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Queering the Troubled Tropics in Panx Solajes' Post-Haiyan Short Films

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Abstract

This article apprehends a precarious moment when the queer and the tropics coincide to form a new fabric of sensing in this age of climate crisis. Queer and tropics are intimate, not only because both embody their inherent openness and fluidity, but also because each is woven closely by the corollary contradictions that besiege them, such as heteronormativity, capitalism, and environmental degradation. Within such an intersecting framework, this study critically engages with a selection of three works by the queer Filipino filmmaker Panx Solajes who attentively observes the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan (locally called Yolanda) in the Philippines, a tropical storm that occurred in 2013, and is still considered to be one of the strongest in modern records. Solajes' post-typhoon films *Balud* (2014), *Iskwater* (2015), and *Himurasak* (2015) are experiments in the troubled tropics that configure a queer vision to engender a habitable and inclusive future through a coupling of human and nonhuman subjectivities. Thus, this post-Haiyan filmography relies on unconventional and resistant forms of queer visibilities that respond to the current climate crisis. Such filmic reading, therefore, can best emerge through allied histories of queer studies, the tropics, and the environment to harness discursive turns that offer alternatives from rigidly pessimistic and realist horizons of the future. This study commits to render visible a balance between the duty to remember and the agency to imagine a habitable future in this equatorial zone of the earth.

Keywords: Panx Solajes' Films, Typhoon Haiyan, Typhoon Yolanda, Queer Ecology, Troubled Tropics, Philippine Cinema

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The Post-Haiyan Turn

On November 8, 2013, Typhoon Haiyan, locally known as Yolanda, the strongest typhoon in modern records, made a massively destructive landfall on the twin islands of Samar and Leyte, in the Philippines, killing thousands of people, displacing countless others, and disrupting the region's ecology. Its super strong winds resulted in deadly six-meter storm surges which flooded Leyte's capital, Tacloban, along with neighboring coastal towns. More than a century ago, Jesuit scientist Jose Algue of the Manila Observatory[1] described an "*ola de huracan"* or hurricane wave which struck the region on October 12-13, 1897 – at the height of the Philippine Revolution against the Spanish regime (Algue, 1898, p. 9). This long history of typhoons is not a new experience to the locals as their home region is geographically situated within a Pacific-facing typhoon belt which makes it a regular entry point or passageway of most of the more than 20 tropical storms that frequent the Philippines each year. However, unlike the October 1897 typhoon, Haiyan remains one of the most heavily documented typhoons both locally and internationally, primarily due to the agility of the global media and on-hand social media. Although to some extent problematically spectacular, the traditional and new media coverages were successful in mounting a global consciousness on the lethal consequences of climate change which the tropics has been exceedingly prone to in recent decades.

This climate emergency triggered a period of critical and creative contemplation which has been called "post-Haiyan," an epochal coinage initiated by Waray poet and scholar Antonino Salvador de Veyra to categorize a poetic movement encompassing regional, national, and global scales that individually or collectively confront the duty to remember, the ethics of working-through trauma, and ecological and nonhuman inclusion (2021, p. 75). Here it is important to remember that there is much more to the prefix 'post' than just a temporal or historical period. As Stuart Hall (2017), reminds us with postcolonialism, the prefix "post" emphasizes contiguous regimes of violence from the past into the present. Suffice it to say that signifying practices, such as scholarship and creative work, aligned with the post-Haiyan period attempt to make sense of the complex and intersectional ecologically-disruptive quandaries that persist in the present. The post-Haiyan project intervenes in current affairs of everyday life. A tragic realization of the "post-ness" of post-Haiyan is that, like any other natural disaster in this time of ecological decline, it is never over and it is here to remain. There is no "after", just the continuous trauma of aftershocks. In this regard, as I have argued elsewhere, "the collapse of stable categories and logics urges us to turn to trauma not solely as a method in literary and cultural theory, but also as an instructive site of dwelling and survival in the Anthropocene" (Claros, 2024, p. 2).

[1] The Manila Observatory is a Jesuit-led meteorological and geological institution established in 1865. Its main task is to conduct forecast and research on weather and earthquakes in the Philippines. Currently, their work centers on empowering science to shape a "safe and sustainable future for humankind" (Manila Observatory, n.d).

The use of the term post-Haiyan is significant, for in the Philippines, particularly in the neighboring islands of Samar and Leyte which felt the full impact of the typhoon's catastrophic landfall, the local name, Yolanda, is more popularly used and ingrained in public consciousness. The use of the name typhoon Haiyan, therefore, reaches out regionally to strategically broaden spheres of tropical solidarity to Micronesia, Palau, Hong Kong, Southern China, and Vietnam, countries also impacted by Haiyan and incurring loss of life and property. Thus, when invoking Haiyan, the particular Philippine experience opens itself up to a regional and global dialogue bridging routes of affect and memory towards solidarity in this age of climate crises which can never be bounded by national borders.

The post-Haiyan turn in the Philippines is characterized by a production of literary and visual art anthologies such as *Lunop: Haiyan Voices and Images* (2015) edited by Joycie Y. Dorado-Alegre, *Agam* (2014) of the Institute for Sustainable Cities, and *Our Memory of Water* (2016) edited by Merlie Alunan. Publications of novels in the Waray language, English, and French, tried to compress Haiyan narratives within a capacious literary form. Some of these novels include: *Tabsik hin Kagamhanan* (2015) by Doms Pagliawan, *Les mains Lâchées* (2016) by Anaïs Llobet, *Remains* (2019) by Daryll Delgado, and *Broken Islands* (2019) by Criselda Yabes. Attempts were likewise made to rework the spectacle of Haiyan through full-length films such as *Taklub* (2015) directed by Brillante Mendoza, and *Kun Maupay Man It Panahon* (2021) directed by Carlo Francisco Manatad.

The post-Haiyan period also paved the way for ethical experiments on the representation of trauma and ecological disasters as seen in the short films of Francis "Panx" Solajes and Joanna Arong. While Arong and Solajes both explore storytelling from the point-of-view of locals, the latter subscribes to a distinct resolution between visuality and oral tradition by resisting to show direct and vivid imageries of the typhoon's onslaught which both traditional and new media has excessively exhausted.

Over the years, the post-Haiyan filmography of Panx Solajes has been in search of a new vision and language of ecological disaster representation in the 21st century, effectively opening up evanescent, yet historically-rooted circuits of filmmaking, to a diverse audience. His oeuvre is further shaped by being a native of Tacloban in Leyte, a speaker of the Waray language, a student of film schools in the Philippines and Europe, and through his positionality as queer. In a feature video for a local pride week, Solajes declares, "I'm queer. I'm gay. I am proud. I am really happy to be part of the LGBT community. I would not want it the other way" (4th Eastern Visayas Pride Week, 2018). He describes queer life in the Philippines as "*masalimuot na maganda*" [complicated yet beautiful]. At an early age of 5, Solajes knew that he was gay thus there was no need for him to come out. In the same video, he detests boxing queer subjects through stigmatizing stereotypes and believes in political and civic intervention to guarantee LGBT rights (4th Eastern Visayas Pride Week, 2018).

According to his personal website, Solajes' artistic practice has been a constant "exploration of the relationship between oral tradition and visual art" (Solajes, n.d.). Aside from his own body of work, he has been active in various stages of film production from sound department, editing, to directing since 2013 (IMDb, n.d.). Yet it is his work in short film that has received most attention. For work on *Balud*, a World Bank initiative Action4Climate documentary competition in 2014 awarded Solajes a special prize for "creative personal reflection of the devastating floods caused by climate change" (World Bank, 2014). In 2020, two of Solajes' short films, *Balud* (again) and *Himurasak*, were featured in Daang Dokyu, a virtual documentary festival in the Philippines at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (Rappler, 2020).

This article thus turns to Panx Solajes' post-Haiyan short films, namely: *Balud* (2014)[2], *Iskwater* (2015)[3], and *Himurasak* (2015)[4], as critical itineraries where the queer subjectivity and the tropical zone intersect to enable the auteur to confront this climate emergency. This conjuncture between the queer and the tropics comes from the premise that both subjectivities have been defined, revised, and besieged by violent historical conditions. Suffice it to say that to be queer and to be tropical warrant a resistant state of becoming and transformation of human and nonhuman subjectivities to broaden the horizons of their futures. There are no traditional queer bodies in Solajes' short films, instead the films embark on finding new ways of seeing, specifically a queer visibility through the dialectical relationship of interiority (*loob*) and performance (*palabas*). These twin vectors are mobilized as an opportunity for the cinematic gaze to disrupt the extractive spectacle of ecological disasters. The focus is turned elsewhere and remains elusive. Through this lens, boundaries disintegrate for an imaginative transcendence to proceed such as that of the *loob* (interiority) to *labas* (performance or utterance), "agony to ecstasy" (Jacobo, 2011, p.10), "mourning to militancy" (Crimp, 2002, p.16), "failure of imagination" (Muñoz, 2006, p. 825) to habitable futures, and "global extermination of meaning" (Baudrillard, 2000, p.70) to a "wilderness of signs" (Mojares, 2013, p. 68) – a transitive movement between polarities from which Jaya Jacobo observes a resolution in the tropical zone where "the equator

[2] The film participated and garnered citations in the following local and international festivals and events: Doc Nomads, Brussels (Dec 2013); Chicago International Film Festival (2014); Special JURY Prize, Action4Climate (2014); Times Square London Fashion Week (2014), Haiyan Awareness (2014), Firstdraft Art Exhibition, Australia (2015); Doc Lisboa, Portugal (2015); Winner, My Hero Int'l Film Festival (2015); Stockfish European Film Festival in Reykjavík, Iceland (2015); Green Film Festival in Seoul, Korea (2015); Several Imagined Cases About the Sea: An Experimental Film Screening, China (2016); Traversal and Trajectories: Expansive Localities, Vargas Museum (2017); Turns in Form Contemporary Art, ViVaExCon | UP Art Gallery | Iloilo, Philippines (2017); Greenpeace Rainbow Warrior Shop Tour, Southeast Asia (2018); Philippine Cinema's Centenary, 100 Films for 100 years, Ayala Museum (2018); Lorem Ipsum, Tin-aw Art Gallery (2019); and Daang Dokyu, A Festival of Philippine Documentaries (2020)

[3] The film was featured in the following art exhibits: Turns in form Contemporary Art Exhibit, ViVaExCon | UP Art Gallery | Iloilo, Philippines (2016-17); and Ouroboros, Firstdraft Art Exhibition | Australia (2015)

[4] The film participated in Daang Dokyu (2020); Lorem Ipsum, Tin-aw Art Gallery (2019); Greenpeace Rainbow Warrior Shop Tour, Southeast Asia (2018); Short + Sweet Film Festival, Pineapple Lab (2018); Philippine Cinema's Centenary, 100 Films for 100 years, Ayala Museum (2018); Traversal and Trajectories: Expansive Localities, Vargas Museum (2017); Turns in Form Contemporary Art, ViVaExCon | UP Art Gallery | Iloilo, Philippines (2016-17), and Talents Tokyo | TIFF | Japan (2015).

presents itself as a paradoxical imaginary: it reconciles as much as it demarcates" (2011, p. 75). Thus, through a tropical and queer cinematic gaze, an ethic of representation emerges to allow the local to prevail and interrogate the dominating senses of the global.

Intimate Intersections: Tropics, Queer, Nature

The tropics and queer have been historically interpreted according to a range of contesting contradictions which renders them 'naturally' comparable. Christian Parenti, calls this geographical zone a "tropic of chaos" as it is plunged into a "catastrophic convergence of poverty, violence, and climate change" (2011, p.16) primarily due to lasting effects of colonialism and neoliberalism. He further expounds this situation in an almost infernal description, "a belt of economically and politically battered postcolonial states girding the planet's mid-latitudes" (Parenti, 2011, p.19). Philippine historian Filomeno Aguilar provides a resonating qualifier for the tropics as a place suffering from "compounded disasters" (2016, p. 418), that is: frequent storms and colonialism where the latter is a "far worse disaster" (2016, p. 42).

However, recent studies echo David Arnold's valuation of the tropics as "both a physical and mental space, a geographical imaginary" (Aguilar, 2016, p. 418). Certain movements within this field have approached it not just "merely as a worldly zone – and a passive locus – but more importantly as a critical rubric and active agent" (Benitez & Lundberg, 2022, p. 5). A prominent interlocutor of the tropics, Christian Benitez not only upholds its complementarity with the violence of orientalism, but further notes how tropicality is always "being subjected to the tropes or discursive turns" (2022, p. 239) – a theoretical position earlier developed by Jaya Jacobo. In other words, in the tropical zone, things can become something else discursively. For instance, one can observe how the same sun that radiates over the tropical Philippines as the temperate world, nevertheless can have multi-directional potential in the meditations of local scholars such Jose Rizal and Jaya Jacobo. In his critique of the tropical impulse of Hidalgo and Luna's paintings, Rizal recognizes the sun as "equally great and fearsome, radiant as well as darkly tempestuous" (Aguilar, 2016, p. 424). Jacobo, on the other hand, arrests the dichotomy of the same sun which she values as "a possibility to turn away from the brilliance of Aristotle's sun in order to turn towards the sun that teaches the autochthone what may be luminescent in the slow burning of one's skin" (Jacobo, 2011, p.12). A clear gesture of the decolonial is at work in finding radiance beyond the obvious broad daylight by turning to what is closely tangible to the "homo tropicus" that is: their darkened skin. For such skin to signify as a cosmological consequence of solar radiance is a result of serious attention to the many turns that the things of the tropics can be. Aguilar further demonstrates how, for Graciano Lopez Jaena, the tropics is a "nature that brings spontaneous productivity" (2016, p. 432) to prove how renowned Filipino talents emerge from this region of the earth. Jesuit missionary Igancio Francisco Alcina also inscribes this natural vitality,

noting the Visayas has a “mild climate like a perpetual springtime” (quoted in Aguilar, 2016, p. 436.). These manifold intentions that shape the tropics show how malleable this category is to a chain of possibilities where, at one point, it can either be hostile or hospitable.

Queer, as a category, shares the same semantic fluidity as the tropics. According to Judith Butler, structural and historical violence have made queer a “paralyzing slur” (1993, p. 223), “an accusation, pathologization, or insult” (1993, p. 226). In more progressive valuations, it refers to a quality of “openness” (Sedgewick, 2013, p. 8), a “discursive space” (Agelides, 2013, p. 60), a state of aberration (Edelman, 2004), or “nonnormative logics and organizations" (Halberstam, 2005, p.6). One can observe from this range of definitions an elusive ideation of identity that consciously resists predetermination. Turning to the Southeast Asian region, Brian Curtin (2015) notes how there is a “lack of consensus” of what the term means to this area of the tropics. Judith Butler and José Esteban Muñoz provide different approaches to its indeterminacy. For Muñoz (2009), the state of queerness is something not yet present in our times as it still belongs to a desired future or a “region of the not-yet” (2009, p.3). On the other hand, Butler makes sense of its constant slippage as both strategic and integral to queer existence and movements arguing that, “it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage, and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes" (1993, p. 228). Suffice it to say that Butler recognizes this elusiveness as a way toward a linguistic malleability wherein it can tactically respond to varying contradictions and contexts to safeguard identities that overcome social norms at any historical moment.

Furthering queer temporality, Michael Snediker shares an insightful take on the aversion of queer identities to the present which he terms the “tropaic gravitation toward the negative” (2009, p.4) especially in the light of Lee Edelman’s skepticism to the viability of a future. The nature of being tropaic firstly situates the present state of queerness within language and other signifying practices. This seeming discontent can be sensed with Jacobo’s (2011) account of keeping time in the tropics where the *homo tropicus* desires for the weather-yet to come until its arrival overwhelms the body with illness and discomfort triggering once again an unending cycle and temporality of yearning. Jacobo identifies a disjuncture within the tropics as always “anachronistic” to a modernity that has been constructed through a “temperate success” (2011, p. 73). Queer scholars such as Edelman and Muñoz agree that queer identity does not fit in with time, to be exact: straight time. The former expresses pessimism that “the queer comes to figure the bar to every realization of futurity” (2004, p. 4). This axiomatic resignation of Edelman stakes its bold claim: for the queer, the future is not only bleak but absolutely nonexistent. This is partly the reason why Halberstam argues that queers occupy space and time “in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction” (2005, p.1). However, Muñoz upholds the proactive

agency of desiring and imagining for a queer future – aside from interrogating straight time, the queer has the potential to "stave off the ossifying effects of neoliberal ideology and the degradation of politics" (2009, p. 22). Nicole Seymour has an incisive take on Edelman's virtuous pessimism claiming that he "fails to acknowledge that, more often than not, it is corporate and governmental disregard for the future that enables the (paradoxical) reproduction of capital, and more specifically, environmental degradation and destruction in the name of capital accumulation" (2013, p. 7). Suffice it to say that this pessimism naturally succumbs to the imaginaries reified by heteronormative institutions which in the words of Muñoz is a failure of imagination. This calls to mind Mark Fisher's (2009) idea of capitalist realism where dominant ideologies propel a culture of defeatism, pragmatism, and illusion to cast doubt on any sense of an alternative to our taxing present.

This intimate intersection of tropics and queer also extends to the natural environment through queer cinema. New queer cinema arose from a need for artistic reflection after queer communities suffered heavily from the AIDS epidemic in the 90s (Pearl, 2004; Halberstam, 2005). This cinematic movement strategically finds productive sites of alliance, for instance with the environmentalist causes, as both have been vulnerable to totalizing dominant power. In other words, the causes for LGBT rights and the environment naturally align with each other as they both push back against long standing historical and structural violence. Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands succinctly describes the queer condition during the current troubled age of climate crisis as "to be wounded in a world of wounds" (2010, p. 338) where the queer body and the damaged earth stay side by side in their woundedness. This wound, therefore, becomes an accessible language for two distinct movements with intersecting interests. However, the alliance between what is natural and queer is epistemologically riddled with contradictions since the queer body is heteronormatively constructed as artificial. In the field of performance, Susan Sontag herself defines "camp", as a foundational element of queer expression, as a "love for the unnatural" (1964, p. 274). Seymour (2018) further outlines diametrically opposed issues that the queer and the environment occupy, including the apolitically numb stance of some mainstream queer performances especially on matters of the environment. The case with the environment is that its performance and activism are rigidly shaped by "well-defined codes" (2018, p. 138) which include: "seriousness, sincerity, and sentimentality" (2018, p.141). These codes are crucial signals and cues that enable environmental causes to gather and appeal to large publics. It is a message of haste because it responds to an existential threat that urgently needs immediate political action. However, these are the very codes that queer performance seeks to trouble and subvert in order to make a lasting and impactful engagement. Within the tropics such discursive reconciliations between the environment and queer emanate from what can be sensed in this contradiction as a potential to learn from each other where queer and environmental performance can strategically harness their own advantages. There is no need to be tied by the vague pronouncements of Sara Ahmed (2013) who

narrowly merges queer politics and enjoyment exclusively such that it stifles queer transcendence. Seymour juxtaposes the idea of change as a stable point of convergence between the two where "the changeability or instability of climate and something like the changeability or instability of gender, or sexuality, or identity could and perhaps should be considered" (2018, p. 143). The fact that both movements can adapt means that at some point their interests may productively coincide which is why Seymour contends that "queer environmental performance can inspire vital self-reflection on the part of environmental humanities scholars" (2018, p. 115). Jonathan Gray concurs by forwarding that "queer subjectivities contribute a more fluid and relational understanding of environmental stewardship" (2017, p. 137). For instance, the field of queer ecology's goal "is to probe the intersections of sex and nature with an eye to developing a sexual politics, that more clearly includes considerations of the natural world and its biosocial constitution, and an environmental politics" (Mortimer-Sandilands & Erickson, 2010, p.5). Here, queer ecology is not presumed to be a fixed thing as emphasized by its expression of "with an eye to developing" meaning to say that an alignment of interests and methods are not yet present, but immanent.

Queer Visibilities

The intersection of the tropics, queer, and nature is presented in Panx Solajes' filmic work, demonstrating a commitment to an inclusive aesthetic animated by the fluidity of gender and nature. Although the three post-Haiyan short films discussed in this study do not have conventional queer bodies, like other LGBT films, they can nevertheless still be posited as equally compelling queer cinema. Inasmuch as the tropics, the environment, and the queer can intersect, certain discursive turns within cinematic language and active spectatorship can render the queer potent and visible, despite its seeming bodily absence. One can situate this phenomenon in the nature of queer cinema itself, which has always sought a new medium and further experimentation (Pearl, 2004; Evans, 2017; Sedgewick, 2013). Coming from a traumatic phase of the AIDS crisis, allied artistic representations aspired for "empathic unsettlement" (LaCapra, 2014) where experimental circuits of rehearsals are enacted to establish authentic relationships between the art and its audience. According to Monica B. Pearl, it is this reason that new queer cinema and its successive movements "reflects rather than corrects the experience of fragmentation, disruption, unbounded identity, incoherent narrative, and inconclusive endings" (2013, p. 33). In addition, Michele Aaron outlines some notable characteristics of queer cinema that "defies cinematic convention in terms of form, content, and genre" (2014, p. 4). These qualities have influenced mainstream cinema to shift from "disavowal to the avowal, the open affirmation of queer implications" (Aaron, 2014, p. 10). However, as Christopher Castigalia and Christopher Reed remind us, new queer cinema cannot simply break free of all conventions without reason as it still has to be "suspended between a responsibility to the spectacular realness of the past and the collaborative inventiveness of the present" (2011, p. 154). With these points in mind, one can sense

the effort of the director to deliberately and consciously experiment with a cinematic language where a film can be queer(ed) through the uncanny representation of the tropical human and nonhuman forging unconventional grounds of queer visibility. Therefore, the choice not to proceed with a queer cinematic sensuality in the representation of post-Haiyan short films, does not mean that the queer project is rescinded to make room for responsible and ethical handling of climate trauma; rather, new frontiers of queering both the human and nonhuman as filmic subjects are configured to grapple with the overwhelming scales of ecological degradation.

Regarding queer bodies, there is no question on the inclusive influence of their presence in cinema, however, as history attests, presence alone does not achieve a reworking of a heteronormative cinema. In the Philippines, for instance, while local films have helped raise awareness on the fluidities of the *bakla* or gay (Inton, 2015), the figure of the *bakla* was almost always banished "in the sidelines and backend serving as writers, assistants, stylists if not supporting characters or film extras" (Alegre, 2022, p. 60). Philippine filmmaker Alvin Yapan provides a clever reworking against queer exploitation in the film industry which has regressed into pornographic escapades and have consequently hampered a more liberative representation of gay eros. In an interview, Yapan (2021) shares an artistic statement behind *Ang Sayaw ng Dalawang Kaliwang Paa* (2011) where two college men explore queer sensuality, romance, and tenderness in an afterschool dance class. The film found new sources of intimacies that do not fall prey to the voyeuristic trend. Other experiments of global queer medium, according to Quinn Miller, include Joni Mitchell's *A Case of You* (1971) and Wilco's *Sunken Treasure* (1996) which uses the "iconic blue light of television emission to represent everyday antinormativity, the basis of queer difference" (2014, p.140). Yapan and Miller prove that there are many circuits toward queer imagination and representation, be it in the tenderness of college students or simply the blue light from a television. Muñoz offers a more provoking take on queer visuality by passing the burden to the spectators saying that "in order to access queer visuality, we may need to squint, to strain our vision and force it to see otherwise, beyond the limited vista of the here and now" (2009, p. 22). In other words, it is the spectator's unconventional way of seeing that constitutes the efficacy of queer visuality which, to some extent, implies that everything can be hermeneutically rendered queer as long as both intentions of the work and the reception coincide, or put simply: the contemporaneous moment where the spectator and the filmmaker sees eye to eye in the screen. Thus, the spectator has an equally important ethical role in queering cinema.

Turning to the question of performance in cinema, Jack Halberstam has caste doubt on certain queer performances posturing as global, which he critiques as being problematically white Euro-Western. J. Neil Garcia (2009) forwards a more grounded critique on this matter by beginning with the totalizing dominance of Judith Butler's performativity which obsesses over external utterances and speech acts, whereas in

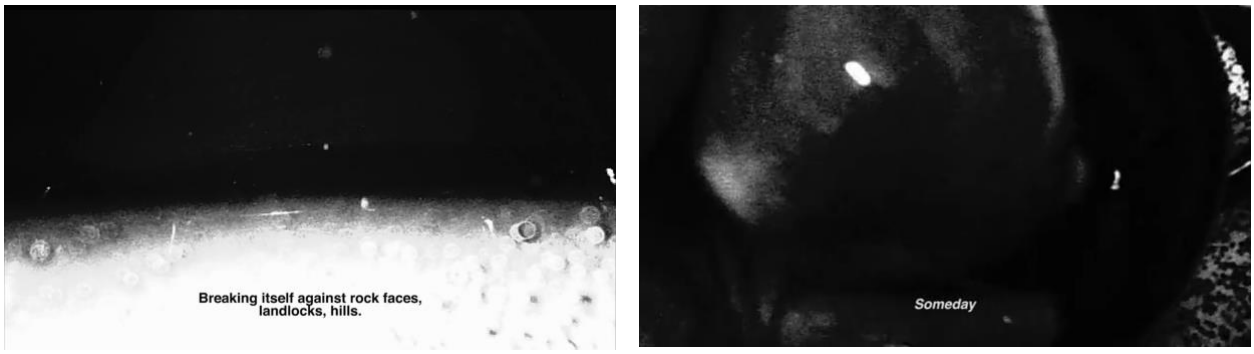
Philippine culture the "*loob*" or interiority, takes precedence over the "*labas,*" or exteriority. Garcia further argues, turning to Albert Alejo, for "a very strong Tagalog-Filipino ethos of transcendental insideness lording over whatever exists oppositional, outside it, the *labas*. Thus, bakla's *labas* (outside) can to a degree be violated from within and become inverted" (2009, p. 121). The elusiveness of this tropical queer figure is likewise complicated in Garcia's exploration of the "aura" in Philippine fiction "for what turns away from it indeed originates from inside it, and therefore can always fold itself back in" (2012, p. 31). Philippine art historian Patrick Flores elaborates the other side of the discussion: the *palabas* from "labas" or the outside" which is both at the same time "spectacle and appearance" (2008, p. 8). He further adds, "it is theater and it involves acting, diversion, pedagogy. It is (dis)guise and it is manifestation. It is a matter of conjuring, tricking the eye, catching the feeling, concealing the device of drama. And because it is tactical, it is also corruptive: semblance is always elusive" (2008, p.8). Suffice it to say that the *labas* has incalculable possibilities that exceed its appearance and intention so much so that its presence before a spectator is a constant barring of expectation as the insular *loob* is unchartered, recluse, and unsignifiable. There are, therefore, no rigid identifications of queerness, and neither are there rigid indentifiers in the arts that emanate from it. Solajes' work is just a fractional indication of the queer impulse and creativity at work. Thus, what is left in this queer semiosis is for the spectator to pick up.

Queer Figures in *Balud* and *Iskwater*

Filipino film historian Nick Deocampo (1985) situates the short film in Philippine cinema as an arena of youth play and experimentation chiefly due to its modest economic requirements and the logistical ease of production. In hindsight, this cinematic form also bears a kind of portability that caters to broad public viewings, from art exhibits, to community screenings, to film festivals. Solajes's *Balud* (2014) and *Iskwater* (2015) embody a queer vision and experimentation in remembering the destruction and the loss of lives during Typhoon Haiyan. Deliberate attempts are made to delineate from a passé visuality of disaster aftermaths while conscripting other artistic forms such as poetry. For instance, in *Balud*, the voice over pieces are poetry recitations of Filipino poet Merlie Alunan's *Old Women in Our Village* and *Tricycle Drivers' Tale* – both contained in her *Seastories* suite of poems (2017, p.131-136). Moreover, representing environmental catastrophes and human suffering are not an easy feat as the recent trend of spectatorship on the subject has been problematic. Aside from the fact that suffering has been prone to reduction, certain films have been framed to dispense entertainment – at the cost of climate refugees and nature itself – which can be consumed and binged at the public's comfort. As such, Mortimer-Sandilands sums up this problem as "the fantasy of wilderness is not only infinitely consumable, but infinitely replaceable" (2010, p. 338). There is an ethical need

therefore to resort to a filmic language that is "untethered from conventional codes" (Aaron, 2014, p. 5).

Figures 1 & 2. *Black and White Scenes*.



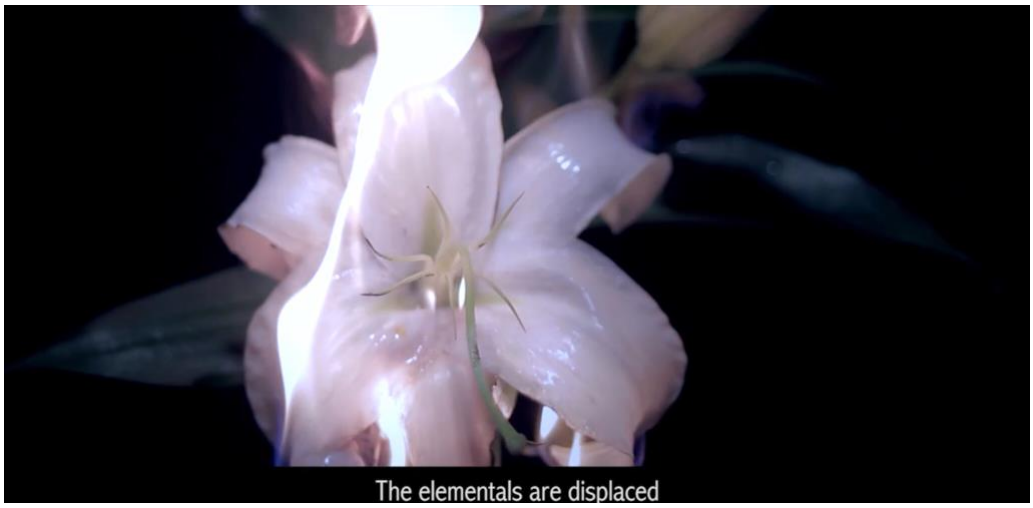
Panx Solajes, *Balud*, 2014

In *Balud*, the film works through combined effects of monochromatic visuality, poetry readings of Alunan's work, and natural sounds such as dripping water, rain, and waves. It asserts the malevolence of an imminent *balud* or wave that disregards the protocols of land-based order. ***Balud's*** figures are resistant to interpretation as it relies on a quick repartee of light and dark where things, figures, and semblances vanish right before they fully unfold to our senses. Some recognizable objects include water and body parts, which still remain elusive as they are either rendered uncanny or are dismembered. One can easily draw comparisons between the monochromatic command of Ingmar Bergman to that of Panx Solajes, but the latter's black and white is more obscure and submerged into the inaccessible unconscious. What is striking with *Balud*'s affective build is the eerie voice over of poetry which announces itself like a whisper that invites the spectator to move closer to the screen only to be reminded that there are visuals waiting to be recognized. This estrangement is furthered by Alunan's poems that narrate the fear of the common folk through a ghost-like persona who warns about the sea's eternal hunger. The lines "Buwas" (tomorrow) are also repeated successively as if to warn its audience of a coming catastrophe.

On the other hand, the images in the film *Iskwater* are more perceptible with a clear cut of three scenes. The first presents a gold fish in a bowl where black ink drips gradually until the bowl turns to pitch back with a hint of a moving fish. It immediately cuts to the next scene of falling white feathers swaying with air as if to resist gravity. The punctum of this 2-minute short film is the final scene where a white tropical flower in its full blossom burns on its own without an external cause and even when it is drenched in water – a consummate simulation of irony and displacement in this time of ecological crises. One can see a contest of the elements of water and fire: invoking a rainforest under siege, and thus, a queer telling of tropical history unfolds before the screen. As fire consumes the evanescent flower, a strange voice over echoes the

words: “nature’s grudge has no mercy. Be it in this world or another. In this lifetime or the next”. This didactic turn of the poetic element in the film reflects nature’s brute consequences, while still gesturing toward the uncertain future as evinced by the lines “another” and “next” referring to different worlds and lifetimes to come. In this regard, the film becomes both queer and tropic not only because of the production, set, and director, but chiefly because of its ability to turn things into something else, in this case, to let them turn to an almost impossible future.

Figure 3. ***Burning Flower scene.***



Panx Solajes, *Iskwater*, 2014

The queer potential of the two films rests on the experimental nature of its tropical imageries that seamlessly coincide with the poetic voice over. Its reimagined ecosystem summons the triumph of the *homo tropicus* to “terrify the monovision of the altitudinal northern” (Jacobo, 2011, p.75) in that the tropics offers visions that are only impossible in other zones of the earth. The peculiarity and elusiveness of their images announce its tropical queerness, its distinction from the heteronormative syntax as it approaches the region of the not yet. Panx Solajes’ penchant for the eccentricities of these objects is the very heart of queer world-making in the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan. Such intimacy between the queer, tropics, and cinema, allow imaginaries to surmount a formulaic storytelling of climate disaster as its audience are bound to discover endless permutations of the possible.

Orality and Visuality of *Himurasak*

Panx Solajes’ post-Haiyan short film, *Himurasak*, takes into account supernatural and even millenarian phantasms of typhoon survivors who attempt to explain how a calamity of such magnitude befell them. Thus, their stories are not simply mindless ruminations, but are a tropic extertion of imagination where the impossible becomes possible; be it a supernatural apparition or disaster afterlives in coastal communities.

At the onset of 2024, a town in Sarangani, a southern province in the Philippines, experienced an unusual school of sardines rushing toward the coast. Reports claimed that at least a hundred villagers brought home 20-30 kilos of juvenile sardines. The local station of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) was quick to allay the fears of the fisher folk communities by assuring that this was just a result of a changing water temperature and "lack of planktons to feed on" (Philippine Star, 2024). However, this peculiar, yet natural, phenomenon has a specific name in Waray, a language spoken largely in Samar and Leyte: "*himurasak*." Little is known about this word in the actual lexicographic entries. The century old *Diccionario Bisaya-Hispano* of Antonio Sanchez de la Rosa mentions its close cognate, *himusac,* which refers to the most ideal time to sow or harvest. According to Panx Solajes' research video and local lore, *himurasak* pertains to excessive fishes that go ashore and are signals of an omen of something catastrophic to come. This then becomes the premise of Solajes' short film *Himurasak* which translates into English as "Harvest of Souls". This 5-minute short film gathers the stories of the local folk who were gravely affected by Typhoon Haiyan. Instead of sharing realistic stories of survival, they open up uncanny, supernatural narratives which are featured in the film as a voice over paired with an ambient background sound.

Figure 4. *A Man and his Boat*.

Panx Solajes, *Himurasak*, 2015

In a separate video, Solajes presents the subjects in documentary style, facing the camera, naturally telling stories together in their coastal village's commonplaces, or in their homes – a *harampang* so to speak. This research component and the short film itself expose their singular intention to rekindle the orality of *susumaton*, the verbal storytelling in the Waray culture where fantastic and historical memories merge

(Alunan, 2016). One woman shares how the vision of Haiyan came to her in the form of a dream where her house was flooded and infested with sharks. Another story witnesses how angel-like birds, often compared to Saint Michael, quashed the strong tides about to hit the shore. At least two commentators made reference to a woman, presumably the Virgin Mary, who was at the shore commanding the high waters with her hands so that it would not reach the coastal villages. One story spoke of karma, reporting that a beggar was refused because of her stench, and portentously retorted that all of the villagers would rot in a few days. The first story that can be heard in *Himurasak* is of a woman who recalls that a medium from Tagalog-speaking Luzon's millenarian group called the Sanctuary of the Holy Spirit, presaged that, "One day I shall cleanse Tacloban City. In years' time, sea vessels will be brought inland. Those who do not listen will die." Filipino historian on Visayan cultures, George Borrinaga, presents a historical reference to this:

> Furthermore, sectarian predictions and fears about an imminent and supernaturally-ordained period of world transforming cataclysm that would spare only a faithful few from a largely corrupt society was not unique to the Philippines of the late 19th century. It nevertheless introduced to local traditions additional details and stages to past prophecies of extreme events such as Padre Gaspar's prediction of a coming "lunop" (deluge) that would transform the world. (2019, p. 89).

Here, Borrinaga establishes the trope of flooding as a usual recourse to narrate a discontent in the present that requires cleansing. Inasmuch as it is framed biblically, it also an anticipation of the need to transcend toward a promising future. In the *Himusarak* documentary component, the interview subjects are not simply drawn out of their daily lives to provide ethnographic data as native informants. They were present before a camera to lay bare the "limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking that" (Foucault, 2002, p. xvi). They teach us that the seemingly sophisticated and clinical ways of coping with catastrophes are only narrow paths to a full understanding of tropical nature. Solajes, in this case, troubles, tropicalizes, and queers, the conventions of a documentary through the fantastic stories of people who hold on to it as truth.

In the short film, as the voice over looms dominantly, its sequences cover quotidian sights such as the moon cast by a sun set's overpowering light, the moonlight's reflection in water, and a man pushing the full weight of his wooden boat to shore away from the buoyancy of seawater. The series ends with an aerial shot of a woman on the shore wearing a white veil. This mise-en-scene goes through the motions of the woman solemnly walking and repetitive waves that barely breach her feet. The aerial shot moves toward the woman as she kneels with her face gesturing toward the sky, her body unperturbed by waters. The camera then pans away from her and now captures the coastal tip of the island with the woman almost indistinguishable from the

unrest of the sea's waves. As she looks up the rustic skies, it intimates what Muñoz calls "ecstatic time" where in a "moment of contemplation one looks back at the scene from one's past, present, and future" (2011, p.32). A specific sense of dignity echoes in the way she kneels where the land and the sea meet. There is no submission, but rather, the "willingness of a body to treat the sublime as beautiful and transform terror into tenderness" (Jacobo, 2011, p.80). What was earlier feared in *Balud* is now embraced in *Himurasak* as part of life.

Figure 5. ***Praying Woman Scene.***

Panx Solajes, *Himurasak*, 2015

The coalescence of the rustic local color, the kinetic sea water, the figure of the veiled woman, and the storied tonalities of the locals open up a distinct affective relationship with trauma and a witnessing borne out of curiosity and patience rather than objectivity. Solajes' vision looks away from the spectacle of environmental and human suffering by presenting the bareness of everyday life in a coastal village. Such a gaze rejects the erosion of queer imagination in the tropics and the formulaic obsession on the "wound culture" (Seltzer, 1998) that packages tragedies into consumable entertainment. Furthermore, the "poisonous and insolvent" present (Muñoz, 2011, p. 30) is vanquished by the tales of the common folk who go beyond the deterministic quagmire of scientific, objective, reportage and reproductive politics. Thus, with *Himurasak*'s visual and oral potency, the "region of the not-yet" (Muñoz, 2011, p. 3) is in sight.

Conclusion: Beyond Troubled Tropics

Panx Solajes' post-Haiyan project renders the queer and tropical nature productively conjoined in echoing our troubled present of ecological degradation. It offers new

visibilities and imaginaries, away from the excessively spectacular tendencies of eco-films, which affirms at its very core an ethical prospect as it treads the delicate harmony between art and its commitment. It unsettles the spectator to aspire to novel ways of living rather than wallowing in hallowed inertia. One may recall Jean Baudillard's pessimism to the current state of the earth which led him to believe in a "global extermination of meaning": the end of truth and reason. Yet, in this case, one can only see the characteristic temperate/northerner monovision once again caught in a deadlock of imagination. Turning to the Subanon or river dwellers of the southern Philippines, Resil Mojares appears to inadvertently offer a retort to Baudillard when he writes about the "wilderness of signs" which reflects the reconciliation of the Subanon culture with their immediate environment. What for Northerners is a lush thicket of meaningless trees, is a vibrant ecology of meanings for the Subanon. Away from the constructs of the modern, a literate agency emerges and persists as long as the last tree stands. As in the films of Solajes, the tropical world too can lead to a queer future, for in this equatorial zone of the earth there is no drought of possibilities.

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