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Queering the Tropics: A Cartography of Tropical Materialism, Queer Ecology & Spectral Tropicality

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Abstract

This special issue entitled "Queering the Tropics" explores how queering as a methodology and gender and sexuality as a critical rubric complicate the study of the tropics and conceptions of tropicality. It also engages with how the tropics as a worldly zone, and the notion of tropicality as simultaneously material and imaginary, reconfigure notions of queer sexuality. In other words, our aim has been to study how the tropical might queer queerness itself. This is to attempt to understand queer as a way to initiate and pursue critical encounters with the tropical world—indeed to begin queering the tropics. This first part of the double special issue draws on queer and trans theories and LGBTQIA2+ studies to map encounters with tropical nature, including tropical materialisms, queer ecologies, and spectral tropicality. Decolonial praxis and Indigenous epistemologies also inform this cartography. The papers collected together in this special issue offer a richness that both critiques and expands queer studies.

Keywords: queer tropics, queer ecologies, spectral tropicality, tropical materialisms, decolonial tropics, Indigenous queer, queering the tropics

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Queering the Tropics

This special issue of "Queering the Tropics" sets out to explore how queerness may serve as a critical rubric through which the study of the tropics and conceptions of tropicality can be further complicated. As such, queerness is intuited here not as a mere phenomenon that unfolds in the tropical world, but also as a manner through which the unfoldings of the tropics itself can be apprehended. At the same time, the issue also considers how the tropics— as a worldly zone encompassing the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn— and the notion of tropicality—as simultaneously material and imaginary—might reconfigure queerness itself. In this sense, the queer and the tropical are entangled here, as to open possibilities of how the two might transform each other, so that the tropical might queer the queer, as much as the queer might queer the tropics. Drawing from various fields such as queer and trans theories, LGBTQIA2+ studies, queer ecologies and ecofeminism, queer spectrality, decolonial studies, and indigenous studies, the papers gathered in this special issue offer a richness that critiques and expands both the queer and the tropical.

"Queering the Tropics" is presented as a double special issue centered around two interconnected subthemes. The first issue is prominently concerned with queer nature and addresses tropical materialisms, queer ecology, and spectral tropicality. This crucial landscape intertwines with the second issue, which addresses decoloniality, tropical Indigeneity, and queer cultures. The two issues certainly inform each other, creating a dynamic in which papers crisscross back and forth between these themes, mapping a complex queer cartography across the tropics. In this first issue on "Queering the Tropics," we encounter instances of tropical materialisms, erotic queer ecology, and spectral tropicality from Brazil, the Philippines, Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka, the Caribbean, and Tropical Africa.

Journeying into Tropical Materialisms

In the year 1492, somewhere in the Caribbean, Christopher Columbus, in his voyage to search for India (see Gómez, 2008), wrote in a letter he sent back home that the earth was perhaps not as perfectly round as explorers have previously thought. Instead, he proposed that it must be "in the shape of a pear that is quite rounded, except at the peak where the nipple is located, as if it were a round ball, and in a place that was as if a woman's teat was positioned there, as if this part of the breast was the highest peak" ["*de la forma de una pera que sea toda muy redonda, salvo allí donde tiene el pezón que allí más alto, ó como quien tiene una pelota muy redonda, y en un lugar della fuese como una teta de mujer allí puesta, y que esta parte deste pezón sea la más alta*"] (Beck, 2021, p. 21; Columbus, 1892, pp. 284-285). His description

of the landscape was particularly crucial, for it started among explorers the practice of giving the places they "discovered" names that directly pertain to women's bodies. Indeed, to date, no known place has been given a name that refers instead to men's nipples (Beck, 2021, p. 24).

Such a bestowing of a female name was obviously far from innocent or simply flattering. The scholar Anne McClintock (1995), for one, crucially points out that this gesture is part of the long tradition of European porno-tropics, which figures the "uncertain continents" and archipelagos, most of which are located in the tropical zone, to be "libidinously eroticized…[as] visions of the monstrous sexuality" (p. 36). Women were particularly evoked in these imaginaries, as it was to them that the excessive and the unbridled—indeed, the intemperate—were commonly ascribed, in contrast to the ironically purported restraint and self-mastery of men. Elsewhere, Greta Gaard (2004) notes that this discursive recourse to nature has served as an excuse for the imposition of colonial patriarchal norms "to the detriment of women, nature, queers, and persons of color" (p. 129). The Catholic church, for instance, via the theologian Tomás Sánchez in his *De Sancto matrimonii sacramento*, insisted that intercourse between a man and a woman—as intercourse *must* only happen between a man and a woman, always after their marriage, of course—should have the latter lie supine, like the earth to be plowed and sowed with seeds; having the woman on top of the man was out of the question, being supposedly "absolutely contrary to the order of nature" (Gutiérrez 1991, in Gaard, 2004, pp. 35-36).

This order, however, could not be further from the natural or the nature of the tropics, imposed as it is by the colonial temperate world. In the Philippine tropics, for example, the animist nature spirits (*diwata* or *anito*), who are often associated with particular landscapes, were forced out as waves of colonialists and missionaries made forays into the country. For instance, the nature spirit of Mount Makiling on the island of Luzon, which was of indeterminate sexuality in indigenous cosmology, transformed into the imaginary of a female goddess at rest—a vision enforced by the Spanish colonial power:

> Our *diwatas*…died one by one as the Spanish *muertos*, *duendes*, *encantos*, and *cafres* took over our caves and earth mounds and forests and trees. Only the androgynous diwata of Makiling survived, because it transformed itself into a seductive myth, her long brown hair waving in the wind, her Andalusian nose cutting an angular silhouette in the twilight as she sat stock still on a rock and dipped her lovely pointy toes into the Laguna. And then, for a coup de grace, she appended "Maria" into her place of origin—and thus became the fairy godmother Mariang Makiling. This was perhaps the first sex change operation in the history of the Philippines. (Cruz-Lucero, 2007, p. 18)

Rosario Cruz-Lucero's description is instructive as it not only emphasizes the constructedness of the common troping of the environment as woman—a critical reminder against the danger of essentialism, that has been long pointed out by scholars (see for instance, Warren, 1993, pp. 265-271; Shiva, 1988, ch. 1; Sargisson, 2001)—but also proposes that the indigenous tropics was not entirely replaced or obliterated by the colonial project. Instead, the tropics transformed itself, adapting to the violent colonial reordering of the world, if only to perhaps subvert it too in time. For indeed, while the turning-woman of the gender indeterminate *diwata* could be read simplistically as the triumph of the colonial reordering, the possibility that this same instance of transversion can be intuited as a performance of queer tropical agency also remains to presents itself, and insists itself to be considered, as a crucial and necessary gesture in the continued struggle to emancipate the tropics from its common misconception as simply a historically subservient subject (see Lundberg et al., 2023a; 2023b).

Thus queerness, in this special issue, is intuited not only as pertaining to the gender diverse, but also as the harnessing of a "mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 1). Tropical queering suggests not only that the worldly zone of the tropics has been tempered by colonial powers; but it has also, in the same process, engaged in queering coloniality and neocoloniality. In other words, the tropics does not merely lie supine to be plowed and sown by the colonial seed. It is also crucial to underscore that here the "tropics" is not deployed as a mere "metaphor to designate the Global South" (Pereira, 2019, p. 5), but instead, calls forth the particular materiality of this worldly zone. The tropics is both "conceptual" and "physical" (Arnold, 1995, p. 142). While it is historically framed as the "West's environmental other" (Clayton, 2012, p. 180), it is more complexly shaped by the various encounters between human and nonhuman agents both within and without the tropical zone (see Lundberg et al., 2022; Benitez & Lundberg, 2022). And so, given this attunement to its materiality, the tropics—just like the nonhuman in general (see Luciano & Chen, 2015; Muñoz et al., 2015)—is regarded here as entangled with and constitutive of the queerness, in its sheer diversity, being articulated in this special issue.

To further a deep understanding of the materiality of the tropics, this special issue also engages with the important theoretical insights offered by queer ecology. Both tropical materialism, as briefly described above, and queer ecology place an emphasis on the nature of the tropics, yet they also do more: each recognizes that the cosmologies of the tropics are alive with nature spirits. In a turn to recognize and pay obeisance to these spirit worlds—which are intricately entangled with material, ecological, and human worlds—we also invoke the notion of spectral tropicality.

The Erotics of Queer Ecology

Queer ecology draws together understandings of the erotic and nature in the tropics in complex ways. For example, studying queer ecologies might reveal the ways in which many cultures of the tropics understood the erotic in nature, and as natural. Queer approaches might further consider the inseparability of tropical lands from people and living things to emphasize the importance of ecosystems and indigenous ways of knowing and being. For instance, the violent production (and manipulation) of nature and spaces in the Caribbean often produced what Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley calls erotic geographies. Tinsley, in *Thiefing Sugar*, discusses the position of violence in the tropics that colonized people experienced: "The metaphoric phrase *thiefing sugar* calls up the contested space of the cane field: a site of sexual violence and exploited labor, a Caribbean landscape that was never a natural topos but one constructed for colonial purposes" (2010, p. 3). Tinsley highlights how nature is inseparable from the colonial histories that have altered and defined it, and she argues that interior and exterior spaces are not so easily divided in the Caribbean, where "erotic geographies" often underlie same-sex sexual relationships that challenge norms formed during periods of great duress and oppression in opposition to slavery's stifling conditions. Tinsley furthermore asserts that understanding queer identities and relationships in the Caribbean are complicated because colonial binary metaphors like "the closet" and "coming out" are problematic to an understanding of nonheteronormative relationships and identities in the Caribbean, as they fail to consider the sociocultural importance of landscape and access to land (2010, p. 27). Queer ecologies can be used to better understand the importance of this relationship.

"Queer ecology allows us to understand the links provided by queer theory to understand that our pleasures are not merely between humans, but are expanded and significantly shaped by the production of nature and the space around us," write Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson (2010, p. 37). Thus, queer ecology suggests, as the authors go on to say, "a new practice of ecological knowledges, spaces, and politics that places central attention on challenging hetero-ecologies from the perspective of non-normative sexual and gender positions" (2010, p. 22). In other words, queer ecologies seek to establish diverse gender and sexual positionalities in environmental spaces, practices, epistemologies, and ways of life, challenging European colonial understandings of the relationships between human beings and nature. This includes recognizing queer people as "natural," and acknowledging that our idea of a "natural order" is largely constructed. At the same time, queer ecology recognizes the abundance of queer non-human behaviors in our global flora, fauna, and ecosystems, which only substantiates how much our world is a very queer place indeed. Viewing the world through a queer ecological lens reminds us that tropical landscapes—"wilderness," as well as human environments—are not spaces restricted

solely for the pleasure, dominance, and superiority of a European-white-male prerogative, and when combined with decolonial studies in the tropics, can demonstrate the various ways that this truth is substantiated by historical records and accounts of harmonious balance between queer and non-queer sexual behaviours and identities in many indigenous populations before they were colonized by Europeans. This is important work for queering the tropics, for it can help to dismantle preconceived notions of the relationship between queerness and nature to realize that much of the homophobia and ecophobia present in the tropics is a remnant of colonialism.

The colonial concept of Nature is deeply ingrained in a discourse of sexuality and gender, and thus it is impossible to have queer ecologies, even ecocriticism, without a commitment to decoloniality because, as Greta Gaard (1997) notes, erotophobia and ecophobia are so deeply intertwined (2004). Thus, to queer ecology means to scrutinize the intersections and boundaries of sexuality/gender and environment to understand the biosocial constitution of the material, nonhuman world, and our experiences and perceptions of what constitutes it. Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson (2010, p. 5) explain: “Queer, then, is both noun and verb in this project: ours is an ecology that…calls into question heteronormativity itself as part of its advocacy around issues of nature and environment — and vice versa.” Our epistemologies and ontologies need a framework for critiquing the ways in which our environment is queer and complex: interconnected, adaptive, erotic, diverse, sexual, and always evolving toward something new and different in a way that best benefits the overall ecological system in which we live. Tropical queer ecologies offer a decolonial option which can transform our understanding of not only how nature and culture influence one another, but also how sexuality and diverse gender identities are inherent to and have always been a part of life.

Queer ecologies in short aim to undo and recognize the damage caused by distancing the nonhuman environment from the human and to develop a sexual politics that considers “the natural world and its biosocial constitution” (Mortimer-Sandilands & Erikson, 2010, p. 5) to understand how sex influences discourses on nature, and environment on sexuality. Queer ecologies destigmatize the relationship between conceptions of nature and those who identify as queer by exploring the ways that ecological diversity, coalition building, empathy, and queer agency rewrite colonial notions of nature and subvert the logic of coloniality that has produced the patriarchy, heteronormativity, racism, and capitalist exploitation that has resulted in exclusion, oppression, division of the human from naturalized environments, and environmental destruction. Queer ecologists address “nature trouble” by reclaiming the term *nature* from the logic of coloniality. Several essays in this special issue examine how aspects of queer ecologies enable important decolonial work in the tropics. Moreover, many of

this special issue's authors acknowledge how queering the topics is inseparable from indigenous landscapes of ecological-spirit worlds.

Invoking Spectral Tropicality

Any attempt at Queering the Tropics must engage with "queering" simultaneously as calling forth gender and sexual diversities, as well as participation in a decolonial maneuver of queering both the term *queer* (as a western construct) and the notion of the tropics. To carry out this second task, queering the tropics must necessarily address the notion of tropicality—and indeed, to carry out an act of queering tropicality.

Invariably tropicality was and is envisioned through an imaginary of dualist/dueling tropical landscapes. "In one imaginary the tropics is a Garden of Eden, presenting landscapes and waterscapes of rich biodiversity—a fecund, exotic, paradise. The opposing image conjures the tropics as a torrid zone—wild, primitive, unconquerable, inhospitable and pestilential" (Lundberg et al., 2022, p. 3). What is particularly significant in descriptions of the tropics is this "over-profusion of splendour and hostility" (Benitez & Lundberg, 2022, p. 2). In queering the tropics, we must remain alert to these ecologies of the tropics, to the very materiality of the tropics—environments, climates, geophysics, landscapes. The nature of the tropics can no longer be denigrated as mere inert matter; it is agential, arising like a specter through tropicality. Thus, to queer tropicality requires us to see and acknowledge the "crucial role that the nonhuman materials also perform in the tropicality of this ecology" (Benitez & Lundberg, 2022, p. 2). In short, in the discourse of tropicality, there is also something else happening, what we might envision as decolonial tropicality.

A decolonial tropicality has been considered by the Caribbean author, politician, and poet Aimé Césaire through his notion of *tropicalité.* Thinking through a "jouissance" of material ecologies of his native Martinique, Césaire engaged in an anti-colonial act involving a return of the repressed.

> Much of the work of *tropicalité* appeared in the literary review journal *Tropiques* from 1941 to 1945. This collection of writings invoke tropical tropes as insurrectional images to put into question and push back (return) imagery of the tropical sublime and overabundance to colonial France's patriarchal self-image (Clayton, 2021, p.71). An example from *Tropiques* shows this potential of the materiality of the tropics in speaking back. Pierre Mabille's piece 'La Jungle' declares that "'tropical paradises suppose the existence of prisons'…. For Césaire this 'sinister jungle' was a disparaged, self-imprisoning and fatal world" (Clayton, 2021, p.71). The jungle (as both ecology and imagery) anticipated Césaire's *Discours sur le Colonialisme* (1950); in

> turn, *Discourse on Colonialism* became a foundational text in postcolonialism. (Lundberg et al., 2023b, p. 5).

Recent scholarship, following Césaire's notion of *tropcalité*, is endeavoring to show how the tropics, in and of itself, has never been a passive, inert, (feminine/effeminate) body, supine under the colonial masculine gaze. The tropics itself is agential and capable of returning to disrupt/queer the temperate suppression of this worldly zone. Indeed, this act of queering tropicality could also be seen as a 'return of the repressed'.

In her work on spectral tropicality, Sophie Siddique Harvey (2008) calls up the return of the repressed through cinematic horror. Spectral tropicality unsettles normative spaces—and it does this through tropical liminality. As she notes, what gives such liminal spaces a spectral sheen can be understood through Sigmund Freud's notion of the uncanny. The uncanny, according to Freud, is that which "has been repressed and now returns" (Freud, 2003, p. 147–8). Of note, Harvey adds, "what makes this form of dread especially horrific is that a sense of the uncanny 'goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar'" (Harvey, 2008, p. 124).

To map out spectral tropicality, Harvey (2008) calls on two horror films, both of which portray female protagonists who cross boundaries between human and spirit worlds. One features a Filipina domestic worker and calls on the Chinese Hungry Ghost Festival and a marriage with the ghost of the dead. The second calls up the indigenous Malay myth of Pontianak, the female ghost-vampire who haunts the Malay Archipelago—the vengeful specter of a beautiful woman who dies during childbirth under violent conditions (Lundberg, 2008). Both films are set within uncanny tropical landscapes, the first amidst Singapore's rundown Chinese shophouses, and the second in the eerie jungles of equatorial Borneo.

Spectral presences and nature spirits appear through liminal spaces and bodies. As famously studied by Victor Turner (1967), liminality is betwixt and between the structures of society. The queer and the tropical are both liminal—Othered—and they offer a time and space through which the repressed may return. In spectral tropicality, that which has been repressed returns through uncanny places, wild landscapes, and queer bodies. Mapping this spectral tropicality further, we may return to the beginning of this introductory essay on Queering the Tropics, where, in the Philippines, the indigenous and gender indeterminate nature spirit—sex-changed into a supine female landscape—may yet return to haunt, and indeed queer, heteronormative notions of the tropics.

A Queer Cartography of the Tropics

The title "Queering the Tropics" is committed to attending to the queer in this particular worldly zone—a critical gesture that remains open for further possibilities in the contemporary scholarly landscape, given that the queer, as the works in this special issue demonstrate, abounds in the tropics. The first part of this double special issue features works that turn to tropical materialisms, queer ecologies, and spectral tropicalities. Through these subthemes, the authors show how queer dispositions have been tempered and marginalized by heteronormative notions originally arriving with colonialism from the temperate zones, but now also come from within the tropical world, and thus insist on a decolonial turn. The papers presented here range across the tropics from Brazil in Latin America, to the Philippine and Indonesian archipelagos, over to the Subcontinent of India and the island of Sri Lanka, across to the Caribbean, and further to Tropical Africa.

Tropical Materialisms: Brazil and the Philippines

The first essay takes us to Brazil with Jaya Jacobo's "A Love that Burns Hot Enough to Last," which describes "Scenes from Trans Tropical Love," which refers to her own experiences as she also moves between tropical locations—from the Philippines to Brazil and beyond. The essay evokes the materiality of tropical nature as she explores the prospects and difficulties of queer relations.

Reminiscing on the variety of ways Brazilian men would greet her, she writes,

> 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! (This issue, p.19-20)

The essay's title is a line from Whitney Houston's "I Wanna Dance with Somebody," and the personal descriptions, echoing the song, reveal the heartache of a trans woman seeking love:

> "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 interresado 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." (p. 20)

From Brazil, we move to several papers set in the Philippines. In Allan Derain's short story, "Ang Batang May Alagang Aso," translated by Christian Benitez, as "The Boy with the Pet Dog," we are introduced to the first yearnings of boyhood desire as the tropical season becomes so hot you can feel it crawling on your skin. The queerness in the story arises subtly through linguistic tropes that materialize through the nature of the tropics itself: brown bodies moist with sweat, birds flitting between the laden branches of mango trees, butterflies unfolding from chrysalises. The boy's pet dog creates the encounter between Josemarie and a young laborer, Jacildo, who arrives from the provinces seeking work on his parents' farm.

> Jacildo burst out laughing. And this time, what Josemarie saw wasn't just a butterfly coming out of its chrysalis, but countless swiftlets flocking and flying around mango trees, just like how the birds would always flock at this time of year in their orchard. (This issue, p. 29)

The story's translator suggests that the tale is a "tropical queer reimagination of writing desire" (Abstract). This desire arises through thick descriptions of tropical materiality through which readers sense the awakening of the boy's desire.

Raymon Ritumban in his paper "Queer Tropical Gothic: Parody, Failure, and Space in Nick Joaquin's 'Gotita de Dragon,'" explores this children's story written during the time of Martial Law in the Philippines. Joaquin, known for his tropical gothic adult fiction, also wrote many stories for children during the time of the regime. The tale "Gotita de Dragon" is a queer parody of a pious Catholic legend in which Saint Martha slays a dragon. The story starts with a poet "scooping 'a wee drop of dragon' out of his beer, which he then christens Gotita de Dragon and, when the lizard says 'I'm a he, not a she,' nicknames him Goti" (this issue, p. 37). This triggers a further concern, "'Because I'm so short?' asked the baby lizard anxiously. 'Because,' reassured the poet, 'someday you'll be as big as a gothic dragon: *un dragon gotico*!'" (p. 41). Thus, a series of adventures are put into motion as Goti sets out to become a Gothic dragon with the help of cockroach and mouse. The tale revolves around queer masculine human and animal characters within the tropics of othered bodies and spaces and the specific materiality of Manila's red-light districts and the polluted Pasig River. And in these othered places the queering takes place.

Queer Ecologies: The Philippines, Indonesia, India

Lesbian writing from the Philippines has suffered from invisibility. Alexandra Bichara, in her "Tropical Nature and Entangled Invisibilities in *Tingle*: *Anthology of Pinay Lesbian Writing*" examines how many of the stories in this Anthology, which inscribe lesbian voices, often do so through invoking nature. Undertaking a queer ecofeminist reading she draws out the connection between women and nature as she sets out to

reveal the "invisible-made-visible of both women-loving-women and tropical nature—whether it be an anonas fruit or an injured butterfly" (this issue, p. 58). The tropical ecology is revealed in food, insects, dolphins, turtles, landscapes, islands, seas, and the archipelago itself. These stories of lesbian Filipinas' passion contribute to the exploration of ecofeminist emancipatory strategies, including blurring boundaries between women's bodies and nature, and re-eroticizing tropical landscapes "inscribing a rich and varied textual ecosystem" (p. 64) and "revealing how these non-heteronormative perspectives perpetuate or deconstruct ecological beliefs in the Philippines as a particularly tropical country" (p. 58).

Turning to tropical climate and typhoons, which are particularly experienced in the Philippines, Ian Harvey Claros draws our attention to how the queer and tropics coincide to create a new way of sensing in this era of climate crisis. In "Queering the Troubled Tropics in Panx Solajes' Post-Haiyan Short Films," Claros examines three films of the queer Filipino filmmaker which observe the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan, locally known as Yolanda. This tropical storm, "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" (p.77) which flooded cities and towns. However, rather than visualizing devastation and the overwhelming ecological degradation, Claros notes 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" (p.84). The films are experiments in the troubled tropics where the filmmaker strives for a resistant form of queer visibilities that engenders a sense of an optimistic future through the relations of human and nonhuman subjectivities in a response to the current climate crisis.

From the Philippines we cross over to Indonesia, where the research team of Rusdianto, Ibnu Maryanto, Aris Arif Mundayat, Hidayat Ashari, Fauziah, Dony Satrio Wibowo, and Wawan Sujarwo take us to a UNESCO World Heritage site. In their paper "Queering Tropical Heritage: Flora and Fauna Reliefs in Karmawibhangga, Borobudur Temple, Indonesia" the team examine the 160 panels of the Karmawibhangga carved reliefs at the Buddhist archaeological site. Undertaking a queer ecological reading of a representative selection from the reliefs, they demonstrate how this ecological presence adds a further dimension to the accepted stories of the panels as only depicting the tenets of karma. Their method furthers understandings of the natural, temporal, and symbolic aspects of tropical heritage. As they state:

> Analytical methods from queer taxonomy and ecology, archaeology, and heritage, are used in this study to reveal tropical flora and fauna

> species and the roles they play in the context of a fuller story of the panels. Such a practice of queer heritage provides a new perspective on how to reveal the story of the carved panels of Borobudur Temple. (This issue, p. 98)

Moving between two novels set in Indonesia and India, Aritra Ghosal and Anindita Ghosal present their paper, "Queering Tropical Nature: Decolonising Hetero-Ecologies through Indigenous Epistemes in *My Father's Garden* and *Man Tiger*." Through the two novels the authors reveal queer intersections that act to shapeshift human-nonhuman duality. Taking up decoloniality through queer ecology their paper dislodges hetero-ecologies via the Indigenous epistemologies that are evident in each of the novels. As the authors point out: "non-normative behaviours and relationships among various species of animals and plants are abundant in nature." And they go on, "Indigenous societies have often revered nature and its non-normative behaviours, viewing them as a symbol of balance and harmony. This episteme is based on an ethos of interconnectedness where lands, plants, animals, and humans coexist in relation" (p.118). The Indonesian novel by Eka Kurniawan entitled *Man Tiger* (2004) moves beyond bio-ontological notions of the human by embracing the queer erotics of a biophilic desire between human and tiger. It deconstructs androcentric, heteronormative and hierarchical ideas regarding nature and gender. The Indian novel by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar*, My Father's Garden* (2018), takes up the *Adivasi* Sarnaistic knowledge and practices of the Indigenous communities who live in the eastern Indian state of Jharkhand, which means 'land of forests.' According to traditional Adivasi beliefs, notions of queer humans and queer nature are viewed as an integral part of life.

In southern India, Sreya Mukherjee explores the local notion of tropicality and ecology and how it intersects with the eighteen-day transexual festival of Tamil Nadu. In "Kūttāṇṭavar's Festivals: Tropicality, Transsexuality, Death & Rebirth in Tamil *Mahābhārata* Folk Cultures," she examines the intersectionality of tropical landscapes and the specificities of the Kūttāṇṭavar festival. The paper undertakes an examination of the notion of tropicality, placing it within the local Tamil tropical ecocultural notion of *tinai,* which gives understanding to local human-environment interactions and cultural practices. The interconnection of queer identity and its expression within the context of Tamil Nadu's cultural landscape is intertwined with ancient myths and the continuing practice of their associated rituals. As the author explains:

> The Kūttāṇṭavar cults that are spread across the five tropical *tiṇai* zones of Tamil Nadu are especially significant because the primary deity of this cult, Kūttāṇṭavar, who is usually considered to be a warrior icon, is unexpectedly reclaimed by the marginalised transsexuals in Tamil society, known as Alis. (This issue, p. 139)

The festival's numbers reach into the hundreds of thousands, "comprising Alis not only from various regions of Tamil Nadu but also myriad transsexual communities from across India as well as from abroad, notably from the tropical regions of Southeast Asia such as Myanmar, Singapore, and the Malay Peninsula…" (p.143).

Spectral Tropicality: Sri Lanka, the Caribbean, Tropical Africa

Taking us to the south Asian island of Sri Lanka, Ewa Łukaszyk, in "Ghosts, Eco-Queer, Sri Lankan History: Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida,*" argues that Karunatilaka's novel undertakes a queering of historical vision through reading the country's recent civil war with its mythological origins. Spectral presences are evoked through both ancient spirits and the central character. "The gay photographer Maali Almeida wakes up after his death in a sort of bureaucratized version of Bardo, the Buddhist limbo" (this issue, p. 165).

> In a vision that could be a depiction of the imaginary torments in Bardo, but nonetheless proves to be a part of this-world reality, bodies are chopped into pieces and thrown into the Lake Beira or stored in an industrial plant originally destined for frozen seafood. Soldiers are butchered, and victims of riots are burned alive. (p.165)

The novel, in its reinvented Buddhist/Saivite perspective, reveals the horrors of the Sri Lankan interethnic genocide entwined with violence of the primordial queen Kuveni, as told in the ancient *Mahāvaṁsa*. When the dead photographer fails in his mission to reveal the political corruption of the war through a posthumous exhibition, he chooses to enter into the River of Rebirth and is led there by the ghost of a leopard. Here, the novel ends in an ecocentric vision where queer relations expand to include the intimate connectivity of all beings and non-beings.

Travelling across to the opposite side of the earthly tropics, Hannah Regis's paper, "Nature and Shadows in the Caribbean: Queer Subjectivity and Identity in Helen Klonaris's "Ghost Children" and Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night,*" opens to the spectral universe and tropical nature of this archipelago. As she states:

> In the aftermath of chattel slavery, forced indentureship, and cataclysmic incidents of history that drew peoples from Europe, Africa, and Asia, the modern New World Caribbean was birthed. These ruptures…continue to occupy the minds of several writers in the contemporary Caribbean world…[who]…have turned to uncanny, spectral, and mythic environments. (This issue, p.180)

Regis argues that the two stories, penned by a Greek-Bahamian and Trinidadian-born writer, "enter into nature with a creative audacity to fill the gaps and holes in history

with new knowledge and myriad self-expressions. What is thus striking is the sense in which the spectral surfaces the subjugated knowledge of fluid sexualities and deviant identities (p.180). Each text subverts neoimperialist perspectives that censure queer and non-heteronormative desire as monstrous and strange, instead finding a therapeutic space in tropical nature.

The last paper in this collection takes us to Tropical Africa. Wesley Macheso, in "Queering Tropical African Heteronormativity through Spirit Worlds: Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji*," is concerned with the ways in which contemporary queer African literature assists in the processes of decoloniality. It does this through inscribing alterities to systematically imposed African gender and sexual realities. This, Macheso argues, is an epistemic project of counterfactualism. The novel by Akwaeke Emezi locates queer time and queer space within indigenous African worldmaking, in this case thinking through the Igbo mythology of Ogbanje spirit children. In the novel, the protagonist dies on the first page of the book, yet we meet him throughout the following pages.

> Vivek is androgynous and is also able to partake in both the world of the living and the spirit world of the dead and the unborn. In this way, Emezi counters the factuality of heteronormative conceptions of life and death, gender and sexuality, and time and space. This is one of the ways in which the novel becomes a tool of decolonization by queering colonial notions of tropicality and its attendant logics. (p.201)

Through this move, the novel counterfactuals the notion of African queerness as an act of neocolonialism, and demonstrates the ways in which tropical epistemologies, including those indigenous to Africa, "are already queer in their non-binary imagination of life and death, human and spirit, gender and sexuality" (p.198).

To be Continued…

It is the hope of this issue that the configurations of the queer and the tropical that the above works consider may crucially interrupt how both categories have been imagined and discoursed, and perhaps offer other ways to do so. We continue this exploration in part two of "Queering the Tropics" as it both intersects with this current issue and further addresses decoloniality, tropical Indigeneity, and queer cultures.

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