




A Love that Burns Hot Enough to Last: Scenes from Trans Tropical Love

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Abstract

This essay meditates on a time spent in the Brazilian tropics, as part of one's journey into womanhood. Titled after a line from Whitney Houston's "I Wanna Dance with Somebody," it reflects on a trans woman's experience of queer desire in the tropics, in light of her own womanhood that remains a tenuous argument for some people who still believe that their bodies have been named to precede and prevail over those of trans, queer, and nonbinary folk. In quiet lyrical turns, the essay, invoking tropical nature, explores the possibilities of queer relations, as well as the opportunity to teach the world about beauty, so as to recreate the world and reexist in it as a woman proud and confident of her own circumstance—to "become it. Love."

Keywords: trans womanhood, trans tropics, trans love, queer tropics, queer desire, tropical nature, Brazil, Philippines

A Love that Burns Hot Enough to Last

*So when the night falls
My lonely heart calls
— Whitney Houston*

“**H**ave you met any moço carioca, Jayita? You can tell me about these things.” I wondered why you texted on WhatsApp that January while I was having lunch at my Lapa apartment.

A few days before I left for Rio last November, you broke the sad news that you weren't going to make it to Brazil after all. That it wasn't the right time, that it was the worst time for you to go. I didn't understand, but still told you I did. A month before, you wrote me an email about the things you were looking forward to doing with me in the cidade maravilhosa.

Did I also tell you I already had bought you some stuff for Christmas as early as September? A shirt with dolphin prints, and a stuffed toy shark? I had to pick them up from a souvenir store in Old Manila. We'd talked about these creatures of the sea for many months. Removing the gifts from my luggage, I wanted to tell you, that in the last days before leaving, I rode the bus for 15 hours from Manila to Donsol town in Sorsogon, the southernmost province of Luzon island, where the whale sharks used to migrate in the summer.

They never came that weekend.

And yet something in the turquoise waters assured me: “There is something else. Just wait for it.”

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Carioca men deliver the best introductions. They'd greet you “gata,” and give you the thrills anytime of the day. “Gatona” or “gatinha” also work, depending on the tone. Most of the time, I'd just giggle at how the silliest boy can make me smile. Even the typical “linda você” can be charming, if only for its forthright charm. I'd believe one if they say “Tudo bem, princesa?” “Meu anjo” does sound heavenly wherever the boy is speaking from, Botafogo or Madureira. I'd accept “minha flor” anytime, half-hoping one would be writing it from Jardim Botânico. And that at the end of the long avenue of palms

midday of a searing summer afternoon, he'd be waiting to greet me. Just imagine how I was flustered when it happened!

I get tense whenever they ask for my number. "Você leu meu perfil?" (Did you read my profile?), I would say. Usually they don't. And when they do, they tell me. "Não estou interessado em uma travesti. Quero uma mulher." (I am not interested in a travesti. I want a woman.) And before I could say, "Mulheres trans são mulheres" (trans women are women), they'd have already blocked me. Whenever one would tell me that, yes, they know I'm trans, they'd shift to "Você é operada?" (Are you post-op?) "Ativa ou passiva?" (Top or bottom?) "É garota de programa?" (Are you a girl for hire?)

These brasileiros are the most toxic. They only see women as instruments of pleasure. They expect us to fulfill their fantasies of the 'she-male' or the 'ladyboy.' Not that pornography or prostitution have done us the worst. In fact, that men encounter primal trans attraction from porn and sex work is affirming for trans women. What men do with trans women because of porn and within prostitution is something else. When I corrected one, he haughtily retorted that I'm the first to ever complain about the terms. And when I tried to engage a most persistent guy for a price, "completos serviços," I was told I was unaffordable! They say they're in love with our femininity but only on certain terms. They want that "thing" intact. "If I wanted something else, I'd call a 'real girl' instead."

They tell us we're beautiful, that we're even more beautiful than many cis women they know, but when they realize how dangerous the desire can be, they'd tell us we've trapped them. They shout, they whisper: "traveco." Trans women can't be too beautiful. And our beauty cannot be loved on our own terms. That hurts.

On a quiet night in Lapa, Mariah and I blushed at how a travesti was leading a lover away from the crowd, until we couldn't figure out where they'd gone from that Bohemian intersection on Avenida de Mem de Sá. We wished her safety through the soulful night, and that he'd treat her well. On our way home to my apartment near the Praça Cruz Vermelha, we noticed a car trailing us on Rua do Rezende. Slowing down, the driver opened his window. "Come on, my girl, these travequeiros won't let women like us walk peacefully," Mariah said. Holding each other's hands, we ran toward the Arcos, where it would be impossible for him to find us. We wandered up as far as Metrô Glória. A couple of travestis were gearing up for the night. They were tall and proud. We were a bit farther from home, but safe, for the rest of the night.

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It took us almost two hours driving on the highway before we could reach Casa Grande, a night club in Bangu, still part of the Rio metropolitan area. In Maracanã

before the trip, Mariah did my hair and make-up. We were wearing new summer dresses from a store at Santos-Dumont, where we picked up the car from Movida. I remember the print on my roupa: toucans peaking from the deepest verdure of the rainforest. Somehow I could feel them smiling at me. *On me*. Teasing me: “What risks will you take on this adventure? Will you let go of yourself?”

On the way we stopped for a Japanese buffet at a restaurant in Barra de Tijuca. It was Mariah’s birthday and we wanted to do something out of the ordinary to celebrate it.

We had just parked outside the club and not even gotten our tickets to enter, yet someone was already greeting us “Lindonas japonesas!” “Girl, I guess your Asian look is brushing off on this brasileira,” Mariah was laughing. “Does the guy think we’re from São Paulo? Is it from all the sashimi? We gotta tell Vivi about this!” I quipped. Casa Grande, indeed, a grand house.

A stage was set up in the center, and a bar on the side. The darkness was only beset by mirrorballs and disco lights, enough for one to figure out faces on the crowd. Travestis, transexual women, pessoas não binarias, cross-dressers, and gay men from the area populated the dancefloor. Their admirers were of course hovering around, many standing in the corner, a few talking to a trans woman patient enough to entertain them.

Unlike in Lapa, where one would just get groped without consent, men here would approach a lady with respect, asking her if she’s free to talk. One can just say no and move on without any fuss. This is the house of women. Our house, where we reign. I’d never seen anything like it! The drag performances weren’t intended to please the usual set of gay men I’ve seen elsewhere, like Buraco de Lacreia in Centro. The women were performing for themselves and for their sisters. One of the favorite numbers was this Italian ballad, “Saro bellissima.” *I will be beautiful*. I found myself listening to it weeks after our excursion.

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Of course, I had to report it all to Carlo, a cherished friend, back in Manila. And they had to ask the toughest question, to debrief me: “Jaya, if experience has already taught you that romance, and the monogamy aspired within it, are both transphobic, then why continue to seek love along these cishet paradigms? Trans women are in the best position to redefine what queer relations should look like, don’t you think?”

In various conversations with my best friend Mariah, we have lamented that no amount of beauty or intelligence can make a man stay in a trans woman’s life. And if there are good ones, they will still leave us, in the end. That while men continue to thrill us, and

we are not foreclosing any future connections with them, we can no longer seek love like the silly girls we used to be. That we should build ourselves up, make sure that we live long enough to fulfill our dreams, that our sisters are safe, that no one in our community gets killed for being who we are. “Remember, we are trans women,” Mariah would tell me. I have never forgotten.

This journey into womanhood has been the longest. One traverses its pathways facing disavowals and severances, and most of the time, death; to begin again is to take leave of the past almost bereft of love, and reckon with the present with a sense of hurt that one may never learn to heal. One would think that with the truth of femininity, one could finally access freedom from the discourses which had occluded one from recognizing much earlier the possibility of a gender that indeed dwells on difference, but the world can only be crueler to women like us whose womanhood remains a tenuous argument as long as some people believe their bodies have been named to precede ours, and are destined to prevail over ours.

And yet, I am also here to teach the world about beauty, when one finds out the name to what one countenances as lovely in the first place, even if it denies me love. So let me give you love, no matter what sanction your heart allows to be affirmed or broken at this moment. It is a woman’s love, too. I become it. Love. I can only imagine my body free from the shame within me that I have nurtured for a lifetime. I must imagine myself untethered from any man who may shame it even further.

I told Carlo I’ve been musing on a few models of filiation that can free trans women from the pressures of eros heavily overdetermined for us by cis/het models which have never imagined us in the first place. I told them that the kinship we can define in non-erotic, post-romantic friendship, especially between and among women and toward other queer and nonbinary folx, should provide us with enough fortitude to look after each other. This sense of a lesbian sorority, premised on previous aspirations toward an Amazonic community, can only inspire us to recreate our world and reexist in it as women proud of our own circumstance. This, too, is love. It is Love.

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David is Carioca who now lives in São Paulo. He is a screenwriter. His latest work is a series on trans lives in Brazil featuring the transpologist Renata Carvalho. Luiz is a taxi driver, but is on leave because of an injury. The night we met, he picked me up from Bar das Quengas and drove me around the city till dawn, from Lapa to Barra de Tijuca and back. He didn’t know any English except “You’re gorgeous,” and I couldn’t speak any Portuguese at that time except, “Você é simpático.” There’s Xuel, a filmmaker who teaches in a favela near his place in Zona Norte. I met Kevin in New York City, but he’s now based in the south of Brazil to play for a basketball team.

Matheus is a charming guy from São Gonçalo. He's in his final year in physical education at the federal university, and plans to pursue a graduate degree abroad. If he's not sending me selfies while at the gym, he tells how he's teaching his little brother Luis how to speak English.

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It was an overcast afternoon in October when we met in front of the Amsterdam Centraal. I found your bulky white shoes endearing, in contrast to your severe ensemble in black. What surprised me more was your demeanor. You were bashful, almost self-effacing. Your eyes sparkle, however, telling me about how excited you were to check out the Andrei Tarkovsy show at the Eye Museum. On the ferry, you told me about your life so far in Amsterdam, how different it was from the one you've known for so long in Gran Canaria. You smiled when I asked about Bubu, your black cat. After an hour at the museum, we decided to walk to the Muziekgebouw. I was wearing my heels and I couldn't tell you how my feet hurt. By the river, we watched the sunset while drinking verdejo. I loved how you said the word "rioja." A couple was being more adventurous nearby. They took off their clothes and jumped into the water. I told you how my life was in Manila, how hard it can be sometimes, and yet how I still looked forward to going back there at the end of every trip. You were happy to know I was scheduled to return to Rio in December, but your mood became somber when you recounted how you were also happy to be in Brazil. You took my hand and held it. "It's such a pleasure to know you, Jaya."

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In my head, I play Whitney's "I Wanna Dance With Somebody" everytime I enter a dance hall. And I must have the song on loop in full volume whenever I am alone at home, full bass through my headset while finding my bearings on the pavement, on the platform waiting for my train home, everywhere I feel the need to connect and only connect. And even when I can't, especially to myself, I am assured by Whitney that I'm not on my own, after all she's seeking to share the dance floor with somebody who loves her, too.

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I can tell you how the fireflies alighted from a tree and traversed the Donsol river the night before I left for Manila, hours before a typhoon ravaged my region. How did it unfold? I'll tell you when I see you next, perhaps long after the tropical storm subsides and all the cancelled flights have been restored. Until then, we exchange legends of the firefly: tales of her fire, stories of her flight.

Acknowledgments

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Jaya Jacobo is a Lecturer in Gender Studies at Coventry University, where she currently does work on trans feminist pedagogies in literature, art and performance. She has worked alongside travesti and transsexual women artists, academics and community workers in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, as well as with trans, queer and nonbinary Filipina/x/o performers from the Philippines and its diaspora. Jacobo was a former Board Member of the Society of Trans Women of the Philippines (STRAP), a former President of the Film Desk of the Young Critics Circle (YCC) of the Philippines, a Founding Co-Editor of *Queer Southeast Asia: A Transgressive Journal of Literary Art* and Co-Editor of *BKL: Bikol/Bakla, Anthology of Bikolnon Gay Trans Queer Writing*. Jaya has also just released *Arasahas*, her debut volume of poetry in Filipino from Savage Mind Publishing House.