eTropic: electronic journal of studies in the Tropics

Queering *Tropically*: Sexuality, Indigeneity, Decoloniality, Spatiality

Christian Jil R. Benitez
Ateneo de Manila University, the Philippines & Chulalongkorn University, Thailand
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0654-1698

Gregory Luke Chwala
University of Cincinnati, Blue Ash, USA
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2666-935

Anita Lundberg
James Cook University, Australia
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0271-4715

Abstract

This is the second collection of papers in a two-part issue on the theme of Queering the Tropics. This second issue begins by delving into the notion of "Queering *Tropically,*" in other words, queering in a tropical manner or in the manner of the tropics. The term queering *tropically* simultaneously alludes to queering through tropes (figurative and performative), and queering through tropical materiality (climate, elements, nature). This issue asserts that the tropics has always been a space where queerness lives, not a place where queerness has arrived post colonialism; queerness was and is often recognized as part of nature in the tropics. This assertion is evident in discussions of Sexuality, Queer Indigeneity, and Decoloniality. Furthermore, Queering the Tropics in attending to the queer across the worldly zone of the tropics is inherently a spatial practice. The tropics, as the Other of the temperate zone, has been subjected to waves of colonialisms and their patriarchal and heteronormative power structures. Yet, the tropics subverts and inverts the structures and strictures of the temperate zone, and this Tropical Queer Spatiality opens up to myriad ways of queer being and becoming. Thus, the papers collected together in this special issue offers a richness that furthers queer studies.

Keywords: queering the tropics, queer tropes, queering tropically, queer sexuality, queer Indigeneity, decoloniality, queer spatiality, LGBTQIA2+

eTropic: electronic journal of studies in the Tropics publishes new research from arts, humanities, social sciences and allied fields on the variety and interrelatedness of nature, culture, and society in the tropics. Published by James Cook University, a leading research institution on critical issues facing the Tropics. Free open access, Scopus Scimago Q1. Indexed: Google Scholar, DOAJ, Crossref, Ulrich's, SHERPA/RoMEO, Pandora. ISSN 1448-2940. Cite: Author(s), Title of Paper, Editors (Eds.) Special Issue Title (Special Issue) *eTropic*, volume, issue, year, pages, DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.25120/etropic.23.2.2024.4108

Queering *Tropically*

On October 16, 2023, on the social media platform X, user @genesisfew (2023) posted now disabled media content with a caption that simply said, "whyd they eat" (where *eat*, as it colloquially circulates on the internet, pertains to gestures of "slay[ing], 'kill[ing] it' or do[ing] very well" (zebra_b1tch, 2019)). A few hours later, another user, @chrisiscluless (2023), reposted the same content, captioning it this time with what appears to be a provocation: "The Philippines has spoken…Brazil has 24 hours to respond." Garnering over 3.1 million views since its original posting, the content in question, as indicated by one of its couple of thousand reposts and replies, was that of "5 filipino queens dancing to water by tyla on a waterfall" (@UroborosHyejoo, 2023). Googling this exact phrase still leads to the original video, posted by Christian Paul Mamada (2023a; 2023b): shot in Campawan Curtain Falls in Baganga, Davao Oriental, on the southern island of Mindanao in the Philippines, the video features their group's "immediate choreography" to the South African singer and songwriter Tyla's song "Water," of which they were "enamored." Earning more than two million views and thousands of comments on TikTok, the video was engaged with by people all over the world, most notably from Thailand, Nigeria, and various parts of Latin America. Indeed, to the joy of many fans of Mamada's video, Tyla herself reposted it on her TikTok account on the very same day.

This particular instance is worth considering as it demonstrates the power of what Nina Wakeford (2000) in her landmark essay terms a cyberqueer space that opens itself up as "an existing place where not only will we" (that is, those that are violently marginalized by the cisheteropatriarchy) "feel at home, but…are even the 'natural' majority" (p. 404). In other words, such a space allows queer folx to not only "explore [their] sexuality and gender identity, [but also] find other people like themselves" (Robards et al., 2018, p. 163). And in the case of the aforementioned viral moment, this space is particularly figured as a tropical one, given the various elements of this specific worldly zone animating the overall phenomenon: the material setting and bodily performance from the Philippines, the hailing of and cheering from Brazilian and Thai kinfolx, and the reverberation of a song heavily influenced by the culture and various sounds of the South African subtropics (see Rys, 2024). In this sense, through the materiality of this very occurrence, it is as if a queer pantropical world finally comes into view, transcending national and geographical borders—a coming together that has been long hindered by various colonialisms and persistent imperialisms throughout history.

However, as Wakefield (2000, p. 404) also emphasizes early in her essay, cyberspace is primarily accessible only to those who utilize, if not outrightly possess, valuable resources such as a computer and strong internet connection, and so, despite the seemingly transcendental liberty it promises—for instance, being a supposed safe space for queer youth (see Woodland, 2000; Drushel, 2010; Lucero, 2017; Austin et al., 2020)—this space ultimately remains subject to the digital divide undergirded by unequal socio-material realities (Van Dijk, 2017). In the above example, this divide is even more complicated by the insistent ownership of dominating powers: Mamada's video, despite the traction it generated over a short period, which thus contributed to its virality at the time of Tyla's song (see Mendez II, 2023), was eventually disabled on X "in response to a report by the copyright owner" (@genesisfew, 2023). And so, what initially appeared as a pantropic queer wormhole has now become a void that, if anything, serves as a critical reminder: that with cyberspace enduring as one of the most important communication technologies where queerness is experienced and rehearsed (Shaw & Sender, 2016)—to the extent that in some cases queerness has been inadvertently and precariously turned into mere online "brand and personality" (Cabbuag & Benitez, 2022, p. 76)—what manifests itself as queer is, in fact, only fractional of what queerness is, and further could be. In other words, queerness persists in being queer, exceeding apprehensions, despite—or perhaps precisely because of—the representation it has amassed over time.

Thus, it is important to begin the second part of this double special issue on the theme Queering the Tropics with this particular example as it demonstrates the continuing urgency—even in the midst of the supposedly queerest years in our planetary history—in considering "Queering *Tropically*," that is, in its most oblique of turns (Benitez, 2022, pp. 238-239), especially as queerness itself is recognized as being intimately entangled with the worldly zone that is the tropics, in its liveliest materialities (Benitez & Lundberg, 2022; see also Benitez et al., 2024, p. 4). In other words, here we invoke that etymological intimacy in which *tropes* and the *tropics* (from the Latin *tropicus,* from Greek *tropikós*/τροπικός) each refer to a turning away, a turning back, a kind of eclipse. Thus, more than simply "tropicalizing" queerness, in the erroneous understanding of the term as merely "'adapting' concepts from Global North contexts to other parts of the world" (Gómez-Cruz et al., 2023, p. 217; see also Siles et al., 2024), which dangerously assumes that these "other parts"—the curiously left unnamed tropics—are passive fields for such concepts to inhabit purely, without contamination; this special issue asserts that queerness has already been long embodied by the tropics in its various forms of Indigenous, folk, and popular intuitions and practices. This special issue thus strives to resist the temptation to imagine the notion of the queer to be "travelling" from the so-called Global North to the tropics, however compelling this idea might be in the quest to "reinvent

and reconstruct queer genealogy" (Perreira, 2019, p. 48). Instead, as a preliminary decolonizing gesture, this issue claims that queerness, in its plenitude, has always been one with the tropics. Therefore, if any vestiges of the grammar of Queer Theory as an institution traditionally traced back to the Euro-western temperate world appear to linger here and in the pages of the following articles, these become ironically poignant reminders of the reality of the enduring colonialisms and neocolonialisms that continue to impact across the tropical world. Queering *Tropically*, that is, queering in a tropical manner, or in the manner of the tropics, makes it possible to offer the provocations of this special issue, with their turnings away, turnings around, and eclipses. Queering *tropically*, in the sense of queer(y)ing through tropes as a kind of seeing double, or irony, is likewise a turning around, a pushing back against enduring temperate (neo)colonialisms.

Queer Sexuality, Indigeneity, Decoloniality

The tropics has always been a place where queerness lives, not a place where queerness has arrived post colonialism. Moreover, queerness was and is often recognized as part of nature in the tropics. Recognizing this truth is in itself an act of decoloniality. Decolonial studies in the tropics demonstrate the various ways that this truth is substantiated by historical records and accounts of harmonious balance between queer and non-queer sexual behaviors and identities in many indigenous populations before they were colonized by Europeans. The process of understanding the queerness always existent in our socio-cultural environment is especially important in the tropics because of the ways in which colonialism disrupted and displaced queerness as an understood, functioning part of many indigenous cultures across tropical regions. This was done in part by prioritizing a white, patriarchal, heteronormative model of what is human above the more decentralized and diverse identity models European colonizers discovered among the indigenous populations they curtailed.

Maria Lugones (2010) argues in "Toward a Decolonial Feminism" that Europeans imposed a gender system of coloniality that placed white males as a model for the human, and females were understood from a normative position of "women," the inversion of men. Native female sexuality was often demonized; females were often cast as whores of Satan. Native male sexuality was depicted as hypersexualized. Racial construction was defined by Europeans as a conceptualization of gender. Indigenous people and the black slaves carried to the Americas were dehumanized and classified as non-human species, "as animals, uncontrollably sexual and wild" (p. 743). It is easy to see the devaluation of not only non-European peoples in this model but also the devaluation of nature, understood as all things not human and less than this very limited model of what is most

human. Subverting the logic of coloniality works to overturn the patriarchy, heteronormativity, racism, and capitalist exploitation that has resulted in exclusion, oppression, and 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.

Lugones notes in "Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System" (2007) that most Indigenous populations before European colonialism (notably nineteenth-century European colonialism) had different, less destructive agencies and relationships with their environments prior to colonization, including different perspectives of gender and sexuality. She furthermore posits that the modern colonial gender system did not impose "precolonial" arrangements but a new form of heterosexualism that disrupted pre-existing colonial agencies. She writes, "Colonialism…imposed a new gender system that created very different arrangements for colonized males and females than [even] for white bourgeois colonizers. Thus, it introduced many genders and gender itself as a colonial concept and mode of organization of relations of production, property relations, of cosmologies and ways of knowing" (p. 186). Lugones reminds us that for many Indigenous people, gender was not biological, sexuality was more liberating, and there were not even gender categories in many "precolonial" cultures. Native perspectives of gender and sexuality were often aligned with those of animals by European colonizers because they transgressed the conceptual boundaries of the colonizer. Realizing this is a starting point for queering the tropics: investigating these directions in the tropics can help to dismantle preconceived notions of the relationship between queerness and nature in the tropics in order to realize that much of the homophobia and ecophobia present in the tropics is a remnant of colonialism—not a feature of indigeneity. This recognition is a necessary decolonial act.

Settler colonialism continues to impact tropical regions, but over the last several decades, researchers of the tropics have offered up imaginative and analytical worlds influenced by cultural histories and repositories of knowledge that posit ways to deconstruct colonialism and move society towards more sustainable practices. These new ways of imagining the world through queering *tropically* suggest alternative paths for understanding human relationships with the more-than-human and the dynamic gender and sexual identities that exist across all lifeforms—the recognition of which is a decolonial act. By creating new ways of seeing, scholars across disciplines and interdisciplines can negotiate the complexities of the human to liberate us from the shackles of coloniality in the tropics. The imagination is a powerful tool that can be used to challenge inequalities and injustices.

Sylvia Wynter, in "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom," has put forth very similar arguments as Lugones. Wynter asks us: what does it mean to be human? She grounds an understanding of human in what she calls Man1 and Man2. She puts in the category of Man1 the form created from the European Renaissance to the eighteenth century with the rise of the physical sciences, and Man2, she argues, derived from that point on with the rise of the biological sciences, notably in nineteenth century models of taxonomy. These modes of being human, she writes, "were to be processes made possible only on the basis of the dynamics of a colonizer/colonized relation that the West was to discursively constitute and empirically institutionalize on the islands of the Caribbean and, later, on the mainlands of the Americas" (2003, p. 264). The globally expanding West, she argues, replaced the older dualisms of natural/supernatural and mortal/immortal with racial difference that was correlated with humanness: white/person of color = human/nonhuman. Wynter's work, which builds on the idea of sociogeny from Frantz Fanon, the idea that the origin/development of agency is the result of social factors, posits that the human is a combination of beliefs and assumptions, or "mythoi," and material matter, or "bios." Phylogeny, evolutionary diversification of species, group, or organism; ontogeny, the processes through which each of us embodies the history of our making; and sociogeny, together, define what it means to be human. Wynter furthermore argues that sociogeny makes it possible for the human to be rethought—to get out of the biological and tell new stories in the humanities and social sciences that enable decolonial, queered versions of the human to emerge.

This is to acknowledge how queering the topics, or queering tropically, is still inseparable from environmental, decolonial, and Indigenous studies. The queer in the tropics has always worked, and still works, to reclaim what is understood as natural, and hence reclaim nature from the logic of coloniality.

Tropics as Queer Spatiality

"Queering the Tropics," in its commitment to attending to the queer across the worldly zone of the tropics is inherently a spatial practice—a geography and a mapping. The tropics, as the Other of the temperate zone, has been subjected to waves of colonialisms with their concomitant patriarchal and heteronormative power structures. The tropics subverts and inverts these "temperate" structures and strictures, and thus tropical spaces enable us to critique and map the complexities of queering. Queering the Tropics contributes to broader discourses on gender and sexuality, highlighting the role of the tropics in pushing the boundaries of queerness. The tropics thus creates spaces that

challenge heteronormative narratives and structures—offering perspectives, both ancient and contemporary, for queer resistance and multiplicities of queer subjectivities.

Queer spatiality challenges traditional notions of space. These concepts explore how queer individuals navigate their lives beyond heteronormative social institutions, creating alternative ways of experiencing and dwelling in the world. Theories of queer spatiality analyze how queer people create identities, form socio-cultural communities, and counter oppressive structures through subversive spaces. In tropicalizing queer spatiality, we argue that the tropics in and of itself is queer; it is the subversive space par excellence. The tropics is heterotopic (Foucault, 1986), being a space that exists outside of and in opposition to the dominant, and continually dominating, societal norms of the temperate zone. The tropics serves as a site of resistance, a space of transformation, and is formed of myriad places, cultures, and natures that offer further ways of queering; it is a space of queer becoming (Nigianni & Storr, 2009)

While queer spatiality examines how spaces are constructed, navigated, and subverted by queer individuals and communities, we contend that the tropics itself, through its very materiality, interrupts and deflects the impingement of the "temperate."

Queering the Tropics: Mapping the Papers

The papers collected together here in Part Two of this double special issue on "Queering the Tropics" demonstrate how the queer abounds in the tropics and, furthermore, embraces the concept of "Queering *Tropically*" through articles that address both the tropes and material tropics of sexuality, Indigeneity, decoloniality, and spatiality. These papers range from Tropical Africa to the Caribbean, through the Southeast Asia countries of Thailand and the Philippines, up to subtropical Taiwan in East Asia, to the archipelago of Indonesia, across the regions and islands of the Pacific, including Sāmoa, and over to the South Asia countries of Bangladesh and India, finally arriving at the island of Sri Lanka.

Queering Tropically—Africa, the Caribbean, Southeast Asia, East Asia

The first group of papers address the concept of queering tropically. Each article, in different ways, demonstrates the intersection and the political significance of the notions and materiality of tropes and the tropics.

We begin in Africa with Niyi Akingbe's article titled, "Queering Authoritarianism in Uganda: Dissident Sexualities and Tropical African [anti]-Aesthetics in Stella Nyanzi's *No Roses*

from my Mouth." Akingbe argues that the collection of poems by medical anthropologist and activist Stella Nyanzi, written during her political imprisonment, takes up the practice of tropical [anti]-aesthetics in her queering of female sexualities. Through her poems, based in radical rudeness or insults and vulgarity, she creates "dissident female sexualities" to critique Uganda's authoritarian regime under President Yoweri Museveni. Tropes grounded in Baganda culture allow Nyanzi's poems "expressed in satire, sarcasm, irony, and burlesque" to politically protest "situations of staggering oppression" (this issue, p. 20). This is apparent in the poem ''Drenched Sanitary Pad'' that compares Museveni's thirty-eight years of escalating repression to a drenched sanitary pad stuck between a woman's legs: "Just as women remove their sanitary pads, / So shall we dispose of this dictator!'' (p. 27). Akingbe's article argues that the poems, in protesting the Uganda regime through dissident female sexualities, subvert literary stereotypes of African women as weak, helpless, and apolitical; furthermore, the article points out that tropical anti-aesthetics can be read as a pan-African response to the Western (English) culture of politeness and thus is a critique of colonialism/postcolonialism in Africa, as well as authoritarianism in Uganda.

Traveling from Africa to the Caribbean, we encounter Prabhudutta Samal and Swati Samantaray's article titled "Queer Narratives and Colonial Injustice: Tropical Landscape in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao."* The titular novel, written by Dominican-American writer Junot Díaz and set in his native Dominican Republic, explores tropical landscape as a generative trope that intertwines tropicality, social dynamics, culture, and history rooted in colonialism and the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Employing magical realism in his transcultural storytelling is part of a decolonial critique that shows the continuing effects of colonialism in shaping gender and identity in the contemporary Caribbean world. "This setting plays a crucial role in the novel's exploration of the characters' struggles with identity, particularly in how they navigate expectations of masculinity shaped by Spanish colonization, the oppressive Trujillo dictatorship, and their quest for self-definition in the post-colonial era" (this issue, p. 42). Queering of heterosexual normativity is enacted through its two main characters: the protagonist Oscar's masculine failures and the narrator Yunior's conflicted hypermasculinity; each exposes the limitations of Dominican masculinity shaped by violent colonial rule and its tropical landscapes of blood-soaked cane fields. Thus, Samal and Samantaray's article reads Diaz's novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as a tropical exploration of queering as a form of decolonial resistance, which exposes the lasting impact of colonial oppression on cultural and gender identities.

Moving across to the Southeast Asia region takes us to Thailand and Natthanai Prasannam's "Sissyphilia and Tropicopolitan Sensibilities: Queering the Star in Thai Boys Love Media." The paper demonstrates a "queer turn" in the Thai mediascape against gay men's sissyphobia via the changing images of internet celebrities in Thai Boys Love. The Boys Love (BL), or *yaoi* (Y), genre arose from the Japanese *seme/uke* trope and depicts "a romantic relationship between male characters *seme* and *uke*, which are comparable in status to a top and bottom" (this issue, p. 59). Prasannam explains that in the early Thai BL series, gay protagonists were acceptable as long as they did not appear effeminate and links this sissyphobia to the dominance of masculine gay images coming out of the West. His article explores recent examples of BL/Y that move from sissyphobia to embracing sissyphilia. He does this through merging the notions of "tropicopolitan," which refers to a colonized subject who is simultaneously a fictive construct of colonial typology and a person of the tropics and thus both an object of representation and agent of resistance, and that of "cosmopolitan sensibilities" (p. 62). Prasannam's portmanteau term "tropicopolitan sensibilities" thus refers to people of the tropics as agents of resistance, including resisting LGBTQ stereotypes "to shape a diverse queer body and desire in the name of sissyphilia, exposing power dynamics and creating a space for cultural diversity in the Thai cultural arena as part of the tropics" (p. 62).

Relocating between Thailand and the Philippines, John Bengan's "New Boy, An Excerpt: On the Sensorial Tropics and Queer Consciousness" offers us a reading from his upcoming novel. The chapter excerpt shows how the tropics is a presence that shapes not only the setting, but also the protagonist's very consciousness. Thus we encounter here an example of queering *tropically* in which the texture of the tropics cannot be disentangled from tropic aesthetics. Bengan's story combines Boy's Love and Campus genres, including tropes such as "discussion of ideas, rediscovery of the self, foes turning into lovers" (this issue, p. 81). The plot follows a Filipino exchange student in Bangkok as he settles into his new residence and realizes his infatuation with a Thai classmate. The excerpt radiates Jaya Jacobo's notion of *homo tropicus*, a yearning framed in tropical time, through depictions of heat "as a sensorial mirage" (p. 81) that trick the protagonist into feeling back at home while encountering the foreign in the everyday details all around him: "each time I stepped out of the condo, the sticky air tricked me into thinking that I wasn't somewhere else. What I saw around me kept the illusion going, until something commonplace—the garlanded roof of a spirit house, high school boys in blue shorts, an unreadable sign—placed me where exactly I was" (p. 82). This tropicality in the Boys Love/Campus novel genre, Bengan suggests, allows queer Filipinos and Thais a shared space of connectivity.

In their article titled "Provincial Drag in the Philippine Tropics: Towards a Decolonial Queer Tropical Aesthetics," Ian Rafael Ramirez argues that drag under neoliberal consumerism has become the most popular queer art form around the world. They cites the empire of *Drag Race*, which began in the U.S. with *Rupaul's Drag Race*, and notes that this franchise has created a stereotypical trope of drag as limited to glamour and superstardom. Countering this hegemonic "heteronormative drag," Ramirez argues for a decolonial queer critique situated in local tropical praxis. Furthering "previous scholarship that has shown that drag cultures in the tropics are pluriversal and typically contingent on locally situated gendered practices" (this issue, p. 102), Ramiriez employs Rolando Vazquez's notion of "decolonial aesthesis" with Samantha Nöel's "tropical aesthetics" to analyze the aesthetics of "provincial drag" as it is produced in digital media by queer provincial Filipinos and notes that "alternative" drag performances showcase "the imaginary tropes of provincialness from a metropolitanist gaze to assert how it departs from such elitist perceptions" (p. 119). In showcasing examples of provincial alterity to homonormative forms of drag, the article foregrounds "how decolonial queer tropical aesthesis can fold drag back into its subversive potential beyond genderfuckery, as a performance practice that laughs at the projects of modernity/neocoloniality" (p. 119).

Artemio P. Millo Jr. continues the discussions of tropes, sexuality, and decoloniality in his paper titled "'Muchakang Pangkalawakan': Queering Engagements with *Bakla* of the Philippine Tropics." In this reflexive ethnographic piece, Millo introduces the reader to the Miss Ugly Gay Universe pageant [*Miss Gay Muchakang Pangkalawan*] and analyzes how participants' performances, which depict flamboyant and effeminate stereotypes of the bakla, are not necessarily authentic to performers' identities. Millo begins his analysis by pointing out that the terms "bakla" and "gay" are often used interchangeably; however, the foreign term does not translate to the Tagalog. It thus becomes evident that "Philippine colonial history, particularly that of American colonialism and neocolonialism, has significantly shaped the sexualization of the bakla" (this issue, p. 126). Furthermore, "this Western sexualization has solidified the homo/hetero distinction as the basis of the Filipinos' understanding of bakla, suggesting that prevalent knowledge about sexuality is the product of Western constructs" (p. 127). The aim of Millo's introspective ethnographic research is to understand how participants make sense of their stage performances in relation to their life experiences and to reveal how unreconciled tropes can liberate the bakla from the oppression of stereotypes. Millo's reflexive practice as a self-identifying bakla, "who performs being bakla within and without the beauty pageant culture" (p. 132), and part of the bakla community, including speaking bakla "swardspeak," enabled the author to develop relations with the research participants. The paper concludes that the obscure pageants of the "Miss Ugly Gay" allow for gender self-discovery, they contest

local stereotypes, and importantly, they resist hegemonic tropes through these queer tropical arenas.

Writing between the Philippines and Taiwan, the paper "Dual Narratives, Shared Radiance: A Tropical Asian Queer Collaborative Autoethnography" reflects upon the lives of the diasporic researchers, Radel James Gacumo and Sheng-Hsiang Lance Peng. They employ what they call a "tropical Asian queer collaborative autoethnographic approach" to illuminate their "voices, perceptions, and lived experiences" (p. 147) of growing up in their tropical/subtropical home countries and their current residencies as research students in countries in the temperate North. As they put forward in their introduction, "Co-authored by two queer doctoral researchers in the broad field of education, this article endeavours to subvert conventional tropes in tropical narratives by means of subjective experiential exploration, therefore imbuing the discourse with a queer Asian perspective" (p. 148). Their work aims to demonstrate how these reflections shed light on the ecological systems theory of human development that argues we are each influenced by our socio-cultural environment and its overlapping milieux of macrosystem, exosystem, mesosystem, and microsystem. Further to their theoretical focus, the paper holds a deeper methodological queering aspect that pivots on their personal vignettes. As they argue, "intertwining subjective experiences within the socio-ecological systems model, the article seeks to vividly depict the knottiness of tropical Asian queer identity and experience" (p. 147). Thus, the paper pays tribute to a decolonial moment through exploring how diverse cultures evoke a spectrum of experiences for LGBTQ+ sexualities and identities and how these queer socio-cultural elements in turn contribute to diverse narratives within queer communities in tropical Asia.

Queer Indigeneity and Decoloniality—Indonesia and the Pacific

Across the tropical world, there are numerous Indigenous peoples who have never fitted the colonial Euro-western binary of male/female genders or hetero/homo sexualities. The tropics queers such dualistic thinking, and many tropical gender-sexualities traditionally transcend the rigid constraints of temperate colonial notions of gender and sexuality. The following papers explore queer Indigenous communities of Indonesia and the vast expanse of the Pacific.

The many thousands of islands of the Indonesian archipelago have been the abode of several Indigenous queer groups, the most famous of which are the *Bissu* of South Sulawesi, who are known for their five genders. In their paper titled "Tropical Indigenous Queer as Guardians of Tradition: The *Bissu* of Bugis Society, Indonesia," the authors

introduce readers to the Bissu, a holy person who is neither male nor female but represents all five genders of the Bugis society of South Sulawesi. The five genders are: *Bissu* (all genders), *calabai* (male who has female traits), *calalai* (female who has male traits), *uruwane* (male), and *makkunrai* (female). The research team of Syamsurijal, Halimatusa'diah, and Wasisto Raharjo Jati explain that their article demonstrates the essential roles the Bissu play "in maintaining various Bugis community traditions and how these intersect with the tropical monsoon climate and agricultural rituals" (p. 176). They delineate "unique qualities of the *Bissu*, their mythic origins as first peoples, their cultural roles and rituals, their persecution, and their survival" (p. 176). The authors map the Bissu "origin story from the famous epic of *La Galigo*, to early colonial documentation of their presence in the Bugis pre-Islamic Kingdoms, and to their current roles in contemporary Muslim-majority Bugis society" (p. 176). Not only are the Bissu essential to maintaining cultural and environmental heritage, but their "Indigenous queer strategies of survival—both in maintaining various gender identities and their ancestral traditions—amidst the onslaught of modernity, religion, and heteronormativity, is an important example for other minority groups, including the broader LGBTQ community" (p. 176).

The island of Sāmoa in the Pacific Ocean has a rich tradition of queer Indigenous cultures. Mandy Treagus and Dion Enari acknowledge that queerness has always existed in the tropics, including the tropical Pacific. They go on to outline how Sāmoa has more than two genders and note that the lives of *faʻafafine*—queer Indigenous who have been assigned male at birth but identify as feminine—have in the last couple of decades been presented in cultural studies, literature, and the arts. However, this has not been the case for *faʻatama*—queer Indigenous people assigned female at birth who identify as masculine or are attracted to females, or both. Faʻatama are often referred to as tomboys, hence the title of their paper, "Faʻatama: Indigenous Tomboys of Sāmoa." The aim of their article is to illuminate three recent representations of the lives of faʻatama from poetry, fiction, and film. They set their paper within a discussion of the European colonial and Euro-American missionary expansion into the Pacific and the western dualistic philosophies that accompanied these incursions. As they state, "This means that gender roles that were part of traditional Sāmoan life were modified under the new colonial regimes…suppressed in favour of heteronormative models that were part of the Christian ethos. Despite the difficulty of ascertaining exactly the gender/sexual order of pre-colonial Sāmoa, it is frighteningly easy to see the impositions of fundamentalist Christianity on present-day lives" (p. 198). Thus, queer Indigenous suppression has not stopped but remains acutely current.

The Pacific—across Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia—is comprised of diverse cultures, customs, and languages. Nevertheless, these island groups share an oceanic geography and cultures steeped in family ties, collectivist values, and spirituality. These qualities are likewise enculturated within queer Indigenous communities of the Pacific and form part of their ethos and strength in the face of ongoing adversity. In "A Queer Resilience: Reviving Indigenous-Pacific Perspectives and Practices," the research team of Jioji Ravulo, Joel Hollier, Malakai Waqa, Isikeli Vulavou, and Eroni Dina further note that "the Pacific is bound by a shared history of colonial rule, a rule that sought to decimate local ways of knowing and doing, being, and becoming. This ongoing legacy has a particular and significant impact on Pacific Islanders of Diverse Sexual Orientations, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics (PIDSOGIESC+)" (p. 124). Their research investigates resilience among these queer communities through engaging an Indigenous Pacific *talanoa* methodology. "Talanoas allow in depth discussion, building on the relationship between researchers and participants to provide space for conversation to flow as participants desire" (p. 125). In turn, experiences, values, and meanings transcribed from the talanoas were benchmarked against a survey. Using this blend of mixed methods captures nuances and contributes to decolonizing research across the Pacific. Talanoa sessions were conducted in Papua New Guinea, Fiji, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Tonga, and Sāmoa, with participants identifying as: Fijian *vakasalewalewa*, Sāmoan *fa'afafine*, Tongan *leiti* (assigned male at birth with a female gender expression); bisexual woman; lesbian; trans woman; gay man; non-binary; and queer. These communities experience high levels of violence, ostracism, and discrimination, yet importantly, they also demonstrate resilience, including through reclaiming and profiling Indigenous Pacific sexualities.

Queer Spatiality—South Asia

The following papers set in South Asia address queer spatiality. Two of the papers introduce us to the traditional queer community of *hijras,* whose long history is noted in ancient Hindu texts. With the arrival of British colonialism on the subcontinent, various strategies were deployed to criminalize hijras. Although they are now officially recognized as the third gender, discrimination still continues. This history and discrimination are analyzed spatially through hijra homes in Bangladesh and on the streets of a red-light district in India. The final paper in this collection queers the spatial practices of global-local flows of food cultures through the tropics of Sri Lanka.

In the paper, "Counter Home: Unravelling the Socio-Spatial Dynamics of *Hijra* Dwellings of Khulna, Bangladesh," Apurba K. Podder and Fadia Binte Shahidullah set out to study

hijra home-making processes through an in-depth study that combines ethnographic methods and spatial analysis in order to investigate hijra households in the city of Khulna in Bangladesh. This tropical architecture paper thus sheds light on the everyday lived experience of hijras. The paper reveals the spatial evidence of stigmatization as well as the organization of the "hijra family." The importance of this paper, as the authors note, is that, "In post-colonial Bangladesh, the perception of home…often restricts tropical architectural discourse to mainstream socioeconomic groups, leaving marginalised communities, such as the third gender, in a precarious position. Individuals who identify beyond male or female genders, commonly known as *hijra*s, face extreme exclusion and stigmatisation from both society and their birth families" (p. 236). The paper demonstrates that the "*hijra* home, situated as it is in a context of social exclusion, challenges many of the conventional categories of home and shows how 'exclusion' is a new way of understanding the architecture of home in tropical South Asia" (p. 236). The distinctive queer spatial organization of these communal houses acts to counter dominant notions of 'home' that rest on ideals of stability, ownership, and family. This tropical home also acts to queer dominant notions of queer, for, while "Western queerness and queer domesticity…emphasises the freedom of sexual expression in domestic space….the *hijra* home suppresses sexuality and freedom, countering the privacy functions of both Western queer and conventional homes. In doing so, the *hijra* home fosters an 'authentic' *hijra* identity and establishes a unique *hijra* home layout" (p. 263).

Kamathipura, the notorious red-light district of Mumbai, India, is the setting for the paper by Neelofar Shafi, Peerzada Owais Adil, and Prachi Priyanka, titled "At the Intersection of Queerness, Disease, and Tropics: Walking the Streets of Anosh Irani's 'The Parcel.'" As the authors state, "the novel focuses on the Hijra transgender community which forms part of the sex-labor and beggar forces who have a marked presence on the streets of this enclave. Employing qualitative textual analysis, this study explores diverse facets of Hijra existence, emphasizing the intersection of queer socio-cultural dynamics with notions of contagious disease and social stigma, set within the local tropical milieu" (p. 271). The paper undertakes an analysis of the novel by adapting the theories of Erving Goffman on stigma and Elizabeth Outka on disease to the queer tropics. Their analysis reveals how contagion and disease are presented as pervasive tropes within the novel that infect the characters' lives, everyday experiences, and identities. Thus, their study aims to reveal the vulnerability of marginalized queer communities such as the hijra, "who are often scapegoated as vectors of infection. These individuals endure not only physical ailments but also societal discrimination and stigma through their perceived association with contagion" (p. 271). The authors note that the novel forces readers to witness the harsh actualities of hijra life. "Within the confines of Kamathipura, where lack of healthcare

and familial rejection force queer individuals into hazardous spaces, *The Parcel* becomes a thought-provoking literary piece…. Through Irani's beautiful prose, which renders a brutal reality, the novel vividly brings to life the hopes, struggles, disappointments, and aspirations of characters whose narratives are often silenced" (p. 282).

The final paper brings us to the queer spatiality of the flows of global-local food through a novel set in the tropical island of Sri Lanka. Abhisek Ghosal, in his paper "Queer*ing Striated* Food Politics: Tropical Postg(l)ocal Precarity in Romesh Gunesekera's *Reef,"* explores the details of how the narrative resists the patriarchal culinary incarcerations of heteronormative sexualities. "*Reef* narrates the tale of Mister Salgado who finds remarkable interests in a wide range of Sri Lankan food items which are usually cooked by Triton, a skilled and private cook cum comrade to Mister Salgado. As the novel unfolds, readers are introduced to the fervent fascination of Mister Salgado with food—a *cultural signifier* that brings Triton, the narrator of *Reef*, closer to his master" (p. 296). Ghosal argues that the "Eurocentric epistemic configuration of tropicality is fraught with fault lines and hence requires a counter-epistemic queer*ing*. In this context, food becomes an important marker of sexualized identity formation" (p. 288). Queering striated food politics breaks from the practices entwining culinary stratification of sexualities and thus allows for *rhizomatic* movements. The novel and its positionality in Sri Lankan cuisine (with all its colonial, neocolonial, and neoliberal complexities) is taken up to illustrate how "*queering culinary spaces* may lay out deterritorial 'queer assemblages' in order to stage nuanced 'critical encounters' among culinary spatiality, queer sexuality, and tropical postg(l)ocal precarity. In short, Gunesekera's *Reef* is critically taken up to elucidate the deterritorial operations of *queering culinary spaces* as an epistemic tool" (p. 289).

Queering On

Through gathering these studies in the two-part special issue of "Queering the Tropics," we preliminarily contribute to the ever-dynamic field of LGBTQIA2+ studies through our collective reiteration that the tropics, as a particular part of the world that has its own histories and worldviews, is an important critical point of departure in attempts to think through the queerest embodiments of gender. In twinning the first issue's intimate entanglements with ecology and nonhuman matters with this issue's realities of neo/colonialism and decolonial aspirations, we hope to open further discourses on queerness and the category of gender itself that will consider their utter diversity, not as mere concepts traveling from the Euro-western temperate world, but springing just as much from these othered tropical worlds. The tropics, after all, has always been queer, and as the papers in this double special issue exemplify, will also always be.

References

@chrisisclueless. (2023, October 16). *The Philippines has spoken… Brazil has 24 hours to respond.* [Repost of video]. X. https://x.com/chrisisclueless/status/1713748485789376561

@genesisfew. (2023, October 16). *whyd they eat.* [Video]. X. https://x.com/genesisfew/status/1713601725121114515

@UroborosHyejoo. (2023, October 28). *can someone pls re-upload the video of 5 filipino queens dancing to water by tyla on a waterfall.* [Repost of video]. X. https://x.com/uroboroshyejoo/status/1718145951410610483

Austin, A., Craig, S. L., Navega, N., & McInroy, L. B. (2020). It's my safe space: The life-saving role of the internet in the lives of transgender and gender diverse youth. *International Journal of Transgender Health*, 21(1), 33–44. https://doi.org/10.1080/15532739.2019.1700202

Benitez, C. J. (2022). A Tropical Traumaturgy: Rereading the folk in 'May Bagyo Ma't May Rilim.' *Kritika Kultura*, (38), 232-265. https://doi.org/10.13185/KK2022.003811

Benitez, C.J., Chwala, G. L., Lundberg, A., & Nyeck, S. (2024). Queering the Tropics: A Cartography of Tropical Materialisms, Queer Ecology, and Spectral Tropicality. *eTropic: Electronic Journal of Studies in the Tropics*, *23*(1), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.25120/etropic.23.1.2024.4079

Benitez, C.J. & Lundberg, A. (2022). Tropical Materialisms: Toward Decolonial Poetics, Practices and Possibilities. *eTropic: electronic journal of studies in the Tropics, 21*(2), 1-20. http://dx.doi.org/10.25120/etropic.21.2.2022.3929

Cabbuag, S., & Benitez, C. J. R. (2022). All hail, the baklang kanal!: Subversive frivolity in two Filipino influencers. *Plaridel, 19*(1), 55-89. https://doi.org/10.52518/2021-11cabben

Drushel, B. (2010). Virtually Supportive: Self disclosure of minority sexualities through online social networking sites. In C. Pullen & M Cooper (Eds.), *LGBT identity and Online New Media* (pp. 62-74). Routledge.

Foucault, Michel (1986). Of Other Spaces. [Trans. J. Miskowiec]. *Diacritics*. *16* (1), 22–27. https://doi.org/10.2307/464648

Gómez-Cruz, E., Horst, H., Siles, I., & Soriano, C. Beyond the tropicalization of concepts: theorizing digital realities with and from the Global South (introduction to a special issue). *Communication, Culture and Critique*, *16*(4), 217-220. https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcad037

Lucero, L. (2017). Safe spaces in online places: social media and LGBTQ youth. *Multicultural Education Review*, 9(2), 117–128. https://doi.org/10.1080/2005615X.2017.1313482

Lugones, M. (2007). Heterosexualism and the Colonial / Modern Gender System. *Hypatia*, *22*(1), 186–209. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4640051

Lugones, M. (2010). Toward a Decolonial Feminism. *Hypatia, 25*, 742 - 759. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2010.01137.x

Mamada, C. P. [@mamadapaul]. (2023, October 15). *We create an immediate choreography and shoot since we've been enamored with this music. MUSIC BY:@Tyla* 🌬. [Video]. TikTok https://www.tiktok.com/@mamadapaul/video/7289996465810771206

Mamada, C. P. [MAMADAPAUL]. (2023, November 3). *Water by: @Tylaofficial*. [Video]. YouTube. https://youtu.be/H2abmmYtrbM

Mendez, M., III. (2023, October 6). *South African Singer Tyla Makes Waves on TikTok With Viral "Water" Dance Challenge.* Time. https://time.com/6321439/tylas-water-dance-challenge-tiktok/

Nigianni, C. & Storr, M. (2009). *Deleuze and Queer Theory*. Edinburgh University Press.

Pereira, P. P. G. (2019). *Queer in the Tropics: Gender and Sexuality in the Global South*. Springer.

Robards, B., Churchill, B., Vivienne, S., Hanckel, B., & Byron, P. (2019). Twenty years of 'cyberqueer': The enduring significance of the Internet for young LGBTIQ+ people. In P. Aggleton, R. Cover, D. Leahy, D. Marshall, & M. L. Rasmussen (Eds.), *Youth, Sexuality and Sexual Citizenship* (pp. 151-167). Routledge.

Rys, Dan. (2024, January 19). *How Tyla's 'Water' Flooded the Airwaves & Catapulted Its Star to the Global Stage.* Billboard Pro. https://www.billboard.com/pro/tyla-water-radio-hit-global-star/

Shaw, A., & Sender, K. (2016). Queer technologies: affordances, affect, ambivalence. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, *33*(1), 1–5. https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2015.1129429

Siles, I., Valiati, V., Valerio-Alfaro, L., & Ferreira, A. (2024). Tropicalizing platformization? Tensions in research on algorithms and platforms in Latin America. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*. https://doi.org/10.1177/13678779241256376

Van Dijk, J. A. G. M. (2017). Digital Divide: Impact of Access. In P. Rössler, C.A. Hoffner, & L. Zoonen (Eds.), *The International Encyclopedia of Media Effects* (pp. 1-11). John Wiley & Sons. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118783764.wbieme0043

Wakeford, Nina. (2000). Cyberqueer. In D. Bell & B. M. Kennedy (Eds.), *The Cybercultures Reader* (pp. 401-415). Routledge.

Woodland, R. (2000). Queer Spaces, Modem Boys and Pagan Statues: Gay/Lesbian Identity and the Construction of Cyberspace. In D. Bell & B. Kennedy (Eds.), *The Cybercultures Reader* (pp. 417-431). Routledge.

Wynter, S. (2003), in Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation-An Argument. The New Centennial Review *3* (3), 257-337 https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2004.0015

zebra_b1tch. (2019, May 5). *eat*. Urban Dictionary. https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=eat

Acknowledgements

We thank the reviewers who gave of their time and expertise to critically review the papers and offer suggestions for improvement. We also want to thank the authors who worked gallantly on revisions and meticulously through edits.

This special issue was supported by the School of Humanities Research Grant of the Ateneo de Manila University, the Philippines.

Christian Jil R. Benitez is a queer Filipino scholar, poet, and translator. He teaches at the Ateneo de Manila University in the Philippines, where he earned his AB-MA in Filipino literature. He is currently pursuing his PhD in comparative literature at Chulalongkorn University, under a Second Century Fund (C2F) Scholarship. His critical and creative works have appeared in various journals and anthologies; the most recent include *Poetry and the Global Climate Crisis* (Routledge, 2023) and *Here was Once the Sea: An Anthology of Southeast Asian Ecowriting* (University of Hawaii Press, 2024). His first book, *Isang Dalumat ng Panahon* (ADMU Press, 2022), was awarded the Best Book of Literary Studies/Cultural Criticism in the 41st Philippine National Book Awards. His English translation of Jaya Jacobo's *Arasahas: Poems from the Tropics* was recently published by PAWA Press and Paloma Press.

Luke Chwala is Visiting Assistant Professor of English at the University of Cincinnati, Blue Ash, USA. He writes from the positionality of a decolonial, queer scholar of the environmental humanities whose work most specifically examines the ways in which fictional texts and imaginary worlds offer decolonial solutions. Specifically, he specializes in nineteenth-century Gothic literature and British culture as well as decolonial and transatlantic queer studies from the nineteenth through the twenty-first century. His most recent work proposes what he has coined as decolonial queer ecologies as a reparative reading strategy of colonial-themed transatlantic Gothic and speculative fiction. He has published work in queer, postcolonial, race, and Gothic studies, including Edinburgh University Press Companions, and the journals *eTropic* and the *Victorian Review*. He is co-editor of the University of Wales Press new series, Queer and Trans Intersections.

Anita Lundberg is an adjunct Associate Professor and cultural anthropologist. Her interdisciplinary ethnographies across Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia explore the intertwinings of tropical nature~culture. Anita's awards and fellowships include: LIA TransOceanik (CNRS, JCU, Collége de France); The Cairns Institute; Evans Fellow, Cambridge University, UK; Guest Researcher, Maison Asie-Pacifique, Université de Provence, France; Visiting Fellow, Institute of the Malay World and Civilization, National University Malaysia; and Anthropologist-in-Residence, Rimbun Dahan, Malaysia. She has published extensively in academic journals, editing numerous Special Issues. Anita has curated exhibitions in NY, LA, Paris, and Sydney, and her own research has been exhibited at the Australian National Maritime Museum, the National Art Gallery of Malaysia, and Alliance de Française. She was a Post-Doctoral Fellow, Cambridge University, UK, has a PhD in Anthropology, an MA in Science & Technology Studies, and a liberal arts BA. After academic stints in Australia and Singapore, she now lives in Bali. She writes in queer solidarity.