situated, one must also be aware of the social, cultural, and historical contexts within which a drag performance emerges and is implicated. Thinking through a decolonial queer tropical aesthesis lens is then enacting a search for modalities of doing. Rather than addressing what it might look like, one must attend to what it does, and how it achieves its objective and intention. It is attuned to the undoing of

homonormative drag from the lens of the tropics. Moreover, as an epistemic tool, a decolonial queer tropical aesthesis, to borrow from Sandeep Bakshi (2023), “fashions itself as practice and politics.” What I mean by this is that this lens lends itself towards transformative politics that rethinks, reconfigures, and reorders unequal relations brought about by the coloniality of neoliberalized drag. Nonetheless, in their pluriversal forms, a decolonial queer tropical aesthesis operates towards the dismantling of a system that delegitimizes othered drag forms.

Provincial Drag as Decolonial Queer Tropical Aesthesis

In August 2020, the video entry of Inday Laura Beatrice Buenavista to the TocoTocoTo Challenge of local Filipino shoe brand, Bragais Shoes, went viral on social media. Inday Laura, a Hiligaynon *agi* from Silay City, Negros Occidental, was eventually declared the winner of the said challenge after being noticed by the designer of Bragais Shoes himself, Jojo Bragais. Inday Laura’s modality of drag is akin to what is described by Jaya Jacobo (2021) as the gendered performance of *palabás*. While it literally translates from Filipino Tagalog as outward thrust, *palabás* may also mean a put-on show (which can mean theater or can have connotations of tactical deception). For Jacobo (2021), *palabás* “demonstrates the gesture where thought intends to proceed into the field and labor through its difficulties.” What Jacobo (2021) elucidates here is a particular choreography from *loób* [inside] to *palabás*, wherein gendered embodiment is not simply a performance of what is inside but an outward projection of multiple departures that gestures toward emancipation. What I mean by this is that Inday Laura’s drag does not simply present her transfeminine self in corporeal forms through cross-dressing and various self-presentations in the video; rather, she produces itinerant routes and projections that engender a particular decolonial aesthesis.

To further elucidate the gesture of *palabás*, it is useful to consider the online performances of *kabaklaan* via the *baklang kanal*—literally, gutter faggot, but implies the *bakla* from the slums who embodies lower-class sensibilities and would usually be subjected to scrutiny for their political incorrectness (Singh, 2020; Vilog, 2020). Noting the virality of *baklang kanal* figures on social media, the work of Samuel Cabbuag and Christian Jil Benitez (2021) reveals that the *baklang kanal* on social media distinguishes itself from the “real-world” *baklang kanal* [those who are from the slums] through fashioning themselves after the wokeness rampant in the Philippine Twitter-sphere (now X-sphere).⁶ This is instantiated by the humorous TikTok content

⁶ The term *baklang kanal* went viral on Twitter after a supporter of then-Philippine President Duterte tagged a group of “woke” and socially progressive *bakla* social media figures as “*baklang kanal*.” Frank Baraan IV (@MrFrankBaraan) reclaimed the term to mean “empowered, brave, social justice warriors” (Baraan, 2020), to which many other woke citizens of the Philippine Twittersphere followed suit. Trans-Filipina director Rod Singh (@iamrodafrog), however, contended that the “*baklang kanal* is not a brand and personality,” for there are “real

produced by Pipay Kipay, who performs a commentary on the sexual violence experienced by Filipino women, and Sassa Gurl, who sheds light on the issues of corruption, among many others (Cabbuag & Benitez, 2021). As Cabbuag and Benitez suggest, the emergence of *baklang kanal* on social media manifests how discourses of *kabaklaan* have erupted. This, I suggest, manifests the instance of *palabás*. In the online performances of the *baklang kanal* on social media, she departs from particular modalities of being *baklang kanal* to incite discourse among her forged publics. She reconfigures herself in the context of wokeness in the Philippine Twitter-sphere/X-sphere and thrusts this re-configured performance of being *baklang kanal* to articulate a route to freedom. She is not fixated on certain locations, such as that of the *kanal*; she, too, can be a celebrity and a socially progressive voice on social media.

Within the context of Inday Laura's video, I am thus attuned to the underpinning politics embedded in Inday Laura's presentation of what I will call the decolonial queer tropical aesthetic of provincial drag. I argue that Inday Laura's provincial drag speaks to Jacobo's notion of the gendered performance of *palabás*, as she extends *palabás* into the realm of the digital and beyond transfeminine projections. Furthermore, Inday Laura's performance of *palabás* illustrates outward projections of the representations of the provincial that unsettles classist perceptions of homonormative drag.

In the viral video, Inday Laura emerges from behind a rice paddy, covered head to toe in mud, creating a dramatic visual of an *agi* arising from the rice farms (see Figure 1). As she enters the frame, the focus shifts to her putting on a pair of gold-colored Bragais stilettos. With confidence and statuesque posture, Inday Laura struts through the rice paddies to showcase her stilettos. She struts as if competing in a swimsuit competition on a pageant stage. Accompanying this scene is the video's caption: "*Hindi lahat ng mga taga BUNDOK* (mountain emoji) *ay NAKA PAA* (feet emoji, in love emoji)" ["Not all mountain dwellers are barefoot"].

Transitioning to the next scene, Inday Laura appears in a black blouse and printed skirt, carrying a *banga* [clay pot], reminiscent of the imagery of provincial women most notably depicted in the paintings of Filipino visual artist Fernando Amorsolo. Known for his paintings of idyllic rural life in the Philippines, Amorsolo often depicts provincial women wearing traditional clothing and carrying a *banga*, which is brought to the river to collect water which is then carried home for cooking. Embodying this cultural reference, Inday Laura continues to stride with confidence as she carries her *banga*. The video then seamlessly transitions to Inday Laura in a one-piece bikini with a red cloth wrapped around her waist pulling a wooden sled typically placed on carabaos' [*kalabáw*, water buffalo] backs as they labor in the rice farms. She effortlessly pulls the

baklang kanal outside our echo chambers" (Singh, 2020). To date, *baklang kanal* personalities such as Sassa Gurl, Pipay Kipay, and Inah Evans, to name a few, continue to pave their way onto Philippine queer mainstream media.

usually heavy wooden sled out of the farm into the concrete streets and back to the farm, as if embodying the strength and resilience of the carabaos themselves. The following scene captures Inday Laura emerging from the water and gracefully strutting across the river. A montage of all previous scenes follows, building anticipation before the culminating shot of Bragais Shoes' box, leaving an impression of the product on the audience. Alluding to the video's caption, Inday Laura has proven: "PINAKAMATIBAY Ang BRAGAIS, Kahit sa TUBIG AT LUPA Hindi Ito MASISIRA" ["Bragais is the strongest. It will not perish in water or on land"].

Figure 1. Inday Laura Beatrice Buenavista in the rice paddies



Inday Laura Beatrice Buenavista emerges from the *putik* (mud) and struts along the rice paddies in a rice farm in Silay, Negros Occidental (Buenavista, 2020).

To further understand the complexities presented in Inday Laura's video, it is imperative to consider metropolitanist perspectives towards the provincial. In "Notes on *Bakya*," Jose F. Lacaba (2014) explains that in the 1960s, the *bakya* [the wooden shoes usually worn by the rural poor in the *barrios* or small towns in the provinces], stood in as a misnomer for the elite's imaginary of the "cheap, gauche, naïve, provincial, and terribly popular." The *bakya* is the antithesis of what is rendered "classy" for the elites, often manifesting in choices of clothing that are outdated, eateries on the sidewalks, and an obsession with soap operas and mainstream

popular culture (Lacaba, 2014). Extending Lacaba's observations of *bakya* habitus to temporality, Bliss Cua Lim (2004, p. 69) notes, "bakya conflates rural peasant with urban proletariat in its imagination of "the masses" as people who are not just culturally or financially beneath, but also temporally behind". Hence, the *bakya* not only signifies tackiness in taste but also temporal notions of backwardness and outdatedness. Simply put, the elites (and often middle-class folk) perceive the *bakya* as those left behind by the projects of modernity.

In more contemporary times, other classed figures such as the *probinsyano/a* [from the province], *jejemon* [folk who wear oversized black shirts with rainbow-colored caps and send text messages in their own alphabet], *jologs* [folk who wear tacky clothing with unmatching accessories and enjoy masscult popular culture], and more recently, the *baklang kanal*, signify a class politics in the Philippines whereby the urban poor and the provincial folk are relegated as backward (see Ancheta, 2015; Reyes, 2017; Tablazon, 2015; Cabbuag & Benitez, 2021). Coloniality is central to this class formation, as it has brought forth mythical metropolitanist viewpoints. As Neferti X. M. Tadiar (2003) argues, U.S. imperialism in the Philippines transformed social hierarchies between gender, race, and class. In her words, "qualities of racial superiority could be found to be embodied in this emergent national elite, whose domination was sustained by economic as well as identificatory ties to foreign capital" (Tadiar, 2003, p. 150). However, as the discourse of the *baklang kanal* illustrates, the deliberate performances and reconfigurations performed by the *baklang kanal* on social media may critique the power structures they are implicated in (Cabbuag & Benitez, 2021). This informs me that Inday Laura's provincial drag bears the potential to disrupt metropolitanist assumptions through its intentional rehearsals of being provincial.

At first glance, Inday Laura parades various imaginaries of the provincial—the rice farms and rice paddies serving as her runway, the *banga* [clay pot] as her headdress, and the wooden cart as her mode of transport (except she's the one maneuvering it, see Figure 2). These imaginaries can be seen as feeding into the metropolitan gaze of the provincial. In the caption, she even alludes to these metropolitanist illusions via her active assertion of herself as "*taga-bundok*" ["mountain dweller"], via the scenic landscape, her becoming-carabao, and her strutting through the rivers. In these depictions, sensibilities of backwardness can be discerned in the ways Inday Laura depicts her everyday life as un-modern. She does so, for instance, through reinforcing Amorsolo paintings which portray provincial women carrying water from the river in a clay pot placed on their head.

Figure 2. Variations of Inday Laura's Provincial Imaginaries



Inday Laura presents variations of imaginaries of provincial life: as a *kalabaw* (buffalo) pulling a wooden carriage and as a provincial woman carrying a *banga* [clay pot] filled with water from the river (Buenavista, 2020).

While she reinforces metropolitanist assumptions of the provincial, Inday Laura nonetheless counters this provincial imaginary via her use of the Bragais shoes. As she states in the caption, not all mountain dwellers are barefoot. On the one hand, the shoes can be seen as an emblem of modernity signifying that the provincial queen is catching up to the glamourized homonormative drag of the Metro. However, on the other hand, the conscious self-presentations of the provincial imaginaries while wearing Bragais shoes engender Inday Laura's deployment of *palabás*. Here, the *palabás* she performs is not simply confined in terms of gendered embodiment; rather, Inday Laura articulates her provincial-ness outward via her provincial drag. Rather than an act of catching up to the modern, Inday Laura's provincial drag is an assertion of her departure from the metropolitanist gaze of the provincial—"not all mountain dwellers are barefoot." She emerges first from the rice paddies, but as she struts with confidence, she demonstrates how she can move in various locations—into the concrete streets and onto the riverbanks. In meshing the emblem of the modern and

the imaginaries of the provincial, Inday Laura fissures the subjective space within which the symbolic order of a metropolitanist gaze is enabled.

To further instantiate what provincial drag engenders, we may also consider the provincial drag of young Boholano *bayot*⁷ individuals who use local materials such as leaves and flowers to construct garments and perform in pageantry-type digital content (see Figure 3). In a video posted by Joemar Deloso (July 5, 2023) featuring the Seedlings Sisters, a group of five young *bayot* from Tagbilaran City, province of Bohol, appear in garments made from leaves and flowers performing a staged pageant opening production number complete with choreography. Then, they introduce their names (based on Filipino beauty queens) before strutting along a concrete road. Their backdrop is quintessentially tropical featuring palm trees, young banana plants, and overgrown grass, and their stage is a narrow concrete lane, only wide enough for a motorcycle. The caption dubs the performance “Miss Kalibonan 2023”.

Figure 3. Provincial Drag of the Seedlings Sisters



Five young candidates competing for the makeshift “Miss Kalibonan 2023” showcase their provincial drag attires in a dance production number (Deloso, 2023).

In the video, they emulate Inday Laura’s assertion that not all mountain dwellers are barefoot as they all wear heels. Here, the young *bayot* project their provincial-ness through performing in their chosen environment and incorporating natural materials. The video’s caption further reinforces their provincial-ness as the pageant is named

⁷ The *bayot* is a local gender identity in the Visayas region of the Philippines that is often conflated with homosexuality and crossdressing (See Torres, 2022).

“Miss Kalibonan 2023”. *Kalibonan*, is a Cebuano word that loosely translates to wilderness, affirming the positionality of the young *bayot* children as glamorous bodies of/in the wild. The active signification of their bodies as of/in the wild appears, at first, as a reinforcement of the metropolitanist gaze that the provincial correlates to an imaginary of wilderness and wildness. However, I argue that it also demands us to think otherwise.

Compared to Inday Laura’s multi-sited performance, the Seedlings Sisters remain in place on the narrow concrete lane. This is where I find the performance’s intervention. I perceive this gesture as a manifestation of their agency to intervene in spaces considered emblems of modernity, as if adding to Inday Laura’s statement, they may be saying, ‘Not all mountain dwellers walk in rice paddies.’ Furthermore, placing their bodies adorned in flora drag on the concrete road signifies a mode of asserting oneself to the emblem of the modern. In wearing the natural materials that previously relied on the land where the concrete now stands, they remind the concrete of what it once was allowing the road to open up to an elsewhere where their provincial drag is legitimized.

Reinforcing the work of Vázquez, provincial drag calls upon us to liberate our minds from coloniality’s hold on our metropolitanist aesthetic judgments. Provincial drag hereby functions as a mode of opening up our senses to the modalities of performances by provincial queens. I posit that the drag performances I have considered here may be easily dismissed as not drag, but such is the point of asserting these performances as potential sites of decolonial drag.

In the works of Kalissa Alexeyeff (2000; 2008) and Jasbir Puar (2001), the authors elucidate that hegemonic ‘westernized’ perspectives on drag risk dismissing alternative modalities of doing drag. Alexeyeff (2000) notes that drag in the Cook Islands exists in the spontaneous mimicry of femininities, choreographed shows that resemble “Western” drag, and beauty competitions. In her ethnographic work on the *laelae* drag shows, Alexeyeff (2008) observes that the creolization of local dances with Western drag is often met with comments of distaste from a mixed demographic audience, while the performances that resemble “western” drag receive maximum applause. Meanwhile, Puar (2001) narrates an encounter she had at a “Diva” drag contest in Trinidad, whereby the audience remarked that an Indo-Trinidadian act is easily classified as “Indian dance,” but “it’s not drag” (p. 1055). While a “Westernized” gaze separates the Indo-Trinidadian performance as “not drag”, Puar insists on the performance as a “counternarrative to the homogenizing impulses of metropole-produced queer theory” (p. 1062).

Similarly, provincial drag highlights the ways in which sexual minorities insist on the ontology of their drag performance. The meshing of metropolitan and provincial

emblems can be seen as a dialogic performance that messes with homonormative drag through a negotiation of local contexts and aesthesis. Ruepert Cao (2017) suggests pedestrian drag, or the counter positioning of a glamorous form of drag via the wearing of everyday clothes and looks, has the potential to reconfigure how drag is understood in the context of ‘third-world’ postcolonial realities.⁸ This is particularly salient in the Philippine context, where the culture of the masses is being denounced by the elites (Lim, 2004). Even within LGBTQIA+ culture, the elites look down on *bakla* and mass sensibilities and cast them as anachronistic figures of alterity (Benedicto, 2009). A decolonial queer tropical aesthesis of provincial drag enhances Cao’s argument. In meshing glamour with aesthesis of the provincial, one engenders possibilities of drag without relinquishing postcolonial realities. They speak back, ‘we will not be invisibilized.’

Provincial drag intervenes too in the representations of provincial queens on the Philippine franchise of *Drag Race* wherein they are depicted as able to catch up with, and challenge, the glamour and fabulosity of metropolitan queens. In Season 1, we find Davaoeña queen Lady Morgana announcing in her verse from the girl group challenge: “*Di palupig sa Manileña kahit ako ay probinsyana*” [“I will not be beaten by a Manileña even though I’m a provincial queen”] (Barbato et al., 2022). Similar provincial pride is perceived in the Meet the Queens video of Season 2, in which queen Hana Beshie from Cagayan de Oro confidently states, “Excited *akong maipakita sa kanila na magaling ang Cagayan de Oro drag*” [“I am excited to show them that Cagayan de Oro drag is great”] (WOW Presents, 2023, 14:37). She adds, “I want to put Cagayan de Oro drag on the fucking map” (WOW Presents, 2023, 14:42). From these statements, one can argue that both drag queens embody neoliberal aspirations of homonormative drag, where showcasing that the drag from the province can be at par with the normative standards of neoliberalized drag. In contrast, the provincial drag of Inday Laura and the Seedlings Sisters asserts provincial pride without surrendering to projections of provincial imaginaries in their performances. Rather than showcasing that they can be at par with homonormative expectations of drag, their provincial drag instead demands that provincial-ness be taken seriously.

Coda

Throughout this essay, I have endeavored to envisage the possibilities of a decolonial queer tropical aesthesis in the Philippines. While previous scholarship has shown us the pluriversal aesthetic practices of drag across the tropics, I reinforce that understanding tropical drag must be open to how a decolonial queer tropical aesthesis

⁸ While Cao (2017) acknowledges this potentiality of pedestrian drag via Eat Bulaga’s *Kalye Serye*, they also critique how such performances may re-signify people’s perception over “drag” performers. Particularly, Cao pertains to the hosts of *Kalye Serye* in drag who, despite having been accused of sexual misconduct, teach morality on national television.

might be changed via the multifarious locally situated experiences of doing drag. In this essay, I have looked at the “alternative” drag performances of Inday Laura Beatrice Buenavista and the Seedlings Sisters; both demonstrate what I call provincial drag. Provincial drag foregrounds the imaginary tropes of provincialness from a metropolitanist gaze to assert how it departs from such elitist perceptions. In projecting the provincial’s alterity to homonormative forms of drag, Inday Laura and the Seedlings Sisters make the decolonial move of visibilizing the remaindered modalities of doing drag. They insist that decolonial provincial drag does not attempt to collide with colonial/imperial forms of drag, rather it asserts a departure from the metropolitanist gaze of the provincial without relinquishing the provincial.

The essay extends earlier works that highlight the colonial difference of gendered practices in the “Global South” and place them firmly within the materiality of the tropics. It also extends the work on tropical drag aesthetics that a homonormative drag form erases and invisibilizes. I hope to have foregrounded how decolonial queer tropical aesthesis can fold drag back into its subversive potential beyond genderfuckery, as a performance practice that laughs at the projects of modernity/neocoloniality. I posit that due to the political projects alternative drag performances illuminate, such performances should not be undermined as simply playful and frivolous presentations. The radical potentiality of aesthetic practices is only effective insofar as they enact their intent. The narrative of how drag came to the mainstream is an example of how subversive practices are easily captured into the fold of neoliberalism, whiteness, and global capitalism. But, as the performances surveyed in this essay also suggest, there will be aesthetic practices that continue to perform radical praxes in their attempt to dismantle ongoing coloniality.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Erika Carreon and Mona Rahimpour, colleagues at the University of Melbourne, with whom I rehearsed my ideas for this essay. I am also grateful to Arvin Jake Adovo for assisting with the translation of Cebuano words to Tagalog and English. Finally, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Professor Anita Lundberg, the editors of the Special Issue, the anonymous reviewers, and the production team of *eTropic* for their constructive feedback and guidance throughout the process.

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