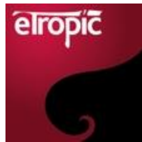

eTropic: electronic journal of studies in the Tropics

Tryst Troppo: Sex, Tourism, and Relationships on a Philippine Beach

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Abstract

The village of Aplaya, Puerto Galera, on the Philippines island of Mindoro is renowned for its beach and scuba diving. Despite its reputation as an isolated tropical island paradise, Aplaya is also infamous for sex tourism—a legacy of a colonial and military history. Following imperial rule by the Spanish, the US colonized the Philippines and established military bases which expanded during the Vietnam War along with the rest and recreation (R & R) offerings in the base areas, including go-go bars and commercial sex. When the bases closed in the early 1990s the sex clientele transferred from military to tourist, and red-light go-go bars opened up in Aplaya. In my ethnographic work on sex tourism, foreign male sex tourists narrate their desires for a Utopian paradise, a tropical beach that is imagined as uninhabited except for the welcoming natives and sexually available women. They nostalgically recount yearnings for a paradise that, lost in the West, is found in the sultry tropics. Colonial and military histories are elided in these imaginaries about the natural access and excess of the tropics. This cultural landscape of the complex relations of sex and tourism call up Lévi-Strauss' reverie in *Tristes Tropiques* or *Sad Tropics*, of the degradation entailed in colonial tropical encounters and the desire for a pure nature and culture. However, male sex tourist's nostalgic imaginaries in actuality are also a story of volatility of trysts gone troppo.

Keywords: Philippines, sex tourism, critical tourism, Tristes Tropiques, sex tourism ethnography, anthropology of tourism, tropical island paradise

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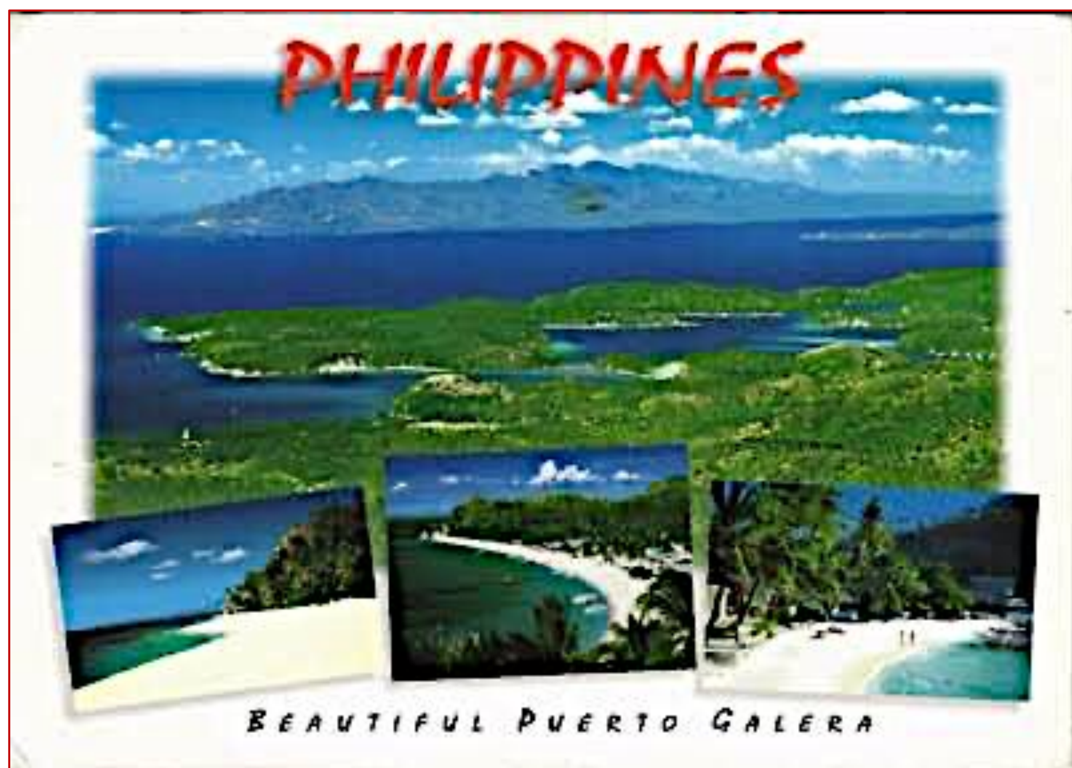
Puerto Galera: Paradise Beach on Valentine's Day

> I'm in Puerto Galera, south of Manila on the island of Mindoro. Behind me I'm watched over by giant volcanic peaks, trying to pierce through the tropical fog that circles their summits. Between the peaks and me, there's an almost vertical landscape of dense tropical vegetation. Palm trees fight for space, trying to burst through the uncultivated green mesh that clings to everything in sticky, vivid-green entanglement. In front of me is the ocean.… The beach here is stunning and I could be a million miles away from Manila for all I know.
>
> —Ben Farrell, *Road Less Travelled* (2016).

Figure 1. *Postcard of Puerto Galera*



Postcards have played an important role in tourism and tropical imagery.

The beachside village (*barangay*) of Aplaya in Puerto Galera, sits on the northern peninsular of the Philippines island of Mindoro. A single concrete path passes through the village tourist area—vendors, stores, bars, accommodation, dive shops and resorts line the road and climb up the surrounding hills. There are also several concrete buildings without windows. At night, doormen

guard the curtained entrances, and flashing lights and disco music seep out into the balmy air. These are Aplaya's 'go-go bars', where Filipina 'bar-girls' dance, and leave the bars with foreign male tourists for paid sex. The bar signs say: 'No Minors Allowed'. The minors from local families are forbidden from working in the bars in order to protect familial honour; it is only outsider non-local, unprotected minors who may end up in bar work (Wiss, 2011; Wiss, 2023).

My first visit to a go-go bar occurred here in Aplaya. By chance it was the evening of St. Valentine's, a day romantic Filipinos, long exposed to American culture, love to celebrate. I convinced a Western male backpacker to accompany me. In the bars, this was interpreted as a Valentine's Day date. We walked into the Parasol Bar, where disco music flooded a dimly lit room garlanded in red: paper ribbons, balloons, and cardboard love hearts. Locally described as 'bar-girls', young women (apparently in their teens) dresses in lingerie, gyrated around two poles at either end of the raised run-way bar. Foreign men encircled the border of the raised stage, separated from the dancers by a drinks bar and its fully clothed waitresses. Older female managers (*mamasans*) worked as intermediaries between the succession of bar-girls and the customers, who selected particular girls to leave with them. This, I was to find, not only meant going back to the customer's room for sex, but usually socialising with, or dating the customer for the evening. As a result of this 'girlfriend experience' or escort system, the restaurants and bars advertised special Valentine's Day prices for drinks and candle-lit dinners. Despite leaving without a bar-girl, my companion and I were given charming smiles by the *mamasans* and bar-girls and we were treated with gifts of red balloons and large cut out hearts.

On this particular night—the evening of Valentine's Day—the normality of the bars providing girls for dates was heightened as commercial sex became a kind of romancing. This situation of racialised sex tourism where sex for money was the primary relationship between Filipinos and foreigners, incorporated an assumed romance between a foreign couple readily enough. This strange normality was to be the beginning of my immersion in Aplaya's sex tourism industry.

Approaches and Departures

> Imagine yourself set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village while the launch…which brought you sails out of sight.
> —Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922, p. 37).

A village ethnography was not my initial intention. And I didn't plan to study sex tourism. I went to the Philippines to research an Australian-Philippines family planning project, delivered via multi-media. My intention was to study a reproductive biotechnology intervention in the Catholic Philippines. I was three months in Manila

feeling frustrated as I spent hours in taxis going to places where I gained no information, hours sitting in government building halls waiting for meetings that never occurred, and hours trying to see project co-ordinators who avoided me. In short, I was in a hierarchy in which I had no status to gain access and information, and did not have the necessary connections to remedy this situation.

Feeling defeated, I took up my guidebook, and fled the city and its frustrations to what I imagined would be the empty space of a tropical beach free of political agendas. There I aimed to rest from my three months of thwarted efforts to do organised fieldwork on a pre-selected topic. And this is how I inadvertently found what was to become my fieldwork site through the *Lonely Planet: the Philippines—a Travel Survival Guide* (1995). Anthropologists, seeking depth and authenticity, do field*work* by separating themselves from the idle, superficiality of tourists. But I will confess, I was a tourist ethnographer who needed guidance.

The guidebook described Puerto Galera as a peninsula with tropical beaches within easy access of Manila. It was while at the backpacker destination of Silver Beach that other travellers told me about the tourist enclave, Aplaya (a pseudonym) 14 kilometres away. They said it was known for its nightlife but warned it was in fact a go-go bar area fronting prostitution. This caught my attention, for after so much bureaucratic evasion, I now sought an area that would be accessible. I had studied feminism, travel, and race, so 'sex tourism' signalled a feminist issue. As a foreigner with hard currency, it would be unlikely that I would be excluded from a tourist economy, which by definition functioned to service the desires of foreigners.

Travelling Back and Forth

This was thirty years ago. I first arrived in the Philippines in the mid-1990s. There I undertook two years of fieldwork in Aplaya for a PhD dissertation. In the following decades I have returned to undertake more fieldwork on sex tourism and subsequent research on anti-trafficking campaigns (2013, 2023). Over time I have also hosted visitors from there, both Filipino and foreign, back home in Australia. My closest connection is three decades of weekly contact with Clara who I met in Aplaya. Her large extended family has been a source of insight into Filipino lives. Clara is one of fifteen children, all eight of the sisters are now married to foreigners and live overseas. Some sisters worked in the bars and some met partners through Christian ministries. The younger sisters visited migrant sisters who found them marriage partners. Clara's brothers subsequently visited the sisters overseas and then migrated. Marriage migration has created a path for women, while men migrate through family unification schemes. Clara says that when she goes out with her sisters in Europe men ask if they are prostitutes. If one of the sisters' foreign husbands is with them then people

seem to suspect trafficking. Clara and her sisters live with sexualised expectations about Filipinas as sex workers either as agents or victims but not as wives, migrants, or as tourists themselves.

The subjects of my ethnographic studies include bar-girls, sex tourists, divers, drug dealers, local families, religious clergy, elites from Manila, and environmentalists. My research has meant living with emotional demands and research complications of hostile subjects—'sex tourists'—in a local political and cultural landscape of criminal activity involving an illegal sex work/prostitution industry and an accompanying illicit drug trade in *shabu* 'ice' (methamphetamine). It has also meant getting to know young women who worked in the bars as bar-girls and the fortunes and misfortunes that befell them.

My search for an accessible ethnographic research topic therefore led me to a site-specific investigation, where I studied what might be called a 'village'.[1] Through a circuitous route I left my topic of biotechnology to end up on an island with minimal technology where even electricity for lighting could be both intermittent and unreliable. However, technologies of travel and communication were very much in existence and I was to find that the isolation of this tropical island beach was a product of, rather than an absence of, embroilments in wider political and cultural histories (see Wiss, 2013).

Detour: The Anthropology of Tourism and Critical Tourism Studies

Tourism has been presented as a defining feature of contemporary capitalism. For example, Frederik Jamieson (1991) described postmodernism or late capitalism as being defined by tourism and technological advancement producing a globally connected world. Under capitalism it has been argued that leisure and tourism have been transformed into a routine and commodified aspect of modern existence (see Graburn, 1983; Nash, 1996; Oppermann, 1998; Clift & Carter, 2000; Ryan & Hall, 2001). In the sociology of tourism, Dean MacCannell's *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (1976), also depicted tourism as a defining feature of modernity. He argued that tourists' quests for 'genuine' experiences often led hosts to display traditional life for visitors as 'staged authenticity'. Other influences included post-structuralist engagements with Michel Foucault emphasising the discursive relationship between power and knowledge. For example, John Urry (1990) in *The Tourist Gaze* positioned tourism as part of a broader disciplinary process, shaped by socially constructed ways of seeing. Anthropologist Lévi Strauss in his work *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) (discussed below) depicted tourism as a 'corrupting' force to

[1] …with an intense awareness that anthropology's conspicuous categories of discrete entities, 'the village' and 'its natives', are a convention rather than reality.

anthropologists' own imaginary of pure worlds of 'villages' and 'natives'—as such tourism caused the despoliation of the anthropological field site.

Despite this antipathy towards tourism as inauthentic and even corrupting, by the 1970s anthropological works started to appear that acknowledged tourism as a significant topic of study. Notable contributions include Valene Smith's *Hosts and Guests* (1977) which examined host-guest relations and the commodification of culture. Anthropological scholarship also occurred in the intersection between tourism and pilgrimage studies. Victor and Ethel Turner (1969) had explored Arnold Van Gennep's (1960, orig. 1909) threefold structure of rituals or *rites de passage* which entail separation, a liminal phase of transition, and reincorporation. In states of 'liminality', subjects are 'betwixt and between', hierarchies dissolve, and equality, unity, and solidarity or 'communitas' occur—thus, through this ritual process pilgrims moved between stages and became integrated into a new identity. Nelson Graburn (1983) adapted this model to depict tourism as a 'secular ritual' or a 'rite of passage,' where tourists enter a 'liminal' state away from their daily routines as dictated by capitalism. For Graburn tourism is a 'sacred journey'—a 'structurally-necessary, ritualized' break from the routine of work (1983). At the intersection of neo-imperialism and tourism, anthropologist Malcolm Crick depicted tourism as a form of 'leisure imperialism' where power, identity, and cultural friction manifest. In *Resplendent Sites, Discordant Voices: Sri Lankans and International Tourism* (1985) Crick discussed the 'sibling rivalry' between anthropologists and tourists. Crick used the word sibling, drawn from kinship, to challenge the 'secret disdain' and 'elitism' of anthropologists. He argued that anthropologists distanced themselves from tourists who they unsettlingly resembled. Instead, Crick drew on their commonality arguing that anthropologists and tourists symbolise the Western world. Both are 'temporary strangers', who exist in 'liminal' spaces and try to commune with the Other.

This brief discussion of some of the work on tourism in sociology and anthropology, can be read in relation to Critical Tourism Studies (CTS) which emerged in the early 2000s. Critical Tourism aimed to challenge the 'value neutral' accounts of tourism studies. Critical Tourism scholars argued that existing cultural and discursive analyses insufficiently engaged with global political economy and the politics of intervention. These scholars critiqued power dynamics, social inequalities, and the political underpinnings of global tourism in order to focus on social justice and ethical projects in contradistinction to the plethora of tourism studies that prioritised the industry's growth (Bianchi, 2009). Studies in Critical Tourism consequently focused on how tourism reproduced systems of domination such as neoliberal capitalism, neocolonialism, and patriarchy. It also advanced 'Hopeful Tourism' a political project to promote social justice, equality, and anti-oppression (Ateljevic et al. 2013).

However, here I want to signal the value of nuanced ethnographic accounts in critical discussions of tourism. Ethnography can reveal the complexity of the politico-cultural landscape of tourism, including sex tourism. Such research offers an important depth and complexity to some studies of sex tourism found in Critical Tourism literature. For example, in "Critical Tourism Pedagogy: A Response to Oppressive Practices" (Steinberg et al., 2020) a model of oppression is assumed in advance of the research. This assumption of oppression—and its presumed one-way power dynamic—is precisely what needs to be investigated. As I delineate below through a brief history of sex tourism, followed by an overview of observations from my ethnographic fieldwork, presumptive ideas can prove to be misleading.

A Rough Guide to Sex Tourism

In the 1980s and increasing in the 1990s academic studies of sex tourism began to emerge. Ethnographic research on sex tourism focuses on the lived experiences of both tourists and locals to understand the cultural and economic meanings behind these encounters. Just as tourism had not been considered a legitimate object of study in earlier anthropology, studies of sex tourism were initially treated as a marginal issue in mainstream tourism studies. Researchers, predominantly feminists, began to articulate concern about 'sex tourism' in the late 1980s, often concentrating on the connection between tourism and large-scale prostitution in 'Third World' countries. Initial research in anthropology and cultural geography also examined the impact of militarized prostitution in Southeast Asia (see Law, 1997). By the 1990s research on the political economy of sex tourism in places with large scale sex industries like Thailand and the Philippines ensued. It was only in the 1990s that the categories of 'sex tourism' and 'sex tourist' emerged in academic, public, and legal domains (Oppermann, 1998; Littlewood, 2001). Analysis of these categories follow Foucault in examining discursive production of identity (see Foucault, 1970,1985). The term 'sex tourism' came to describe the across border activities of sex and commerce between men and women of rich and poor countries respectively.[2]

However, to address the literature on sex tourism requires a consideration of its founding discourse in studies of prostitution. Language choice usually indicates an embedded politics. Using the terms 'prostitution' or 'sex work' commonly signifies the political position held. The term 'prostitution' indicates a focus on the exploitation of women. Prostitution is therefore deemed inherently coercive even when consensual. Anti-prostitution scholarship, or abolitionism, has depicted prostitution as a form of gendered exploitation entrenched in patriarchy, capitalism, and global inequality. Anti-

[2] Here it is pertinent to note that I have not continuously placed provisional quote marks around the term 'sex tourism', nevertheless, in all instances, the term is used provisionally. My intention is not to provide a final arbitration of terms but to use the specificity of an ethnographic account to illuminate identities, their presuppositions, and their highly contested usage.

prostitution feminist activists have argued that 'prostitution' is gender violence and inherently exploitative, with trafficking denoting sexual slavery (MacKinnon, 1987; Barry, 1979, 1988, 1995; Jeffreys, 1997, 1999; O'Connell Davidson, 2002). In opposition to this stance, sex worker rights activists have argued that 'sex work' is a choice and sex work collapsed into force and exploitation, or into the crime of trafficking, undermines the agency of women undertaking migration to work in commercial sex (Kempadoo & Doezema, 2018; Agustín, 2007).

The forty-year debate on prostitution as exploitation and sex work as exchange—or a debate about force and choice—eventually moved from a focus on the West to the non-West, and significantly to the tropics. It was argued that under conditions of 'sex tourism' the inequality between nations and genders meant exploitation, not exchange, was the only possibility (see Truong, 1990). This prompted sex worker rights feminist ethnographers to undertake field work in sex tourism to uncover the 'voice' and agency of sex workers (see Odzer, 1994, Law, 2000, Brennan, 2004, Kempadoo, 2004; Agustín, 2007). The debate on choice versus force then moved to trafficking where choice was overridden by legal definitions of force where consent was impossible. However, Doezema (2013) challenged the abolitionist claims that poverty abolishes consent. She argued that sex work has been subject to moralisation depicted as uniquely non-consensual and exploitative while, in fact, many forms of labour involve economic coercion. It is notable that many studies of sex tourism have often focused on either political economy (Truong, 1990; Sturdevant & Stoltzfus, 1992) or culture and identity (Law, 2000, Brennan, 2004). This has followed a move from Marxist inspired feminist analysis to feminist analysis focusing on identity and agency.

Adding to this literature, descriptions of tourism as 'liminal' have concentrated on sex tourism as especially signifying liminality. According to this position, tourism is understood to be outside of normative capitalism's world of work, and those outside work, such as the tourist, are therefore represented as being in a 'liminal' position. This particular reading of liminality relies upon the perception that there is a hegemonic culture in which uncertainty only flourishes at distinct times and places *outside* the 'normal' structure of society. As outlined above, liminality occurs in some of the major founding works on tourism (see McCannell, 1976, Graburn, 1983) and is notably being used in some of the major texts on sex tourism (Ryan & Hall, 2001, Oppermann, 1998). Ryan and Hall who assert the liminality of sex tourists, cite MacCannell's argument that the alienated tourist travels in order to recover his or her 'sense of structure' (2001, p. 2, citation 1976, p. 6). Ryan and Hal extend this argument on liminal status to argue that both the sex tourist and the sex worker are 'outside' the 'normal restraints of work and family' (2001, p. ix). Therefore, liminality is depicted as *outside* the normative structures of power. Ryan and Hall apply a primitive version of Turner's work on the

liminal, collapsing a history of specific anthropological writings on ritual behaviour[3] they argue for liminality as a universal state, signified by universal roles. My concern here is the way the term liminality is invoked to account for uncertainty. Categories that do not appear fixed or certain are depicted as 'liminal' in an otherwise 'hegemonic' structure. Liminality has been represented as a transgressive space, a perpetual outside position. This identity is then often represented as permanent, fixed, and even essential—overriding the ways uncertainty haunts all categories.[4]

While, in general, feminist accounts have often cast sex tourism as a social problem of inequality between genders and nations, tourism studies have depicted sex tourism as less problematic by focusing on the inevitabilities of the increasing commercialisation of *all* relationships. In, sexuality studies, rather than taking sex tourism as a given, research has focused on the constructed nature of sexuality and therefore its possibilities as a critique of dominance. For example, Littlewood's (2001) historical research applies Foucauldian discourse analysis to show a 'shadow history' of tourism to argue for sexual motives in travel. Citing the example of gay men, travelling outside of the United Kingdom, where homosexuality was illegal, prominently from the mid 1860s to the mid 1960s, meant sex away was a form of transgression, even liberation. However, Littlewood (2001) also discusses the 'existential sadness' or 'sense of loss' that underlies commercial sexual encounters, arguing that the 'pilgrim' as a sex tourist seeks an authentic connection which falls short of the paid encounter. The intersection of travel and melancholy is a recurring theme in travel literature. It challenges the notion of travel as pleasure, suggesting instead search for something lost.

In this brief guide to sex tourism literature, I leave open what is normative or transgressive, as my aim is not simply to represent these relations as fixed, but to show how they are activated. I take into account the political economy and cultural landscape surrounding relationships defined as sex tourism, but question any straightforward notion of exploitation or the unilateral commercialisation of sex worker by sex tourist. Further, I argue that ethnographies of sex tourism necessarily require *both* political economy and cultural understanding. An example is Denise Brennan's ethnography *What's Love Got to Do with It?* (2004) which explores how local women in Sosúa, the Dominican Republic, use sex as a method for social mobility and migration. She examines sex workers, clients, and others connected to the sex tourism business. For sex workers, their work is more than economic need; it is an advancement strategy based on the 'performance' of love. Women seek to turn

[3] Albeit often used by anthropologists to produce a unifying theory of social cohesion.

[4] In another example, Lisa Law (2000) writes that the sex tourism districts in Southeast Asia are 'liminal' or 'border zones' where the shifting nature of relations cannot be categorised in fixed and certain terms, and therefore belong to a 'third space'—the 'liminal' (2000, p. 9). Law is trying to show how white male 'hegemonic power' over bar girls is challenged and resisted by possibilities within the bar scene

commercial sexual transactions into marriage, migration, and a way out of poverty. These women are attempting to be players in a web of global economic relations as they try to take advantage of the foreign men who try to take advantage of them. Brennan's work is consequently an ethnographic account of the economy and culture of sex tourism which examines agency, inequality, and opportunities in a globalized economy.

Paradise Imagined

> Mindoro has a coastline indented by bays and coves. Puerto Galera, on the north-eastern tip of Mindoro Oriental, is one of the Philippines most popular tourist destinations…. Its outstanding natural and underwater beauty makes it an ideal holiday destination and scuba divers Eden.
> —E. Peplow, *The Philippines* (1997, p.188).

Only forty years ago Puerto Galera's subsistence economy was based on fishing and agriculture. Since then, foreign tourism has become the main income earner. Tourism is based on the tropical beaches, scuba diving, and what is promoted as 'nightlife'. This 'nightlife' signifies go-go bars providing bar-girls for sex tourism services. The presence of this industry in a Filipino fishing village comes from a distinct historical legacy. Colonialism in the Philippines entailed Spanish rule for three hundred and fifty years. Then, with US success in the Spanish-American war, in 1898 the United States became the new colonial power. From the turn of the century the US established basic military bases in the Philippines. These were vastly intensified when the US engaged in the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 70s. Alongside the bases, an accompanying rest and reaction (R&R) industry provided leisure for servicemen, including commercial sex. In 1992, with the closure of the bases, a new form of clientele was pursued—male tourists.

Prostitution is officially illegal in the Philippines, though arrests usually only occur when political agendas dictate. The R&R industry had normalised having go-go bars around base areas offering Filipinas to foreign heterosexual men for transactional sex. As tourists made their way further afield to Puerto Galera in the 1970s and 1980s, local Filipinos realised that some male foreigners were bringing sex workers from Manila and the ex-military base areas. For locals, tourism meant providing for 'natural' male tourist desires. Thus a few locals in Puerto Galera (related by kinship) opened up their own go-go bars at Aplaya beach. To do this they needed political power and police consent for protection. Also, in order to maintain the values of the Catholic community they needed the tacit agreement of the local families, so only non-local women, those outside of kinship connections, were recruited to be bar-girls. The clientele for the bars are sex tourists—foreign heterosexual men from Europe, the US, Australia, Japan and more recently South Korea. These male tourists often depict their sexual desires as

'natural'. They also depict bar-girls as effortlessly available, part of the natural excesses of the tropics. Omitted from their fantasy is the history of militarism in Southeast Asia and its legacy in the scale of the commercial sex industry.

Aplaya is easily and cheaply accessible from the national capital of Manila and can be reached in four hours. Hundreds of buses depart daily from Manila to Batangas, the major port in southern Luzon. From there, at least a dozen boats a day leave for Puerto Galera. The number of Filipino residents travelling to the island remains low, as there is little industry in the area to support a large population, other than those involved in tourism upon which the local economy has become dependent. Due to the international and national outcry over organised sex tours to the Philippines in the 1980s, word of mouth as well as tourism advertising promoting 'nightlife' in the Philippines rather than explicit advertising often spreads news of Aplaya as a sex tourist destination.

Another highly profitable industry is the supply of the drug *shabu* (a methamphetamine locally known as 'ice'), which is brought into the area from Batangas and Manila. This industry is likewise controlled by some of the people running the bars and their allies. Foreigners who express a desire to become involved in the *shabu* industry are often reminded by other foreigners of the two Europeans who attempted to do so and were found *bolo-ed* (macheted) to death in their Puerto Galera hotel room. The local drug trade, like the go-go bars and bar girls, is therefore also highly controlled and highly lucrative—and the domain of particular Filipinos. Twenty years ago, there was a greater use of ice by bar girls, as those who ran the bars ran the ice industry. The bar-girls said they used it to overcome the 'feelings of shame' associated with dancing in public. One bar-girl told me that *shabu* gave her 'fire in the belly' allowing her to dance all night and "go with strangers."

Aplaya's sex tourism economy is produced out of foreigners' desires for a Utopian paradise, which entails an empty space, a beach that is 'uninhabited'—"except for the necessary extras—the welcoming natives, and compliant women" (Wiss, 2023, p. 3). This cultural landscape is an imaginary created from tourists' desires—specifically, male heterosexual fantasies. Locals took up these desires to provide the basis for their businesses, which included industries they had considered immoral, if not illegal, in their own political and cultural arenas. What might be called organised crime often occupied this space and provided the fulfilment of these desires. Foreign men became intimately connected to women who worked for industries devoted to extracting money from them. Women from bars knew the most intimate physical, emotional, residential, and often financial details of their customer/boyfriends. But these women were also often sexually linked, if not contracted, to provide sexual services to bar-owners, local politicians, and local police to whom they owed favours for mediating drug use and supply, and soliciting charges. Further, these women were often emotionally involved

with Filipino men who recognised and used their access to foreigners' emotional lives and their money. These women, it could be said, had patron-client relationships with Filipino men (including industry 'strong-men') as well as the patron-client relationships with tourist customers/boyfriends. As a result, relationships were fraught with conflicting obligations, which women from the bars had to negotiate.

When relationships between local women and foreign male tourists (or expats) became unsatisfactory or problematic, these men had the ability to pay for another woman and 'dispose' of 'the problem'. But the wronged women also had the power of redress through violence, if they had the contacts, or to go to local officials with charges ranging from immigration breaches, to criminal charges of assault, rape, or theft. Bar women both lived off, and regularly extracted extra money from, foreign clients/boyfriends from which local officials took their share. The power to do this came not just from using the emotional vulnerability of their customers, but also the women's connections to Filipinos involved in arranging these sexual and emotional relationships as a business. Foreign men who did not co-operate faced the real or threatened prospect of physical violence, prison, deportation, or at the very least, a great deal of trouble.

Foreign men were vulnerable because of their highly individualised pursuit of what they saw as freedom. They were vulnerable not because they assumed they were separate from locals and thought they were superior to them. Many foreign men continued to live as if they were in control, assuming they embodied a form of national, racial, and financial privilege. They took it for granted that they could simply access the services of the people and the resources of the area without consequences. Meanwhile, they drank heavily, flaunted their money, affronted local values, spoke indiscreetly about affairs, were generally oblivious to local reactions, and were unwittingly linked with women who were tied to those who ran the bar and drug industries. They acted out their individual freedoms with only tenuous links to other foreigners who may (or may not) support them. Although they had money, foreigners rarely used it collectively or knew how to use it socially and politically for the purpose of making connections and interventions with Filipino power brokers who might provide protection. Most foreigners, especially tourists, didn't know how to convert their financial power into political alliances and the subsequent protection these offered—which was how local Filipinos used money and protected their interests. In short, Filipinos often had a 'home ground' advantage over foreigners in their use of personalised alliances and connections to authority which included kinship and business relationships.

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Mélancolie Ethnographique

> Journeys, those magic caskets full of dreamlike promises, will never again yield up their treasures untarnished. A proliferating and overexcited civilization has broken the silence of the seas once and for all. The perfumes of the tropics and the pristine freshness of human beings have been corrupted by a busyness with dubious implications, which mortifies our desires and dooms us to acquire only contaminated memories.
> —Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques,* 1955 (orig.).

In 1955 famed French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote *Tristes Tropiques* or *Sad Tropics*—a fusion of travel, fieldwork and memoir. As Levi Strauss dealt with his despondency with academia, he began to write a more 'poetic' novel which was to become his most popular and most celebrated work. Lévi-Strauss penned, 'I hate travelling and explorers,' because travellers arrive only to find a 'polluted' version of the exoticism they sought. For Lévi-Strauss, the tropics were 'sad' because they mirrored back to the West the 'filth' of its own expansion. As such, *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) was a volume full of loss and nostalgia for a world destroyed by contact with the West. This idea of decline is echoed in the English translation of his work as *World on the Wane* (1961). For Lévi-Strauss, cultural difference represented a pure, underlying order or structure. When non-Western cultures come into contact with the West, contamination and disintegration occur. Lévi-Strauss argues:

> Humanity, however, if not resigned to becoming the sterile consumers of the values that it managed to create in the past, is capable only of giving birth to *bastard works*, to gross and puerile inventions, and must learn once again that all true creation implies a certain deafness to the appeal of other values, even going so far as to reject them if not denying them altogether (1985, p. 10, my italics).

Lévi-Strauss uses an image of kinship—the illegitimate bastard. Like a traditional sex tourist, the West is old, weary and lecherous in contrast the non-Western other who is innocent; and their intercourse brings about a stained and illicit progeny. While Lévi-Strauss' rarely considered historical context, it is significant that *Tristes Tropiques* was a post-war condemnation of the effect of Western colonialism upon the tropics, specifically, the Amazon and Brazil. For Lévi-Strauss, European colonialism as a cultural force corrupted and reduced both the cultures of colonising and the colonised.

In 1967 as a response to Lévi-Strauss, philosopher Jacques Derrida delivered his paper "Structure, Sign, and Play" at the 'The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man' conference at John Hopkins University (Derrida, 1978). He critiqued the anthropologist, stating Lévi-Strauss assumed a fixed centre which then helped

produce and shore up the binaries of us (temperate West) and them (tropical Other).[5] Derrida argued that in Western philosophy, structures rely on a centre, a fixed point of 'presence' that rules the system while remaining outside its laws. In Lévi-Strauss's work, he notes, this centre is 'nature', 'truth', or 'origin'. Countering this position, Derrida argued that the centre is also a construct and therefore the entire structuralist system is subject to the movement of meaning, and deconstruction. Furthermore, he philosophised that 'natives' have their own indices of power, including through kinship and relationship systems. Derrida notes, that in overlooking the power relations that are already present, the 'remorse of the West' idealises a purity that never existed.

In *Of Grammatology* (1967) Derrida discussed *Tristes Tropiques'* trope of nostalgia not as an innocent sentimentality but as a form of power and authority. He argued that nostalgia is an essential part of Western metaphysics. The longing for 'presence', 'origin', or 'truth', depicted as being outside the plays of power, is a form of power in itself. He points out that Lévi-Strauss, following Jean-Jacques Rousseau, espoused a nostalgia for an Edenic 'lost garden'. The 'primitive' is a site of authentic human connection that has not been corrupted by Western culture. In this regard, Derrida proposes that nostalgia is actually a form of myth-making. By longing for a simpler, 'purer' past, we are attempting to assert power over the meaning of the past. For Derrida then, the 'origin' is always a mere 'trace'—a 'ghost' of something that was never completely present to begin with.

Derrida argued that Lévi-Strauss had a 'Rousseauist nostalgia' for a lost, pure, origin,

> … a sort of ethic of presence, an *ethic of nostalgia for origins*, an ethic of archaic and natural innocence, of a purity of presence and self-presence…this structuralist thematic of broken immediateness is thus the sad, negative, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauist facet of the thinking of freeplay…. (1967, p. 264 my italics)

This nostalgia and myth-making was conspicuously present in Aplaya during my ethnographic fieldwork. The desires of sex tourists projected, articulated, and repeated, a desire for a beach paradise on an isolated tropical island. The imaginary was for a simpler time where natural women and traditional gender relations prevailed. This myth of a tropical lost paradise helps produce Aplaya as paradise found, rather than a particular version of paradise which has been created through a long history of sex, tourism, red light go-go bars, and complex relationships. And in this mythic

[5] It is important to note that the designations of West and Other are of course complex, as are Global North and Global South. Here the climatic-geographic qualifier of temperate (West) and tropical (Other) is used to demonstrate how these cultural geographic divides are embedded within discussions of tropicality. I discuss tropicality in relation to sex tourism in the Philippines a previous article (Wiss, 2023). An introduction to Tropicality can be found in Lundberg, Regis & Agbonifo (2022).

landscape, sex tourists imagine they are outside the power plays that are intricate to the reality of Aplaya's cultural landscape.

Conclusion: *Tristes Tropiques*—Tryst Troppo

> Tourism now represents the core activity of the economy of Puerto Galera, which is well known for its beaches, scuba diving and entertainment activities, including "go-go bars". The city and its beaches have also become one of the many sites of the Philippines sex tourism industry. (*Wikipedia*, citing Wiss, 2013).

I became indelibly integrated in the sex tourism discourse of the Philippines when my words, quoted above, appeared in the Wikipedia entry for Puerto Galera (Wikipedia). I further experienced the complexity of the intricate relations involved in sex tourism when a group of expat business owners wrote to me asking that I no longer comment on sex tourism in the area. This is a pertinent reminder that this anthropologist is not outside her research and the ethnographic stories she tells; rather, she in embroiled in relations with sex workers and sex tourists in Aplaya.

These days, my online published words on Puerto Galera are fairly accurately extracted, but uncited, by AI to state:

> In the "Tropical paradise" myth, tourists often view the Philippines as a "tropical paradise" where sex is readily available, a perception that is reinforced by "tropicality" and "decoloniality" discourses that mask the underlying economic and social realities.[6]
>
> Contrasting realities: While some locals may participate in the sex tourism industry for economic reasons, they often try to maintain moral boundaries and may frame their own community differently from outsiders. This creates a divide between the perception of "insiders" and "outsiders" and can perpetuate cycles of exploitation.

My approach has been to produce an ethnographic account of a particular political economy and cultural landscape of sex tourism. There is a need for attention to the specific moral, political, and economic forces that encircle and intervene in the relationships between female sex workers and male sex tourists. In Aplaya the vulnerability of white male tourists and expats came from thinking they inhabited the 'empty space' of a tropical beach paradise. They were not, however, in an empty space or Utopia of their own finding, but situated within a highly organised industry, and

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[6] This is AI information is extracted from Wiss, 2023.

caught up in a local political culture involving prostitution and drugs supply businesses. This produced a powerful local Filipino clique which accessed state authority when required to deport or imprison tourists; or who, if necessary, could resort to violence or the threat of it.

The journey of this paper follows a historic arc from the earlier nostalgia of Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques*, to a contemporary scene that is perhaps more appropriately twisted to 'Tryst Troppo.'[7] The word tryst calls up the messy and unstable relationships that arise between Filipinos and foreigners. The term troppo is an Australian vernacular for going native, of being excessive, even mad, in the tropics.

For Levi-Strauss (1955) European colonialism corrupted and reduced the stable identities of the colonising culture and the colonised culture, or self and Other. He depicted the cultural difference of the ethnographic Other as representing a pure, underlying order. Contact with the West could therefore only bring cultural adulteration and disintegration. With both reverence—and irreverence—I acknowledge this critique, and add a twist to signify the continuous movement of meaning. I question a model of colonisation as a fixed binary of domination and subordination to illuminate intricate, though unequal, relations. I substitute the term *tryst* to signify the productive mixing of these strange liaisons. I use the term *troppo*, in the vernacular of expats in tropical locations, to signify their excessive and unstable connections. While imbued with unequal power, interactions between foreigners and Filipinos are not fixed; rather, they are made in every transaction. This discussion of ethnographic revelations of sex tourism and sex workers, and their complex relationships on a Philippine's beach, reveals an intricate cultural landscape that may be succinctly, colloquially, described as tryst troppo.

[7] The dictionary states the meaning of the Australian slang term "troppo" as going/gone mad, crazy; specifically behaving strangely associated with hot tropical weather (Wiktionary).

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