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Queer Cosmopolitanism in the Disaster Zone: “My Grindr Became the United Nations”

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Abstract

This article reflects on the significance of cosmopolitan socialities and intimacies following disasters, and the opportunities and risks they offer for restorative and reparative action for survivors and their communities. Reporting in particular on the experiences of LGBTQ Filipinos in post-Haiyan Tacloban, I discuss how the presence of foreign aid workers in everyday social spaces provided opportunities for queer identity expression and social attachments. I argue that cosmopolitan socialities, including new connections initiated via mobile dating platforms, were embraced by LGBTQs for their potential to share and repurpose wounds after rupture, especially in a conservative small-town context where LGBTQ identities have been historically repressed. This article attends to the opportunities and risks of queer cosmopolitanism as an uneven experience between middle-class and low-income LGBTQs.

Keywords: cosmopolitanism, queer, disasters, urban communication, social media, Grindr, hook-up apps, ethnography of aid, disaster capitalism, Philippines

Introduction

Times of crises and disaster are extraordinary moments that can bring people and cultures that would otherwise never have met into contact. The excitable journalist, the hardened first responder, the backpacking volunteer, and the heavily armed security officer create an odd, if increasingly common, formation that floods into the field after calamity is declared. It was Naomi Klein (2007) who famously attributed the ideology of disaster capitalism to these seemingly disparate agents of the “aid-industrial complex” as they reorganize and manipulate the disaster zone; indeed, corporate and political interest have bizarre ways of neatly aligning with the neocolonial aid machinery with its bounty of construction contracts and security agreements. But whether arriving via parachute or Humvee, news van or food truck, these outsiders are crucially and fundamentally also cultural figures that carry with them values and dispositions that often operate above the local. Many of these transnational agents are the cosmopolitans imagined by Ulf Hannerz: the “footloose” people, “on the move in the world”, who “tend to want to immerse themselves in other cultures” (1990: 240-241). If we follow Hannerz’s cosmopolitan/local dualism, the permanent dwellers of zones of danger are then the “locals”, as aid recipients—especially in developing and crisis-afflicted societies—are assumed to lack physical as well as imaginative mobility to break free from the narrow constraints and prejudices of their home culture.

In this article, I am concerned about the interactions and collisions of the global and local particularly in times of crises, and attend to the diverse and often unexpected outcomes of cosmopolitanization to social life within both physical and digital spaces in the disaster zone. My focus is the set of experiences of sexual minorities—LGBTQ people in Tacloban in central Philippines who weathered the destruction and massive loss of lives wrought by Typhoon Haiyan in November 2013. Drawing from interviews and ethnographic fieldwork with crisis-

affected people as well as foreign aid workers, I aim to recount how the presence of these (white) cosmopolitan figures enabled new everyday socialities and intimacies that led to local LGBTQ identity expression, belonging, and healing. What was once a small town with strong Catholic values and an intensely repressive gossip culture suddenly suspended some of its rules and hierarchies immediately following the disaster, opening up opportunities for queer expression through the mundane presence of foreign workers perceived to be open-minded, able-bodied, and desirable. I attend to the role of social media–hook-up apps in particular–in everyday life, and argue that these digital spaces created ambivalent opportunities for openness in the form of cosmopolitan sociality but for the most part privileged Filipino middle-class homonormativities that themselves contract aspects of Western homonormativities.

Scholars in queer theory have often been suspicious, and rightfully so, of the ways that “gay globality” travels across cultures and imposes elitist and exclusionary normativities onto local or less affluent LGBTQ subjects. Indeed, the muscled, manscaped torso, and the “uniform” of tight t-shirts and jeans are among the aspirational markers of gay globality (Benedicto 2008) that have rapidly spread in cosmopolitanized spaces of post-disaster Tacloban and strongly reinforced in digital spaces of hook-up apps. Digital media scholarship on queer dating and hook-up technologies point out that such platforms often reinforce hegemonic notions of racial difference (Boston 2016; Shield 2017) and privilege the performance of sexual stereotypes over free identity expression (Roth 2016) as their socio-technical features of categorization and filtering, including based on race, invite conformity to enhance users’ visibility and sexual desirability in the app.

At the same time, following queer scholars Eve Sedgwick (2003) and Lisa Henderson (2013), I intend to deploy “reparative critique” to understand how ruptures open up new and

liberatory ways of being and becoming. Driven by an imperative to have “political and ethical regard for survival as the first condition of thriving” (Henderson, 2013: 13), I use reparative critique in identifying the communicative practices, social attachments, and forms of belonging that became especially meaningful for queer subjects following an event of distress. In other papers, my colleagues and I have exposed the social violence as well as everyday indignities experienced by the disaster-affected people we have met and spent time with in our ethnographic fieldwork (Curato et al., 2016; Madianou et al, 2015; Ong et al, 2015). While remaining indignant to the enduring failures of government and humanitarian institutions in processes of material redistribution, I aim to open up a discussion of the often-unspoken queerness of disaster itself, and the liberatory yet risky modes of healing and repair that it potentially offers to its wounded subjects.

Cosmopolitan connectivities after crises

Many possible connectivities may emerge in the aftermath of disasters. A pessimistic reading of the disaster recovery process characterizes the relationship developed between global actors with local affected communities as one of *domination*. A political/economic critique of the aid enterprise exposes how the state avoids direct intervention and responsibility in favor of facilitating reforms for big business to step in. Profiting from human tragedy in the guise of being “socially responsible”, private corporations are then given free reign to transform disaster zones into markets following logics of neoliberalism (Collingsworth, 2005: 264). For instance, Klein’s (2007) pioneering work in *The Shock Doctrine* documents the “legalized land-grabbing” that occurred in Arugam Bay, Sri Lanka when hotels and beach resorts drove out coastal communities following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. This analysis of disaster capitalism

draws attention to social outcomes of dispossession and exclusion among local communities resulting from the economic exploitation of global conglomerates.

Recent critique also lifts the veil from the social justice interventions the humanitarian and development sector undertakes in local communities. Studies characterize the fundamentally *instrumental* relationship between aid agencies and the affected people they seek to help. Monica Krause's work argues that the humanitarian field operates as a quasi-market in which agencies compete for donor funding and in which beneficiaries are not simply the end of humanitarian relief, but also "the means to an end" (Krause, 2014: 40).

From a more anthropological approach that focuses on the personal motivations of aid workers, Liisa Malkki makes a similar, if more nuanced argument about how professionals relate with aid recipients. Deep within the *ethics of care* and the *professionalized mission* of Finnish aid workers exists the "palpable" and "quaking neediness" to "escape", as they are troubled by their "white privilege" while living in a society lacking in warmth, sociability and adventure (2015: 1-9). Anne-Meike Fechter's (2016) ethnography of expat aid workers in Cambodia finds that expats and locals hold divergent moralities and expectations when providing aid and assistance. She argues that while there is often an intense process of working through the question of "what is the right thing to do, such musings are often conducted without taking the voice of the recipients of aid into account" (Fechter, 2016: 13). Both anthropological studies highlight the ambivalent and contingent nature of humanitarianism, as particular decisions are often entangled with the benevolent obligation to care for needy others as well as the heady mix of neocolonial, market, organizational, and narcissistic imperatives.

It is unsurprising then that normative conceptualizations of cosmopolitanism have not mapped on neatly to humanitarian practice. While the historical legacy of humanitarianism is

strongly imbued with a cosmopolitan principle of the moral equivalence of human life across geographical and cultural differences, universalist principles are hard to instantiate into aid interventions and communicative acts, even when they are carried out with the best of intentions (Chouliaraki, 2012; Nikkunen, 2016; Orgad 2013). Scholars suggest that humanitarianism has in fact moved from an other-centered cosmopolitan ethics to a self-centered communitarian ethics that privileges the voices and perspectives of the Western actor, aid worker, or donor over that of the non-Western subject who remains passive, voiceless, and dependent (Chouliaraki, 2012; Madianou, 2013). As Lilie Chouliaraki (2012) illustrates, contemporary fundraising campaigns encourage Western publics to empathize with celebrity humanitarians “like them” rather than enabling a cosmopolitan education about the plight of distant sufferers.

Engaging with the special issue theme of postnormative cosmopolitanism, I argue that more grounded and everyday life conceptualizations of cosmopolitanism offer inroads to understanding the complex dynamics of human sociality in crisis situations. While normative theorizations of the concept are useful for setting a particular yardstick for good sociality in contexts of global connectivity and its converse, polarization (e.g., Silverstone, 2007), everyday life approaches to cosmopolitanism are much more attuned to modest modes of living and belonging that may actually be preconditions to full human flourishing. As Veena Das’ (2007) anthropological work with Partition survivors in the slums of India points out, inhabiting the everyday and “just being” after violent rupture is an achievement in itself. Before enacting the explicitly political and attaining creative capacities for assembly, organization or protest, survival is necessary. Following this, we need equal regard for the “ordinary” and “actually existing cosmopolitanisms” that help people and communities knit their lives back together.

Queering cosmopolitan socialities

Everyday life approaches to cosmopolitanism have duly attended to the complex intersections of race, ethnicity, and class that produce communities living with and through difference (Christensen and Jansson, 2015; Georgiou, 2013; Werbner, 1999). While gender analysis has productively critiqued the gender bias of the mobile elite *homme du monde* figure (Tomlinson 1999), there is still little discussion about sexuality in relation to cosmopolitanism, though with notable exceptions in queer theory and area studies (e.g., Benedicto, 2014; David, 2015) and digital media research (e.g., Boston, 2016, Roth, 2014; Shield, 2017). This article attends to the specificities of the cosmopolitan imagination in relation to sexual difference.

I also want to bring the potential of queerness into our discussion on postnormative cosmopolitanism. I argue that queerness is a strategic framework to open up the normative and top-down strands of cosmopolitanism by shedding light onto the risks and opportunities of the disruptive and messy social attachments that arise in settings of disorder. To put it another way, queer cosmopolitanism is a call to be sensitive to outcomes, both risky and reparative, that emerge when diverse bodies commingle in occasions of disaster or distress. This vantage point unsettles the deterministic tendencies of normative versions of cosmopolitanism to privilege certain ways of being or rigidly fix subjects into identity positions by regarding the fluidity and ambivalence of states of being when subjects make social bargains in the name of mobility and survival.

Helpful here is Miyase Christensen and Andre Jansson's (2016) inquiry into the cosmopolitan attachments that Turkish female migrants living in Stockholm develop in the context of marginalization and segregation. They show how migrants put down roots in their new city in spite of the occasional experiences of alienation produced by interconnected factors

of their precarious class position, their ethnic minority status, and exclusionary policies in the city. Related to this, Pnina Werbner has shown that working-class forms of cosmopolitanism emerge from the *esprit de corps* shared by migrant laborers in the Gulf, as they “inevitably must engage with social processes of ‘opening up to the world’” in the face of demanding and dangerous work (Werbner, 1999: 18-23). In both projects, we can see how cosmopolitan attachments become compulsory in managing risky conditions of working-class life in strange and difficult environments.

Myria Georgiou (2013) develops a three-fold typology of *neoliberal*, *vernacular*, and *liberatory* cosmopolitanisms in her analysis of multicultural London. Neoliberal cosmopolitanism refers to the top-down process of the commodification and gentrification of places and cities through selective worldliness (2013: 34). Meanwhile, vernacular cosmopolitanism is the “embodied, practiced and contradictory form of cosmopolitanism that emerges in urban spaces of intense juxtapositions of difference” (2013: 44). She reserves liberatory cosmopolitanism for the normative and explicitly political formulation of sociality that “raises questions about the significance of difference in advancing equality, recognition and redistribution” (2013: 146). This typology draws attention to the multifaceted outcomes of cosmopolitanization in urban spaces that on one hand can deal harm (neoliberal cosmopolitanism) but also forge social connections (vernacular cosmopolitanism) and create long-term and political solidarities (liberatory cosmopolitanism). Applying this typology to my analysis of social relations within the disaster zone, I am concerned with how the aid-industrial complex might enforce the exclusionary logics of neoliberal cosmopolitanism and inflict greater harm on disaster-affected people. At the same time, I am sensitive to the outcomes of vernacular cosmopolitanism in the newly developed interracial friendships and intimacies their social

significance for the community. I am also curious about whether there are enduring forms of liberatory cosmopolitanism in public actions that have brought sustained benefits of political recognition or material redistribution to the local LGBTQ community in the disaster zone.

This inquiry to the LGBTQ experience in disasters is essential, as they have been rendered as wholly invisible in most research in disaster management. Despite being more vulnerable to disasters, aid agencies have neglected to develop targeted interventions for LGBTQ people, even dealing them further indignities in disaster response programs. As Andrew Gorman-Murray, Scott McKinnon, and Dale Dominey-Howes (2014) have exposed, same-sex couples were physically separated in housing resettlements projects following Hurricane Katrina in the US, as government and aid agencies applied heteronormative definitions of “family”. They also found cases of discrimination in the Haiti earthquake response, where gay and bisexual men were denied access to healthcare and food-for-work programs on the basis of appearing effeminate (Gorman-Murray, McKinnon and Dominey-Howey, 2014: 910-912).

Because of these institutions and histories of exclusion compounded by other calamities of homophobia and identity crises, queer scholars rescue the political significance of the studied resilience developed by queer people in their everyday lives. In the queer literature, Jasbir Puar (2009: 169) uses the concept of conviviality to refer to “how bodies come together and dissipate through intensifications and vulnerabilities”; it is that act of commingling that allows for healing and forgetting. This process of healing may happen in what queer scholar Mimi Schippers (2015) refers to as “queer time”, which refers to non-linear experiences of time and life stages that do not correspond to heteronormative institutions of family and reproduction. I think “queer time” is an especially useful concept in light of more technocratic approaches to disaster management which tend to prescribe stages of recovery and rebuilding. For Schippers, the attachments she

and her friends developed with their “hurricane lovers” in the queer time following Hurricane Katrina had productive potentials for healing and belonging:

Hurricane lovers, from what I could see, were not on ‘straight time’ in this sense. No questions were asked about “where this will go” or about longevity and commitment. What mattered was feeling connected to each other and to New Orleans... That I and many friends around me found community and a sense of belonging in the arms of lovers while queering time and what it means to be in a relationship makes perfectly perverse sense (Schipper, 2015: 17-18).

Following this, and extending Lucas de Lima’s (2011) queer writings on conviviality, I propose an approach to queer cosmopolitanism in the disaster zone that examines how intercultural interaction might enable the repurposing of wounds after rupture that allow for their undoing, mutation, or regeneration. This approach recognizes both the uncertain opportunities for transgression and diverse temporalities of healing as well as the risks of exacerbating existing injuries and exclusions in post-disaster socialities and communications. A postnormative account of the recovery experience does not expect that people will “get better” and linearly progress from one stage of recovery to another; neither would it be pessimistic to state that the aid-industrial complex directly leads to harmful outcomes. Helpful to think about here are nuanced approaches that think about how harm and injury folds in and arises from the hopeful attachments that people make, such as in Lauren Berlant’s (2011) notion of “cruel optimism”.

The digital media literature also echoes this theme of the tension between openness as well as closure, particularly in relation to the socialities afforded by gay dating and hook-up

platforms. App users have opportunities for identity expression and community belonging through their informal chats with other users who share their sexual identity. For instance, Andrew DJ Shield's (2017) study shows diverse outcomes when immigrants connected with locals in Denmark through hook-up apps: immigrant users of the platform gained sexual partners and friends and furthermore learned helpful practical information about their host country and improved their language skills through the intercultural interactions enabled by Grindr and PlanetRomeo. However, this expansion of sociability and intercultural knowledge ran up against the apps' tendencies to reinforce the racial hierarchies that exist in broader Danish society (Shield 2017: 254). A similar tension is observed in Yoel Roth's (2014) study of Scruff, the gay hookup app primarily targeted at bears. While bear identity is intended to have "semiotic openness... that looks beyond bodies and toward a common search for community" (pp. 2125-2126), the design features of the app creates "barriers of entry for potential users and forces reductive self-presentation that bear little in common with the complexities of raced, gendered, or embodied experiences of self" (p. 2123).

In the next sections, I aim to account for the constrained and risky agency of vulnerable LGBTQ bodies in communion with and through pain after Typhoon Haiyan. Typhoon Haiyan was the strongest typhoon on record to make landfall when it hit the central Philippines on November 8, 2013. It caused over 8,000 casualties mostly in Tacloban, following the storm surge that hit this densely populated city.

I will be drawing from research that began from the team ethnography in the Humanitarian Technologies Project exploring communication environments in the disaster zone from April 2014 to June 2015. Our interviews and participant observation focused on how communication technologies were used by affected people to engage in fundraising (in Madianou et al, 2015)

and protest (in Curato et al, 2016). From the original project, I conducted follow-on fieldwork that included a focus on LGBTQs' particular experiences of disaster recovery. From December 2015 to July 2016, I conducted a new set of interviews with 20 gay, lesbian, and transgender people in Tacloban, participated in town fiesta activities and private parties, and visited beauty salons where gay men were employed as hair and nail stylists catering to both low-income and lower-middle-class clientele.

The projects also had a digital ethnography component. I logged on to Grindr and Tinder to observe people's profiles and responded to users who interacted with me via private messages. I also friended participants on Facebook as this is the most popular platform locally and allowed me to stay updated about momentous events in the LGBTQ community, such as Tacloban's Gay Pride parades in April 2016 and March 2017. Doing digital ethnography allowed me to observe locations and discourses of users, as Grindr in particular utilizes a phone's global positioning system (GPS) to mark a user's location relative to other users, and invited users to state their age, ethnicity, and what they're "looking for". Following research ethics protocols, I use pseudonyms below when referring to participants.

Aspiring for development within disaster capitalism

My colleague and I arrive in Tacloban in April 2014, five months after Typhoon Haiyan hit the city. The downtown area is bustling, with efficient roads and transport, and the occasional gridlock to indicate just a healthy amount of activity. *Sari-sari* (convenience) stores and supermarkets alike teem with customers, in spite of "Haiyan prices" hiking up the cost of soda and energy drinks. There is a sense that people are getting on with their lives: dusting off their

karaoke sets, arriving on time for their beauty parlor appointments, and planning for next month's town fiesta.

Hotels and restaurants are particularly busy. International aid agencies have fully booked the city's top hotels, so researchers like me and my team make do with hostels that have since rebranded as hotels to cope with the aid industry traffic. Georgiou's (2013) notion of neoliberal cosmopolitanism is relevant to think through local middle-class Taclobanons who told me,

“Downtown Tacloban has never been more happening. Before the typhoon there were only a few cool spots to hit in the city center and you had to go to the outskirts for somewhere chill. But now we have new burger joints and the bars are always full” (Ervin, 29, middle-class gay man).

Within the operations of the aid-industrial complex, ordinary people imagine and aspire for genuine economic and social development. Over bottles of beer in a downtown restaurant teeming with foreign aid workers, Ervin delivered the statement above with no hint of irony and a sincere appreciation of the city's newfound buzz and energy. Having endured the immediate aftermath of Haiyan, where he and his family saw dead corpses in their walk through eerie silence and darkness from their home to the rescue center in the airport, Ervin felt comforted by the speed in which external actors have helped clean up the city. For him and other middle-class Taclobanons, the noise and mess of transformation were generally viewed optimistically from the lens of development, rather than pessimistically read as exploitation by external actors—a critical sentiment that emerged strongly in other disaster contexts such as in post-Katrina New Orleans. But whereas New Orleanians had a strong sense of pride and nostalgia for their city's

storied history of multiculturalism and musicality that they felt was under threat from rapid change imposed by external actors (Thomas 2014), middle-class Taclobanons instead craved for change and development, having long interiorized shame for the city's high poverty rates, not to mention the infamy of being the hometown of Imelda Marcos, the wife of late dictator and plunderer Ferdinand Marcos. Being middle-class in a city where one in three households are classified as living below poverty line (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2016), Ervin and his friends used to spend most of their leisure time in the local branch of a Filipino coffeehouse chain and view other developing cities in the country with a twinge of jealousy. He explains,

“There was a proposal before [Haiyan] for a gay bar, but the city government blocked it saying it was evil and not suited to our Catholic values. So really for a proper night out or if you want to meet new people, you'd have to go to Manila or Cebu. But now after the typhoon, you feel like the whole world is here and there's always something new being built or rising around the corner” (Ervin 29, middle-class gay man).

Ervin's particular experience as a middle-class LGBTQ in a low-income city sheds light on how neoliberal cosmopolitanism—for all its hollow veneer and insensitive velocity that have dealt various indignities in disaster contexts (Adams, 2013)—might, in specific places, trigger more hopeful aspirations and imaginative potentials. For middle-class people in Tacloban who have felt excluded by the aspirational globality of the commercial capital of Manila and the tourist hotspot of Cebu, new construction projects and rising infrastructure are perceived in good faith, viewed as markers of progress in a city felt to be economically and socially stagnant. Particularly for LGBTQs who lack physical spaces that affirm their identity in their own

hometown, the thrill of newness in the city suggests an investment in an idea of a better future. I am reminded here of queer scholar Manalansan (2015), who uses the concept of “worlding” to understand cosmopolitan attachments. For Manalansan, the critical and imaginative practice of worlding involves promiscuous borrowings and shameless juxtapositions, particularly for postcolonial subjects in the developing world (Manalansan, 2015: 570-571).

The immediate outcomes of the new cosmopolitanism in the disaster zone are not only imaginative, but occasionally have material consequences for the middle-class LGBTQs I have met. Middle-class people do not benefit from humanitarian and government relief efforts such as housing assistance and livelihood projects, which are strictly—and controversially—targeted only at the poor, unlike in other global disasters such as Katrina, which had more blanket distribution efforts (Ong et al., 2015). However, some middle-class locals have gained professional experience by working for and with global humanitarian organizations. Global agencies hired local staff as members of program teams, even as leaders of accountability and communications teams—positions that required good communication skills and proficiency in English and the local languages. Curiously, gay men came to occupy these positions in accountability and communications departments for at least three of the largest aid agencies.

There is Ivan, a 28 year-old gay man with a college degree in nursing, who was working as a freelance social media content manager prior to the typhoon. He says he jumped at the opportunity to join an aid agency after Haiyan:

“Initially they wanted to hire me to handle health projects because I was formerly a nurse.

But I convinced them I could lead their communications and accountability team, which is

really my passion. I think I wore them down with my talking and energy and they thought I'd be the type to talk to people properly" (Ivan, 28, middle-class gay man).

As with most communications and client interface professions, there seems to be a gendered expectation that gay men and women are better suited for the emotional labor of communicating with communities and listening to problems with compassion and empathy (see, for example: David, 2015, on transgender and gay people in the call center industry). Ivan and the other gay accountability officers I met claim to have experienced the most professionally rewarding work of their lives while working with global aid agencies after Haiyan. Three and a half years after the typhoon, two of three gay men continue to work full-time for humanitarian agencies in senior roles, while one has earned a scholarship to pursue graduate studies in France. From a recommendation of a French aid worker, he learned of the opportunity to study abroad and fulfilled one of his lifelong dreams:

"It's weird because in a way it was thanks to Haiyan that all these doors opened up for me. I became more confident and thought that I could actually pursue my dream of studying abroad. I'm thinking I can even put on this fake British accent that I learned from [my aid worker friend] so they would be fooled to think that I'm smart!" (Paul, 24, middle-class gay man)

Coming out and hooking up in queer time

Just as humanitarians forever change local politics and economy through their relief work, their physical presence in restaurants and bars and digital presence in hook-up apps often causes

extraordinary, if unintended, changes to social life, from the public expression of queer identities to romantic relationships that provide necessary, if temporary, intimacy.

Three months after Haiyan, five times a week from 10PM, a truck parks outside Burgos Street near the posh Hotel Alejandro, the local headquarters for the United Nations. This truck serves as a watering hole on wheels, attracting an assortment of foreign aid workers, religious volunteers, disaster researchers, Filipino *balikbayans* (returning migrants) involved in voluntourism, and curious locals toasting to Heinekens and Red Horses. Figure 1 captures the typical late night scene in this mobile bar.



Figure 1. Disaster hipster: Foreign aid workers and locals unwind, in hipster style, in an abandoned lot where a pop-up truck bar serves beer and cocktails five nights a week.

Here people are friendly and chatty, though weary from the day's work. This is where I met 26-year-old Jericho and his friends, two gay men and a lesbian couple. Jericho confides how hanging out and befriending foreign workers in this space have emboldened him and others to become more confident in expressing their LGBTQ identity in everyday life:

“I observed humanitarians as being very [publicly affectionate]. Unlike us Filipinos, we're more disciplined. So when I see them get drunk and guys kiss other guys and girls kiss other girls, I say to myself, ‘Cool! It shouldn't mean anything’” (Jericho, 26, middle-class gay man).

As a dutiful Catholic who uses religious paradigms of “temptation” and “sin” to characterize his after-hours socializing with humanitarians, Jericho feels that foreign aid workers—whom locals describe as very liberal and even “hippie”—have relaxed some of Tacloban's small town anxieties. To hear Jericho and his friends tell it, the laid-back vibe foreign humanitarians bring to social spaces made being queer normal and unfussy. They shared how a closeted friend of theirs came out as gay while chatting up foreign aid workers in the truck bar. After a round of drinks, one aid worker asked their friend point-blank whether their friend liked guys or girls—a question Jericho and his friends were always too embarrassed to ask. Put on the spot, their friend casually admitted to being gay—a non-event greeted by the foreigners with nonchalance. For their group of friends, the absence of ceremony with which it was received made the coming out an achievement twice over, neatly sidestepping the awkwardness that usually followed the normal process of coming out.

Another outcome of cosmopolitanization is the development of interracial romance and intimate, if short-term, attachments. Although social spaces such as the truck bar made people feel comfortable to befriend strangers and “network” with aid professionals, gay men and lesbian and trans women remained quite reluctant to be overtly flirtatious. Held back by the fear of being judged as *walang hiya* (no shame)—which, in a Filipino small town context is one of the worst insults, as it strikes at the core of Filipino moral personhood (McKay 2012)—queer people I interviewed instead used mobile hook-up apps such as Grindr and Tinder. Discreet sexual encounters negotiated via hook-up apps that allow users a degree of anonymity took place between local survivors longing for intimacy and escape, and aid workers seeking distraction. Just as with the cosmopolitanization of physical spaces, these digital spaces visualized and materialized the changing social landscape of the city:

“Overnight, my Grindr literally became the United Nations. Before Haiyan all we had on Grindr was *mehhh*—four or five people. After Haiyan, boom—white men!” (Jericho, 26, middle-class gay man)

“Filipino gays always go for other masculine gays, so normally I’m not very popular on [dating apps]. But then I met this French-Canadian who thought I was actually pretty. When I met him in his hotel... he asked me how I was and whether I lost my home. But I didn’t really give him details. I just wanted him” (Levi, 26, middle-class gay man).

Levi’s one-night stand with the French-Canadian aid worker is his first sexual encounter with a white man. As he shares the details of his tryst, his language and demeanor make it clear

that it had been for momentary pleasure, and nothing more. Having come face to face with the shocking transience of disaster, where all could suddenly and completely be lost, Levi has no illusions of longevity or commitment. The novelty of the encounter in the most unusual “queer time” of post-Haiyan Tacloban gives Levi’s retelling a sense of drama, as he excitedly says, “It wasn’t my best, but it was perhaps my most memorable.” There are striking parallels here with the reparative qualities of touch and intimacy after moments of trauma and rupture, which Mimi Schippers (2015) discloses in her auto-ethnographic account of sexual encounters with her “hurricane lover” in post-Katrina New Orleans.

It is important to highlight here how the social interactions negotiated via hook-up apps often subscribe to existing cultural structures of “white love” and colonial desire (Rafael 2000), rather than offering a complete escape or free experimentation of sexual identities. While these sexual encounters may offer comfort for the moment, they are reflective of Filipino (and broader Asian) racial hierarchies between more desirable white bodies and less desirable non-white bodies. Having a white lover, whether heterosexual or homosexual, is a marker of prestige, shaped by the colonial history of Spanish and American rule in the Philippines and classed perceptions of whiteness as connoting wealth or middle-class status (Cabañes, 2015). Hook-up apps such as Grindr which have drop-down menus inviting users to identify by “ethnicity” following dominant US American labels such as “white”, “Asian”, “black”, “Middle Eastern” and also “mixed” were used by foreigners in Tacloban to denote their racial difference, attracting more attention, and the text that accompanied their profiles invited interaction by denoting racial difference and cosmopolitan status, e.g., “French NGO worker here for 3mos. Looking for friends, fun and tour buddies”.

From my interviews, I learned that many of my middle-class Filipino informants indeed fetishized the masculinity of white bodies and conform with images of gay globality that they access in mainstream film, television, and commercial advertising. Worrying examples of homonormativity are prevalent among middle-class gay male participants, who tend to view the white muscled body as immediately more desirable than the typical Filipino *bakla* body—the vernacular sexual tradition that conflates homosexuality, transvestitism or effeminacy, and lower-class status (for a discussion of the *bakla* versus the “global gay”, see: Benedicto, 2008).

However, some contexts also pose a challenge to mainstream sexual normativities. For Levi, as suggested in his quote above, his desire for white men is explained in large part by his perception of their greater openness to his effeminate (*bakla*) gender identity, which is increasingly rejected and ridiculed by middle-class gay Filipino men. He enjoys more popularity among foreign men, whom we can presume are oblivious to, or directly reject, the repressive local status hierarchies (themselves shaped by postcolonial histories) that make the *bakla* a figure of ridicule.

Nevertheless, middle-class queer people view the relationships that developed between foreign aid workers and locals as appearing more equal than some of the typical interracial relationships they observed in Tacloban prior to Haiyan:

“Actually before Haiyan, I didn’t really think I could hook up with white men here. Because all we see here are dirty old men and young Filipinas—you know, the typical relationship of *gamitan* [using each other]. After Haiyan, I began to think, *ay*, (interracial) love is possible.” (Catherine, 34, queer woman)

Catherine, a chef in a local restaurant, recounts here the negative perception of the common interracial relationships observed locally. These are often marked by vast differences in age, leading locals to perceive them as relationships premised on *gamitan* or instrumentality. Indeed, Catherine's remark points to some worrying trends of sex tourism and trafficking and cybersex dens that afflict poor provinces in the Philippines, raising alarms even in the Western press (BBC News 2014). In contrast, the romantic and sexual relationships formed between middle-class locals and foreign aid workers were viewed as less likely to operate within these power hierarchies, since there were rarely expectations of long-term commitment in the queer time following Haiyan. In addition, foreign aid workers tend to be younger, professional types employed by respected global aid agencies, seen more favorably in local eyes than older single men spending their retirement money.

Nevertheless, while participants often mentioned that "people knew what they were getting into", romantic relationships and sexual encounters still carried risk. For one, global aid agencies and even less professionalized volunteer organizations generally enforce strict ethics procedures that actually prohibit sex with locals. Although codes of conduct specifically prohibit relationships with direct beneficiaries of aid, the foreign aid workers I spoke with say that relationships with other locals in the community (i.e., non-beneficiaries) remain a "grey area" in their ethics guidelines. Aid workers often justify relationships with local staff members, political elites, and the middle-class using the language of romantic love. Post-Haiyan, my colleagues and I encountered at least two cases of (heterosexual) marriage between foreign aid workers and locals, with weddings that proudly played up the drama of "finding love in a hopeless place".

A second risk is the inherent unevenness in mobility between the "cosmopolitan" aid worker and the "local." Following Hannerz's (1990) formulation, a power asymmetry exists in

deciding who gets to leave and who gets to stay, not only in the disaster zone, but also in the romantic relationship in these post-disaster attachments. Research on expat communities, including foreign aid workers, point to consistent patterns that household decisions, including those pertaining to complex ethical matters, are usually made by the expat rather than the local (Fechter 2016).

Asymmetric cosmopolitanisms

While the experiences of middle-class queer people in Tacloban suggest that the cosmopolitanization of the disaster zone led to various and unintended social opportunities, these opportunities were not available to all. As middle-class disaster-affected people interacted with humanitarian workers in professional and social spaces, low-income and poor disaster-affected people met them only when receiving dole-outs.

For some low-income LGBTQs, the destruction of their infrastructure and livelihood swept away their gender identities as well. Visiting one of the local beauty salons that served a modest low-income clientele, I was introduced by the hospitable owner to Awi, one of her former employees, who used to work as a makeup artist. The salon owner had had to retrench some of her hairstylists and manicurists—several of whom were *bakla* (adopting transgender identities)—because business was bad and few customers had the disposable income to spend on non-essential services such as perms or nail art. Following up on this lead, I texted Awi and invited her for coffee. Her former employer told me to expect someone with long black hair who often dressed in strappy floral outfits and summer dresses to show off her thin shoulders. Upon her arrival, Awi surprised me by sporting a buzzcut and wearing a baggy t-shirt on her slender frame. Awi revealed to me that after being laid off from the beauty salon, she struggled to find similar

work and had to switch to construction work, where employment opportunities were abundant in the rebuilding of the city. She felt compelled to cut her hair to fit into the macho construction work culture and repress her gender identity as *bakla*:

“It’s hard to work in construction when you’re *bakla*. But it pays the bills for me. Life is really harder now. I hope people recover so they have time to beauty themselves up.”

(Awi, 27, low-income *bakla*)

Certainly, the novel opportunities for escapism and entertainment opened up by the cosmopolitanization of the disaster zone were seized only by those who with the luxury of material resources and leisure time. Similar to the findings of Gorman-Murray, McKinnon and Dominey-Howes (2015) in the post-Katrina recovery, the particular needs and vulnerabilities of LGBTQs in Tacloban were not recognized. Public toilets and bathing facilities were marked according to the heteronormative categories followed by global aid agencies and local governments, often dealing indignities to transgender people living in mass housing relocation sites. Although I observed large aid agencies’ diverse initiatives targeting women and children, LGBTQ-focused interventions were curiously absent. Upholding the traditional Filipino ethos of individual self-responsibility as interiorized by Filipino queers, queer people consulted by local agencies suggested that they did not rely on agency interventions and found ways to survive on their own (Ong et al., 2015).

Toward liberatory cosmopolitanisms

I have thus far presented the cosmopolitanization of the disaster zone as an asymmetrical process that enabled particularly Filipino middle-class expressions of queerness that were variably hopeful, novel, professional, dramatic, and life-affirming. Unfolding in the queer time of disaster, where hierarchies and normativities are suspended or at least relaxed to enable experimental lifestyles in survival mode, new opportunities to express identity, develop attachments, and enroll in new professions are available to those with ample resources and the confidence to seize them. As I have shown, the exploitative spaces of neoliberal cosmopolitanism (Georgiou, 2013) seen here in the aid-industrial complex that has gentrified downtown Tacloban, have simultaneously catalyzed the imagination and inspired hope, as middle-class LGBTQs welcomed how the change and development they had waited for for so long reshaped their poverty-afflicted and conservative town. I have also shown how the vernacular cosmopolitanisms (Georgiou, 2013) that emerged in social spaces and materialized and reinforced in digital spaces of hook-up apps seemed to relax the anxieties around coming out in public, afforded intercultural connections that sometimes challenged Filipino sexual normativities, and offered alternative images to the common stereotype of interracial relationships being plainly instrumental. Here, contradictions around racial hierarchies in postcolonial Philippines were present, as these hierarchies were at times reinforced and at other times challenged in the new cosmopolitan attachments that emerged following Haiyan. This contradictory movement is starkly experienced by affordances and social uses of hook-up apps in Tacloban, where the queer intimacies and healing from digitally enabled cosmopolitan connections ran against particular exclusionary logics of “gay globality” that the app as circumscribed within mainstream Asian normativities reproduce and accentuate.

I argue that these queer cosmopolitan experiences—while often fleeting and directionless, lacking in explicit purpose or agenda—suggest affective investments to better futures while simultaneously *being in the moment* and soaking up that experience. Following Henderson (2015: 134), I argue that such ways of living offer “openings, new precedents, reparative possibilities” which are important to consider so as not to cripple the politics of disaster relief into an unresolvable “impasse of disappointment” (ibid.). However, it would be remiss for us to not suitably reflect on the stark inequalities in queer cosmopolitanism between middle-class and low-income LGBTQs. At a practical level, it is imperative that humanitarian agencies move beyond lip service to serving vulnerable and minority groups, when this agenda has continued to dismiss the particularities of LGBTQ experience in disaster and how sexual identity is constitutive of how they experience opportunities or indignities in disaster recovery.

Were any of these queer cosmopolitanisms enduring and sufficiently liberatory (Georgiou, 2013)? Two and a half years after Haiyan, Tacloban witnessed its first Gay Pride Parade in April 2016. Organized by a small group of university students and partially funded by two of the gay respondents in our research who stayed on to establish new businesses in Tacloban, the colorful street celebration received national media attention and signaled a growing capacity for political organization and mainstream publicity. Its organizers and supporters use the language of resilience and human rights in their slogans—not dissimilar from advocacies circulated by foreign aid workers and their various projects at the height of their operations following Haiyan. Although foreign aid workers have since packed their bags for assignments in other disaster zones, I would suspect that some, had they remained in Tacloban, would have stood in support of the parade, witnesses and allies to the newly emboldened queer identities rising from the rubble of Haiyan.

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