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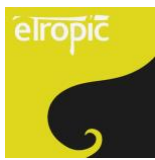
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## **Tropical Materialisms: Toward Decolonial Poetics, Practices and Possibilities**

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### **Abstract**

Tropical Materialisms concur on at least three things: humans are always entangled with non-human/material agents; such entanglement is necessary for any creative act to take place; and these same entanglements allow us to interrogate and re-evaluate preconceived notions about the world. This Special Issue aligns itself with the fields of new materialism and posthumanism. What is particularly exciting is the opportunity to rearticulate these fields in tropical terms, that is, with scholarly and creative practices from and about the tropical world. This focus is crucial given that current scholarship in new materialism and posthumanism predominantly comes from European temperate contexts and is informed by Western philosophies. In order to decolonize the ontological turn, this Special Issue recognises not only that colonial knowledge systems impacted the tropics, but also that matter's liveliness was and is well understood in Indigenous cosmologies, ancient philosophies and 'animist materialism'. The papers collected together in this special issue offers materialisms informed by decolonizing intuitions. They variously demonstrate how the tropics, as geographic zone and as pertaining to poetics (via "tropes"), can theoretically inform and historically problematise new materialism and posthumanism. They offer new vocabularies through which discourses on "tropical materialism" may be initiated; and a cartography of practices across disciplinary fields which demonstrate what this "tropical materialism" may be. The Special Issue collection it itself a form of *poiesis*: a creative engagement with the world.

**Keywords:** Tropical Materialisms, Animist materialism, ontological turn, Material Poetics, decolonization, poiesis, new materialism, posthumanism

## Tropics and New Materialisms

To study the tropics, and to strive toward a decolonized rendition of such an attempt, it is imperative to recognize the crucial role that nonhuman materials also perform in the tropicality of this ecology. For while the tropics has long been constructed “not simply as different, but also as inferior and subordinate” (Césaire, 1972, cited in Bowd & Clayton, 2019, p. 4) to the temperate world — and, as such, the tropics is “a conceptual, and not merely physical, space” (Arnold, 1995, p. 142) — it is of utmost importance to understand how these discursive phenomena have been activated and sustained in part by the very materiality of things found in this particular worldly zone. However, this emphasis on nonhuman materials from the tropics, is not simply to affirm the colonial and imperial projections onto the tropics as the “West’s environmental other” (Clayton, 2012, p. 180). Instead, as Denis Cosgrove (2005) astutely reminds us, it is to remember that “somewhere between the theoretical mapping that inscribes cosmographic lines around the imaged globe to produce ‘the tropics,’ the empirical geography of lands, seas, and airs that characterize these parts of the globe, and the environments and peoples that make places in the equinoctial regions of the globe, epistemology and ontology constantly rework one another” (p. 215).

This constant reworking between epistemology and ontology has been demonstrated in a recent previous special issue of *eTropic* journal. The introduction to that issue, titled “Tropical Landscapes and Nature-Culture Entanglements,” pays attention to how tropicality, particularly as a colonial project, “constructed a tropical world that was closer to the intentions of Europeans than the lived world of the tropics” (Lundberg, Regis, & Agbonifo, 2022, p. 5). It is in this sense that the common exoticism of the tropics, expressed through its frequent portrayal as simultaneously “paradisical, luxuriant and redemptive” and “primeval, pestilential and debilitating” (Clayton, 2013, p. 180), is ultimately recognized to be “closely entangled with colonialism and its fascination with, and fear of, the Other — which extends to both wildlife and peoples” (Lundberg, Regis, & Agbonifo, 2022, p. 6). In this current issue of *eTropic*, a similar gesture of extension is practiced, however this time, the aim is to take nonhuman materials into consideration not merely as passive objects of colonial fascination and fear, but as active agents in participation with various instances of encounter in this worldly zone. In other words, while the previous issue of the journal critically ruminated on the potency of “human perception and inscription” through art, culture, and other imperial and scientific practices in shaping and even creating tropical landscapes (p. 2), the present special issue places emphasis on the comparable agency embodied and rehearsed by the nonhuman materials that inevitably contribute and influence such moments of creative formation.

In this paradigmatic shift from simply recognizing the primacy and responsibility of human cultures in shaping landscapes, to acknowledging that nonhuman materials, including landscapes themselves, likewise participate in these instances of creation, a word from the title of the previous journal issue – that of *entanglement* – is again instructive. Entanglement easily brings to mind the image of at two or more things intimately braided or knotted, for instance seaweed (the traceable etymological basis of the word) enmeshed with itself and other things, say a fishnet and conch shell. What is crucial to *entanglement* however, is how it has also been used in the domain of quantum physics: here, the word signifies how “material impositions do not heed human understandings of closeness of spacetime,” to the extent that “particles, with no recognized connection or force across spacetime, can be of the same body; that is, what is considered as one is affected in correlation when what is considered as the other is affected” (Stark, 2016). This ultimately signals these particles as “inseparable, inextricable... not individual entities, but a system that cannot be agentially cut up” (Stark, 2016). Karen Barad (2007), in her invaluable outlining of this notion, extends entanglement to implicate “our *knowledge* of the ‘object’ [ontology] with our *knowledge* of the ‘measuring instrument’ [epistemology]” (p. 344), suggesting that “with every measurement we are ‘looking inside a phenomenon’” (p. 345), in the sense that materials are all connected, intra-acting with each other, not existing separately, but co-emerging through their “entangled agencies” (p. 33).<sup>1</sup> It is this entanglement of materials that makes absolute objectivity an impossibility, for things often mistaken to be simply mediating in a given encounter are also exercising their interposing agencies in the same encounter.

This recognition of the entanglement of matter — human and nonhuman alike — is at the core of new materialism, “a contested term” for a “theoretical orientation” whose “one distinctive characteristic” is its insistence on “the significance and agency of materiality and the inter- or intra-actions across the primary dualisms of western thought” (Alaimo, 2020, p. 177). In other words, new materialism primarily responds to “a perceived *neglect* or *diminishment* of matter in the dominant Euro-Western tradition as a passive substance intrinsically devoid of meaning” (Gamble et al., 2019, p. 111). However, the modifier *new* in the name *new materialism* highly “troublesome” (Alaimo, 2020, p. 177; see also Ahmed, 2008). As pointed out by Kim Tallbear (2017), the “fundamental insight” of new materialism that “matter is lively” is “not new for everyone,” as it can be “roughly translated [as] what we can call an indigenous

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<sup>1</sup> Barad (2007) further differentiates “intra-action” from “interaction” as follows: “in contrast to the usual ‘interaction,’ which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action. It is important to note that ‘distinct’ agencies are only distinct in a relational, not an absolute, sense, that is, *agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don’t exist as individual elements*” (p. 33).

metaphysic” (cited in Alaimo, 2020, p. 188 n.3).<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, the nomination *new* is still practical, for at the very least, the name signifies a conscious turn toward emphasizing what has been otherwise simply dismissed in Western thought as inert nonhuman material. As Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (2010) write in their critical anthology, “if we nevertheless persist in our call for and observation of a *new* materialism, it is because we are aware that unprecedented things are currently being done with and to matter, nature, life, production, and reproduction. It is in this contemporary context that theorists are compelled to rediscover older materialist traditions while pushing them in novel, and sometimes experimental, directions or toward fresh applications” (p. 4). In other words, the *new* in *new materialism* can be interpreted less as a marker of novelty, than of a “prematurely celebratory” (McClintock, 1995, p. 12) gesture envisioning a future in which our own entanglements with nonhuman materials are recognized.<sup>3</sup>

It is by the same virtue that the present special issue proposes to substitute the modifier *new* in *new materialism* with the word *tropical* — as a move toward the possibility of theoretical orientations that similarly attend to and emphasize the entangled agencies of nonhuman materials while also arising from and flourishing through the particular worldly zone that is the tropics. For despite the fact that in a new materialist perspective, “material can be drawn from anywhere, anytime, and anyone” (Holbraad et al., 2014), existent scholarship predominantly comes from Euro-Western, continental, temperate worlds. This reality within the present new materialist scholarly landscape, coupled with “the capaciousness of new materialisms toward nonhuman life and the intelligent liveliness of the world,” in effect, “may actually reinstall the unmarked western human as the site of enunciation and ignore racial formations [among other intersections] in that process” (Alaimo, 2020, p. 185; see also Kogler, 2022). As Zakiyyah Iman Jackson (2015) argues, the turn towards “beyond the human” may dangerously “reintroduce the Eurocentric transcendentalism this

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<sup>2</sup> Worth quoting here at length is Tompkins’ (2016) articulation as emblematic of the common doubt on the “newness” of new materialism:

There are reasons to be suspicious of the New Materialism, as indeed there are reasons to be suspicious of any intellectual movement that calls itself “new”—because of course we need to always ask: what is the heroic narrative that its putative “newness” seeks to instantiate? A non-human centered ontology and ethics; a sense of the biological and non-biological world as vital and alive; an idea of the body as having a life and conversation of its own, with itself; and, most centrally and crucially, the idea that planetary life should, must be, and will be at the determinative center of political world-making: these are epistemologies and ontologies that can hardly be said to have recently been invented but rather are familiar to, among others, First Nations and Indigenous peoples; to those humans who have never been quite human enough as explored, for instance, in postcolonial and revolutionary black thought; to some strands of feminist thinking, for instance, de Beauvoir’s thinking about the objecthood of women; and to other non-Western medical and spiritual modalities.

<sup>3</sup> It is crucial to note that McClintock (1995) refers here to the prefix *post-*, whose problematic singularizing rhetoric ironically calls forth the need toward “a proliferation of historically nuanced theories and strategies...which may enable us to engage more effectively in the politics of affiliation, and the currently calamitous dispensations of power” (p. 396), one manifestation of which can be observed in the dominance of Euro-Western and temperate perspectives on new materialism.

movement purports to disrupt, particularly with regard to the historical and ongoing distributive ordering of race” (cited in Alaimo, 2020, p. 186); ultimately then, it is imperative to ask “what and crucially *whose* conception of humanism are we moving beyond?” (Jackson, 2015, p. 215). Thus, for Jackson, race is essential to consider in new materialism, especially since “blackness conditions and constitutes the very nonhuman disruption and/or displacement [new materialist literatures, among others] invite” (2015, cited in Alaimo, 2020, p. 186).

In a similar manner, the *tropical* in the nomination “tropical materialism” that the current special issue proposes dares to assert the tropics not merely as a worldly zone — and passive locus — but more importantly as a critical rubric and an active agent through which such new materialist orientations can be further articulated and problematized. For, given the complex and particular histories of the tropics, materials here are permeated with entanglements that may not be pervasive or even exist in temperate worlds — and are thus likely invisible, and negligible, to the new materialist lens that emerges from temperate localities. For instance, plantations as specific material ecologies in various locations across the tropics cannot be reduced to just an analysis of the “slavery of the plants” and “microbes” (Haraway et al., 2016, pp. 556-557) lest the historical reality of “the slave garden becomes part of a narration of networked kinship that transforms the reproduction of racial oppression and resistance into a flattened multispecies ontology — where difference among and between forms of life is obscured” (Davis et al., 2019, p. 5). Instead, plantation ecology demands that it is also viewed and analyzed with the colonialist, imperialist, racialist, and capitalist dimensions that are inevitably entangled with the nonhuman materials that constitute such sites (see, for instance, Murphy & Schroering, 2020).

Thus simultaneous to the new materialist imperative to attend to the neglected appraisal of matter and its diminishment as inert substance in the Euro-Western tradition, tropical materialisms (especially in the plural form) “take into account and eventually resist the comparable prevailing inattention [to] — if not outright ignorance [of]...non-Euro-Western thinkings” regarding materiality (Benitez, 2022, p. 2). After all, even though new materialist analyses have indeed been expanded including through “provocative” vocabularies and understandings from physics to cybernetics (see Barad, 2007; Haraway, 1989), it still remains that “Global South epistemologies and philosophies of race and racism, ranging from postcolonial and decolonial theories, to Indigenous critique to Afro-based thought, to Black Studies to perspectivisms and relational models, have long anticipated the ways to differently imagine knowledge and perception as the foundation of planetary inheritance” (Gómez-Barris, 2017, cited in Alaimo, 2020, p. 184). Such complex understandings involving more-than-human worlds, have already been demonstrated by various scholars, including many who

might not identify themselves as new materialist thinkers (see, for instance, authors mentioned by Shomura, 2017). It is thus the hope of the current issue on Tropical Materialisms to contribute to the proliferation of similar theoretical orientations and critical interventions that assert the power and entanglements of matter arising from the various and varied tropical regions of the world.

### **Poetics, Practices, Possibilities**

The papers brought together in this Special Issue on Tropical Materialisms reflect the plurality of this neologism. Not only do they arise out of the materiality of particular areas of the tropical world, but they also emerge from various cultural, disciplinary and theoretical geographies. In the following articles we encounter the Global South and Latin America, Australia, Papua New Guinea, Bengal in India, the archipelago of the Philippines, the islands of Jamaica and Puerto Rico in the Caribbean, the seas off Nigeria in Africa, and the built environment of Macao in Southern China. We are also presented with the materiality of spirits, of spoken words and writing, of animal, human and vegetal bodies, of land, sea and forests, the elements of wind, water, soil, and anthropogenic waste and pollutants – and how these things stick together and fall apart. The papers arise from disciplines and interdisciplines across the arts, humanities and social sciences; thus, each article's engagement with materiality reflects not only theories of new materialism, posthumanism, or material poetics, but is an engagement with the underlying theories that inform different academic specialities. In the following papers we encounter works informed by feminist, tantric, rhizomatic and cosmological philosophies; anthropologies and ethnographies of Indigeneity, activism, and the built environment; and literary studies of folklore, narrative, science fiction, and poetry. Simultaneously, many of the articles engage with environmental studies, ecology, and climate change. Brought together as a collection, the papers offer a nascent cartography of Tropical Materialisms and their various material poetics, practices, and possibilities.

### ***Materialist Philosophies of the North and of the South***

The collection of papers begins with a philosophical discussion exploring ontological and epistemological questions that arise from the turn to matter, and the matter of the tropics. Epistemologies of the North and the South are drawn into conversation in order to explore alternative ontologies, including the potential of Tropical Materialisms.

### ***New (Feminist) Materialism and Epistemologies of the South***

Aleida Luján Pinelo, in her article “Mangrovia Encounters between Epistemologies of the South and New (Feminist) Materialism”, evokes the rhizomatic motif of the mangrove as she sets out an in-depth analysis of new (feminist) materialism and epistemologies of the South. Her particular concern is how the ontological turn carries with it the threat of old colonial and patriarchal practices. She advocates for the conjunction of new feminist materialisms alongside new materialism in recognition that feminism has been at the forefront of the move to materialism and always remains part of its genealogy. She also puts new feminist materialism/new materialism into conversation with epistemologies of the South — a necessary move in order to counter the pervasive colonization of knowledge. In this regard, Luján Pinelo recalls her own experience as a young scholar in Mexico and the colonialist influences on her education, and calls upon Latin American theorists of decoloniality. The term coloniality, developed by Aníbal Quijano, refers to complex socio-cultural processes arising (like mangrove roots) from colonialism. As she notes: “the colonization of the Americas in the fifteenth century configured a new and different global order in which colonialism, global capitalism, and Eurocentric modernity are entangled” (Luján Pinelo, this issue, p. 28).

The paper is a forceful philosophical analysis of the theories of new (feminist) materialism and epistemologies of the South, their genesis and their landscapes of practice. By showing both the affinities and differences between the two, the paper demonstrates the richness and diversity of their arguments; furthermore, it investigates what new materialism has to do with decolonization and tropicality. In this regard, she concludes with a discussion on the possibilities of Tropical Materialisms:

Tropical materialisms offer a double-edged movement: on the one hand they expose European imaginaries about the tropics...and, on the other hand, they offer material figurations to build alternatives to the hegemonic North. Figurations such as “tropical landscapes” and the “mangrove” are very powerful for describing the material and epistemological diversity “contained” in the tropics. (p. 39)

### ***Material Spiritualism of Shakta Tantra***

Sudipta Chakraborty and Anway Mukhopadhyay introduce us to the intricacies of Shakta Tantra Yoga and set this ancient Indic philosophy and practice alongside new materialist and posthumanist philosophies of the West. In their paper “Spiritual Materialism/Material Spiritualism: Shakta Tantric Approaches to Matter”, the authors



outline how both Indic and Western philosophies have privileged the Spirit over Matter. Different to many Indic discourses and yoga practices that denigrate matter and uphold the superior position of the spirit, Shakta Tantra conceptualises matter and spirit as interchangeable dynamics informing the workings of the universe.

Analysing the integrative approach practiced by the Bengali yogi Vishuddhananda Paramahansa, they explain how his school of Akhanda Mahayoga (Integral Great Yoga) combines Shakta Tantric epistemologies of matter, with tenets of classical Yoga, in order to give rise a new philosophy of “matter”. As the authors state:

This specific orientation to materiality, fostered by such epistemologies in a tropical country like India...can be useful in our “postcolonial” appreciation of the Indic traditions of materialist thinking that have been different from, and yet can be placed on a comparative spectrum, with the Western philosophies of new materialism and posthumanism. (pp. 47-48)

Indeed, in Bengal and other areas of the subcontinent the tropical nature of the seasonal rhythms alternating animate and inanimate worlds has inspired the worship of the Great Goddess in ancient Indic thought. Thinking through the possibility of a Tropical Materialism, Chakraborty and Mukhopadhyay note that: “Vishuddhananda’s Shaktism was, among other things, ritualistically associated with the seasonal worship of Devi – the forms of worship where the material coordinates of the tropical seasonal cycle are co-configured with the earthly manifestations of the Goddess” (p. 60). Taking this notion deeper, the authors go on to postulate: “One might even wonder whether this specific Shakta orientation to material nature could be framed only within the material matrix of tropical nature in the eco-spiritual context of which Shakta Tantric philosophies took shape in India” (p. 60).

### ***Indigenous Materialisms and Spiritual Materialisms***

The notion of New Materialism is a sustained critique of Western theories that privilege the human over other beings, the materiality of the Earth and universe, and the spiritual world. It is a critique of human centrism. However, materialisms have long been an integral aspect of ancient and Indigenous philosophies and practices that involve the intertwining of materiality, spirituality, cosmology – of more-than-human worlds. Following the previous paper on Ancient Indic philosophy, the next two papers continue the problematization of the idea of *new* in the term new materialism, for the Indic and Indigenous practices all came before the ontological turn, and thus also reveal that new materialism is to a large extent a discussion of the West with itself.

The following two papers concern Indigenous practices and their intricate entwinement with material, spiritual, and cosmological elements.

### ***Spiritual Healing and Materialism***

Daniela Vávrová's, "*Graun Em Pulap Long Pipia: Rubbish, Sorcery, and Spiritual Healing, Papua New Guinea*" is the accompanying written account to the ethnographic video that follows the spiritual healer Bapra Simi. The paper and video are set in the town of Vanimo near the international border between Papua New Guinea and Papua Indonesia. Bapra Simi is originally from the isolated Karawari region in East Sepik Province, and like her fellow Ambonwari migrants, must navigate life as an urban dweller.

"*Graun Em Pulap Long Pipia*" [the earth is full of rubbish], comments Bapra Simi. Her reference is to the material rubbish which overflows in the urban environment and collects on the beaches of Northwest Papua New Guinea, but is also an explanation for the possible causes of illness, and furthermore to the violence of sorcery and the casting of spells, to the poison of gossip and bad will – the toxicity of material and spiritual detritus.

The video records the healing practices of Bapra Simi as she attends to her patient Edi to cure him of a swollen leg. The paper focuses on her explanations during the healing rituals and analyzes their articulation of how social conflict materialises in corporeal illness, and how materially experienced illness is both inflicted and cured through the invocation of spiritual forces. As Vávrová explains:

She stopped the bad powers from coming close to Edi. She heals with prayers and by speaking in tongues. She heals by touch and by pulling an imaginative thread on a physical piece of wood to twirl the pain out of Edi's leg. We see her doing a creative healing act, an interrogation with the spirits and revelation of the pain in the context of material processes and relationality between human and non-human worlds. (p. 71)

### ***Indigenous Materialism and Cosmology***

Barbara Glowczewski's "*Black Seed Dreaming: A Material Analysis of Bruce Pascoe's 'Dark Emu'*", translated by Anita Lundberg, takes us to Australia. The paper demonstrates how Indigenous ontologies and practices reveal the relationality of material, cosmological, and spiritual realms. The paper performs a double praxis. It is



a re-translation into English of Glowczewski's foreword to the recent French translation, entitled *L'Émeu dans la nuit* (2022) – of Aboriginal author Bruce Pascoe's book *Dark Emu* (2018 [orig. 2014]). In this regard the paper undertakes a material analysis which demonstrates how the book challenged the Western written history of Indigenous peoples of Australia. The second praxis is to place the translated text within the context of Tropical Materialisms.

The book *Dark Emu* critiques the pre- and early colonial history of Australia by demonstrating that Indigenous peoples were more than nomadic hunter-gatherers, for they simultaneously engaged in proto-agriculture as evidenced in material traces in the landscape and early written accounts – including evidence of stone constructions for huts and fish traps, the grazing of native animals, the maintenance of soil fertility, and the dispersal of wild grains. At the same time, all these earthly material practices have multiple connections and entanglements with cosmology and spiritualism. The book opens with the Emu Creator Spirit, who, after manifesting on earth, became a dark form in the Milky Way, viewable from the Southern Hemisphere. There are other sacred traces of the great emu found in rock carvings in both the far east and west of the vast continent, and which manifest as ancestral Dreaming tracks crisscrossing the land from tropical coasts to central deserts and into the ocean itself. These Dreaming tracks also reveal networks of Aboriginal trade (which in the far tropical North of Australia extend across the seas into Indonesia with the Makassar sailors). Of significance to this study is the inseparability of the celestial Emu-being, land, people, and grains. As the text articulates:

The Aboriginal exchange economy, which transverses the entire continent, connects everything that lives and grows into a network of places in a series of spiritual links... "Dreamings" in the sense of a space-time multiplied in mythical itineraries – the Dreamings, whose ancestral travelers in the form of animals, plants, people, rain, fire, or stars, have shaped the terrestrial landscape". (p. 86)

The cosmovisions of Australian Indigenous peoples offer a critical reflection on the notions of new materialism and critical posthumanism via Animist materialism, which demonstrates a complexity akin to quantum worlds. Indigenous knowledge and ritual practices of land care are of immense value to the possibilities of Tropical Materialisms, especially as the tropics continues to experience some of the most devastating effects of unprecedented climate change.

## ***Material Poetics***

Like the materialisms in ancient and Indigenous philosophies and practices that involve humans as just one aspect in a complex cosmological world of land, animals, elements and spirits, the notion of Material Poetics reminds us that things are always entwined with no-things, and furthermore involve *poesis* – creativity. The term Material Poetics was coined in a paper arising out of ethnographic fieldwork and informed by phenomenology (see Lundberg, 2008). However, in this issue, the several papers that invoke material poetics engage more closely with the materiality of language, folklore, poetry and literature, and the performances of these. What they demonstrate is the materiality of language – its presence, and ability to re-present, rather than mere representation. Indeed, the materiality of written text itself – for instance, the presence of black marks on the white screen as you read these words – demonstrate materiality; but so do the very sounds of words. In the next few articles we are taken through the resonant sounds of onomatopoeia in folklore and modernist poetry, through forests of words in literature and politics, and to the activism of poems in the devastating wake of hurricanes.

### ***A Philippine Materialist Poetics***

In “Vernacular Virtual: Toward a Philippine New Materialist Poetics”, Christian Benitez calls upon the vernacular in order to unfurl a new materialist respect for literature. Benitez firstly turns to precolonial folk poetry in order to demonstrate how the onomatopoeism found in these traditional texts (in Tagalog and Indigenous languages) constitutes a linguistic material poetics which is beyond mere representation. He then shows how similar principles and material practices can also be found in modernist texts of the Philippines (written in English), including the poetry of prominent Filipino writer, Jose Garcia Villa. He chooses these seeming disparate texts (vernacular and modernist) in order to “coincide” them – to reveal their relationality and entanglements.

Regarding literary materialism Benitez explains that locating such an analysis in the tropics is crucial as:

...most of the existent and significant studies on the new materialist discursive field come from Euro-Western scholarship; therefore, in “situating” (Haraway, 1991) the new materialist propositions regarding the literary in the specific context of the Philippine tropics, what becomes possible is an insistence that “material can [indeed] be drawn from anywhere, anytime, and anyone” (Holbraad et al. 2014

cited in Todd, 2016, p. 17), even and perhaps more so beyond the Euro-Western and temperate worlds....” (p. 98)

Furthermore, by locating this analysis in the Philippines the author demonstrates his own relationship with the scholarly landscape of his native country where there is a growing trend in ecocritical literary studies. Despite these positive moves toward ecological and material specificities, Benitez notes that “many of these attempts return to a representative treatment of literature, regarding it as merely a medium that demonstrates certain material concepts or phenomena, without necessarily taking into consideration that literature, in and of itself, is material...” (p.98). Ultimately, Benitez’s essay demonstrates how language is material, and in the instance of the Philippines, Tropical Material.

### ***Material Poetics and the Tropical Forest***

In the paper, “Into the Woods: Toward a Material Poetics of the Tropical Forest in Philippine Literature” Glenn Diaz furthers an investigation into the materiality of literature, arguing that the tropical forest is a material discursive space that mediates history. And he is especially interested in how this history is imagined in Philippine literature. Drawing together theories and ideas of new materialism, material poetics, and militant tropicality, Diaz analyzes selections of indigenous and revolutionary literature and their relational entanglements with the materiality of the tropical forest in order to reveal the forests’ elemental force, and their active and collaborative contestation of violent capital and state-making on both natural and human worlds.

He reveals that:

As a geographic space and idea, the country’s tropical forests have routinely lain outside the contours of conventional historiography, their significance limited to either inert, exploitable resource, or unmapped terrain. Thus, the forests retain their profuse, layered potential as narrative and political subjects, including their ability to disrupt and transform human agency within them as well as the imagination of history as it manifests in Philippine literature. (p.122-123)

As Diaz points out: “In the Philippines, among the most vulnerable places to climate change, the link between, on the one hand, authoritarian state-making and capitalist development, and, on the other, deforestation and the destruction of the environment” has been well established. And he goes on to warn: “the context of a full-blown climate emergency means the imperative to reimagine political action and agency,

collaboration and assemblage, as regards forests and the non-human world, is paramount.” (this issue, p. 124). In short, Diaz articulates a Tropical Materialism in which “Philippine forests stage a... defiance” (this issue, p.125).

### ***Material Poetics as Hurricane Survivance***

Melinda González’ ethnographic article, “Colonial Abandonment and Hurricane María: Puerto Rican Material Poetics as Survivance”, follows Puerto Rican poets in the archipelago and the U.S. diaspora as they write and perform poetry as a form of survivance in the wake of Hurricane María. González’ research reveals how the poems contest U.S. state narratives that underplay the effects of the hurricane, how they mobilize people in community-based recovery efforts to provide food, water, buildings and other social necessities, and how the poems document the people’s material suffering, and bear witness to the reality of their lived experiences. González focuses on the poetry of Ana Portnoy Brimmer. She follows her to numerous events in the U.S. and Puerto Rico, and undertakes a reading of several of her poems. Her aim is to: “analyze Puerto Rican critical and creative material practices in poetry spaces that confront histories of colonialism and engage in forms of survivance.” She argues that survivance is *poiesis*: “a continuous affirmation of life in the face of ongoing disasters and death through material poetic practices” (this issue, p. 142).

González recognizes how the material world – climatic and colonialist – impacts the lives of Puerto Ricans, yet even as the world materiality acts upon them, poets also reshape their worlds through the corporeality of their bodies, spoken words and writings. She concludes:

As island people, our lives are always entangled with our environment.... These entanglements allow for generative and creative practices that permit spaces for survivance even in the midst of overwhelming death and destruction. The hurricane wasn’t just a thing that happened to Puerto Ricans. Hurricane María was shaped by and continues shaping the environment.... Hurricane María also reshaped the way that Puerto Ricans experience and understand time, mark historical moments, and engage with politics and the world around them. Through a re-coming of La Santa María, the hurricane brought international attention to the deep and lasting impacts of colonialism and austerity on Puerto Rican life and the possibilities and (im)possibilities of survivance in the continued face of imperialism and economic destitution. (p. 157)

## ***Toxic Materiality***

Continuing with the Material Poetics of the written word, we are moved to consider anthropogenic substances and their impacts within the tropics, and further around the globe. The following two papers reveal the toxicity of manufactured matter. The first paper returns us to the poetry of the Caribbean, with an emphasis on the island of Jamaica; while the second essay takes us across the ocean to the marine environment off Nigeria where we are immersed in the depths of Afrofuturist speculative fiction.

### ***The Materiality of Polluted Tropics***

Ysabel Muñoz Martínez' article "Gardening in Polluted Tropics: The Materiality of Waste and Toxicity in Olive Senior's Caribbean Poetry", begins by recognizing neologisms that describe the current unprecedented era of human impact on the earth: the Anthropocene, the Capitalocene, the Plantationocene. However, it is to the notion of the Wasteocene that Muñoz Martínez turns in order to analyze Jamaican poet Olive Senior's famous collection *Gardening in the Tropics*. Honing in on three poems – "My Father's Blue Plantation", "The Immovable Tenant" and "Advice and Devices" – she demonstrates how the poems present the ways in which colonial-capitalist systems enabled and perpetuate pollution, waste and toxicity. Informing her analysis are insights from new materialism, material ecocriticism and postcolonial ecocriticism. Recognizing both the exponential increase in toxic waste, and that this waste is distributed unevenly (following old colonial pathways), she argues that there is a need for scholarship of toxicity in cultural studies – and especially through tropical materialisms, which have the potential to offer decolonial non-hegemonic perspectives. In the case of the Caribbean islands, these include Indigenous and Afro-Caribbean perspectives. Such counter-narratives to toxic politics are crucial, for as she notes, toxic "injustices appear frequently in areas where global economic forces have wreaked havoc through colonial violence, as evidenced in the long history of exploitation that has taken place in tropical regions" (this issue, p. 163).

As she states:

Senior's poetry encourages the substitution of harming techniques that threaten the wellbeing of nature and people, favoring ancient forms of working with and not against the land, as done by indigenous communities in the Caribbean and through the teachings of African ancestors. She denounces the strategies of silence and normalization aiming to naturalize toxic waste in the bodies and environments of the tropics. Hence, her poetry presents a commitment to constantly resist

toxic narratives, suggesting turning towards indigenous and local knowledges and breaking of toxic normativity. (p. 176)

### ***Tropical Materialism and Marine Toxicity***

In their essay “Marine Entanglements: Tropical Materialism and Hydrographic Imaginary in Nnedi Okorafor’s *Lagoon*”, Sanchar Sarkar and Swarnalatha Rangarajan take us to the tropical ocean off the coast of Nigeria in Africa. As the authors note, the distinctive feature of the Anthropocene is the intricate entanglements of matter in which the environment is comprised of anthropogenic and natural elements. In the novel *Lagoon* (2014), the Africanfuturist/Afrofuturist author Nnedi Okorafor explores the entanglement of oil and seawater. The authors analyze the novel as “tropical eco-speculative petrofiction that functions within the realm of hydrographic imaginaries and focuses on the material-ecological engagements of petro-capitalism that has led to the creation of a tropical [contaminated] marinescape...” (this issue, p.182). This essay dives further into the depths of posthumanism examining how the novel incorporates an ichthyological identity, that of a revenging swordfish that embodies aquatic subjectivities, as well as a shape shifting alien that takes on the form of a mythological African water goddess.

In the words of Sarkar and Rangarajan:

The conflict between the fossil-fuel culture, spearheaded by a manufactured matter like oil and the natural marine-scape (water) is directly linked with...the swordfish that assumes the role of an avenger, a symbol of nature’s vengeance against the human footprint.... (p. 189)

They emphasise the importance of recognising matter – oil and water – as agentive materials, and argue that oil should be considered an anthropogenic hyperobject, where an oil spill off the coast of tropical Africa has the capacity to spread as viscous toxicity widely throughout the world’s marinescapes.

### ***Into the Matter of Matter***

Following the previous essay on the entanglements of elements in speculative fiction, the closing paper of this Special Issue draws us to the humid shores of subtropical Macao in Southern China, and into the matter of matter as it materializes over long historical time, and projects into the climatic future.



### ***Sticky Matter and Porous Futures***

Benjamin Kidder Hodges, in his evocative article entitled “Some Things are not held together by Glue: Chunambo and other ‘Sticky Matter’ in Subtropical Macao, China” grounds us in matter and its multispecies affects involving people, animals, things, spaces and elements. He takes as his starting point adhesives – or ‘sticky matter’ – in the form of the traditional rammed earth material called *chunambo*. This product is known across many former Portuguese colonies of the tropics – from Mozambique in Africa, to Brazil in Latin America, to Goa in India – where it is always comprised of local products. In Macao these include oyster shells, local soils, sand, straw and sticky rice, which are all adhered together with slacked lime. Long before the omnipresence of concrete, Macao was being constructed with *chunambo*. This human-made product is structurally strong, but also porous, and these qualities make it particularly suited to monsoon environments.

However, *chunambo* itself draws things together and into relation. The article thus seeks to follow some of these sticky leads, including the material’s relation with colonial history. As Hodges states:

Composite materials and the ‘sticky matter’ that binds them together can help re-frame this history as well as concurrent discourses around urban development and the environment in general. In Macao, it can be used to think about flows of people, capital and goods. Given the large-scale land reclamation projects ongoing in Macao, it can also help consider how new islands and their coasts are designed to deal with the subtropical storms and climate that so inform this casino capital of Asia (this issue, p.199).

Hodges’ focus on adhesive matter draws from new materialisms that incorporate scientific concepts to apply them in unorthodox ways in other disciplines, in his case, a multi-species anthropology of an urban space and its environmental impacts. However, at the same time, the article itself is held together by the materiality of its subject matter, which allows it to wander over wide disciplinary territories and subjects, exposing their relationality, while inviting important speculation into the future.

### **Closing by Opening**

Following the lead of the porous matter of *chunambo*, we close by opening up towards future articulations of materiality both ancient and new as they arise from the tropics. Tropical Materialisms, we argue, are particularly evocative of ways in which tropicity



inflects materiality and there are many more fields to be explored. For instance there are important questions to be asked regarding how Tropical Materialisms are realised through science and technologies – given that some tropical countries once deemed ‘underdeveloped’ have ‘leapfrogged’ in technology; there is also further research to be done regarding the matter of matter itself and ontological relationalism involving the becoming of tropical worlds; following quantum physics, we know that matter is agentive as it very being (Barad, 2007) – a notion long understood within in certain Eastern philosophies and Indigenous cosmologies, so many of which arise from the tropics.

Thus, the papers collected together in this Special Issue are just a small introduction to the possibilities offered by Tropical Materialisms. At the heart of this collection is a conversation with new materialisms, posthumanism, and material poetics. What is significant with placing this issue in the tropics and allowing it to arise from the tropics is the decolonial engagement it offers. The papers collected together here engage new materialist authors of the Western-temperate sphere and draw them into the humid environment of tropicality and epistemologies of the South to create rich discourses. These are necessary as the world experiences unprecedented climatic effects from global warming. And as the earth warms, the zone of the tropics – long held to be contained between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn – is breaching the imagined lines of its latitudinal borders and spreading further North and South, increasing its global reach and bringing with it increases in tropical climatic conditions with their concomitant animal vectors, tropical diseases, and (un)natural weather phenomenon (see Clayton, 2021). Yet, Tropical Materialisms also offer something more: they open up to moments of material *poiesis* – the bringing of something into existence which requires “an active engagement with the world, which is always creative” (Lundberg, 2008, p. 2).

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