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Decolonizing the Tropics: Part One

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Abstract

This special issue is a collection of papers that addresses and enacts the theme of decolonizing the tropics. Each article provides a sense of how we can untangle ourselves from entrenched colonial epistemologies and ontologies through detailed articulations of research practice. Drawing together humanities and social sciences, the papers collectively address questions of whose voices are heard or silenced, what positions we write from, how we are allowed to articulate our ideas, and through which mediums we present our research. In doing so, the contributions foreground the critical importance of these and other questions in any move towards decolonizing the tropics.

Keywords: decolonizing, tropics, decoloniality, positionality, de-canonize

Towards a Praxis in Decolonizing the Tropics

This two-part special issue on the twin themes of 'Decolonizing the Tropics' and 'Decoloniality and Tropicality' brings together a wide variety of interdisciplinary papers from many countries (and states trapped within countries) and tropical regions of the world. The double issue is the outcome of a positive response from scholars and practitioners concerned about the continuing affects/effects of colonialisms (in their various guises) as they arise in tropical locations. With so many papers – over twenty making it through the review process – the special issue is more elegantly published in two parts. Part One is entitled 'Decolonizing the Tropics' and is designed to be read with Part Two 'Decoloniality and Tropicality'. These twin issues curl and weave in and around and through each other, setting up reverberations between the collections. Publishing two complementary issues thus creates an interesting 'space between', an intermezzo, that allows for separations and connections, where new ideas have room to gain ground and grow.

Upon realizing we needed to publish a double issue on the decolonizing-decoloniality of the tropics-tropicality, we were beset with a quandary regarding how to go about separating the papers. This became a challenge in practicing the decolonization-decoloniality of our own academic epistemologies and ontologies. In contemplating how to proceed, the first idea was to follow a classic academic practice and divide the papers into 'humanities' and 'social sciences.' However, this was far too simple and was also too disciplined; it called up academic fields, but also indicated how we, too, are siloed into these academic categories. Then, in one of those middle of the night revelations¹ the conundrum of how to separate the papers while maintaining their relations, and without re-inscribing academic divisions, became obvious. We had already discussed and put into practice how we, as an editorial team, were each to personally approach this special issue. Thus, emerged a second idea on how to separate the papers. Let us explain.

When we first came together for this special issue, Sophie Chao proposed that each of us write a positionality statement as part of the decolonial practice of the editorial team. These statements were to precede and frame our theoretical, analytical, or storied observations regarding decolonization, decoloniality, or postcoloniality, arising from our disciplinary and interdisciplinary specialities and our specific tropical research locations. In an interruption of classic academic texts in which theory comes before practice, positionality statements announcing what position you

¹ Although Anita Lundberg experienced the revelation, it had arisen from reading the positionality statements that we had emailed between us. Thus, it was relational; rather than individual.

write/research from are often pronounced first, and from this personal basis the theoretical text then follows.

Yet, this is no simple divide between practice and theory, or between subjectivity and objectivity. These two aspects are in relation. Positionality statements involve highly nuanced understandings and articulations of theory. Such statements perform the theory in the writing of the statement. Positionality statements also introduce the voice of the author into the text, and thus there is no way to pretend you are a distanced observer unaffected by your text and research. Such statements furthermore demand that we think about who gets to write, and who is written about. And in the case of 'decolonizing the tropics', positionality demands that we think about the location of the writer and of those written. This is of course to speak of power relations – ones that are steeped in the legacies of colonialism and neocolonialism. The tropics is the region of the world most strongly impacted by colonialisms and currently suffering under neocolonialism. We thus need to ask whether the voices of the diverse peoples of the tropics are being heard: quoted, cited, authored. This means we must furthermore question what forms, ideas, and theories are allowed expression.

This fertile relationality in which positionality and theory intertwine, seemed like a way to likewise structure the two-part collection. Following the same procedure our own positionality statements and theoretical analyses, seemed like a way in which we could separate, yet retain, connections between the two issues and the papers. We are yet to see if and how it works; which is up to our readers to determine. At the very least, this approach allows us to bring together humanities and social sciences articles in both the issues, which we hope will give a sense of the important contributions that scholars across and between disciplinary divides are making as they put into practice ways of thinking and enacting tropical decolonization.

Thus, we begin Part One of this special issue on 'Decolonizing the Tropics' with a series of positionality statements that situate us, as editors, in our writing. While each is a personal statement; collectively, they outline the concerns that arise from our various locations or fields of research in the tropics. These short reflective, or diffractive, pieces demonstrate a variety of approaches and styles – story, statement, recollection.

Decolonizing Self: Undisciplined Ethnography in Indonesia and Malaysia
— Anita Lundberg

As I begin writing this statement, I am reminded of Claude Lévi-Strauss, who said he did not feel a sense of identity; he was simply the place where something occurred. Those words made me feel immediately at home. There is no self as a

self-same identity, for we are always in relation with the world around us. When we try to wrench ourselves from these relations, we put into motion all those binaries of culture/nature, human/non-human, civilized/primitive, male/female, self/other, theory/myth. These violent slashes (/) re-enact colonial ways of knowing and being which are premised on relations of hierarchies and antagonisms.

Perhaps my lack of identity is due to growing up always moving; I don't think I went to any school for more than two years. Even within the same town or city we would change houses and schools. I don't know why. My father was a Norwegian immigrant, my mother Australian. My grandfather, in the parlance of racist descriptions of his time, said we had "a touch of the tar;" he might have meant Spanish – I only deduce this because he painted very large bullfighting scenes. I barely knew him. My grandmothers I never met, although I have a movie star photograph of grandfather with my step-grandmother, a regal Filipina of mixed heritage (*mestisa*). That is as far as our Australian heritage goes. Not surprisingly, I travelled, and live overseas. Perhaps, not my 'identity'; but my skin is white and I am female.

I came to Anthropology late, already partway into a PhD in Science and Technology Studies in which I had previously done an MA. This, combined with a liberal arts undergraduate experience, meant I was essentially undisciplined. I set out for fieldwork having completed a course in Indonesian and a self-guided reading list in Anthropology – which meant skipping to the texts I liked, a combination of classic and postmodern, and a few ethnographies and cultural histories of Indonesia. My mental portmanteau also consisted of ideas from other scholarly fields, an array of philosophical and literary works, and my own experiences of previous month-long travels through various islands of the archipelago.

Fieldwork was in a traditional whale hunting village in Eastern Indonesia. During my second week, four of the whale hunting boats of ancient design were dragged out to sea by an enraged whale and the village was plunged into an existential crisis – along with the estranged neophyte anthropologist. This crisis instilled a sense of lack, a dissolution of self – and opened up towards the potential of other ways of being and knowing (Lundberg, 2001). This is the same process that traditional initiation rituals instil in novices. Fieldwork was awash in mythic stories, filled with Animist-Catholic beliefs, and intertwined in relations: whale hunters, whales, ancestors, the spirit of the whale, boats, and the sounds of waves. This ethnography was held by the element of the sea.

On returning to the university to write my dissertation, I realised that academic disciplines have their own myths. Anthropology as the hero setting off across the

seas in search of knowledge (Stocking, 1983; Sontag, 1966); Psychology as Psyche's journey into the underworld. Mythology was as much a part of academic disciplining, as it was a rich part of fieldwork. Myths – of anthropology, and whales, and whale hunters – when set alongside each other set up resonances, for they are archetypal tales (Jung, 1968). Yet there was also that neophyte anthropologist who was not at all heroic. This was a different story, one of losing self. In fact, all hero stories hold this aspect of loss of self (the hero faces great battles and momentarily dies, sometimes eaten by a whale). These moments speak of lack and syncope, which the French postfeminist theorists Luce Irigaray and Catherine Clément have taught are the fissures through which other ways of knowing may arise (Irigaray, 1993; Clément, 1994).

My postdoctoral fieldwork was in a traditional Malay house set on a large property of Indigenous trees, at the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur. The house was originally from Perak in the north. Myths and stories started arising through the very materiality of the house. I called this material poetics (Lundberg, 2008). The house brings up stories of the famous postcolonial hero Maharaja Lela who assassinated the first British Resident (a colonial administrator). The house's oral history is that Maharaja Lela escaped his hanging, went into hiding, and later returned to build the house. The house is also tenuously connected to a history of WWII jungle guerrilla warfare against Japanese invasion carried out by Malays, Chinese, and a smattering of British soldiers. And finally, arising from this matrilineal house, is the Malay myth of Pontianak – the female ghost-vampire who continues to haunt Malaysia and Singapore. This myth inspires new generations of local feminist writers. Wood was the element that held this ethnography.

Decolonising processes are about recognising myths of academia as much as the myths that arise out of fieldwork. Decoloniality is to embrace relationality so that colonialist binary systems of knowing may begin to be dissolved (Lugones, 2007; Glissant, 1997, Benitez & Lundberg, 2022). Decolonization is to recognize that Western epistemology is not impenetrable; the close reading of even the most rigid texts can reveal their breakdown, there is always a small fissure through which mutiny may enter. Importantly, Western thought is not homogenous (Malik, 2017); there are also philosophies that tell us of other ways of being and knowing which are filled with senses of a relational universe. Some of these texts I discuss in the second part in this special issue.

The Challenge of Decolonizing Anthropology – A view from the Pacific
— Sophie Chao

I write this commentary from the positionality of a Sino-French female, middle-class scholar, trained in Anglo-European forms of research, and operating within a

discipline – anthropology – that has historically been instrumental (or instrumentalized) to further imperial logics of extraction and appropriation. I write this commentary from the positionality of a junior researcher living, working, and conducting fieldwork on unceded territories in Australia and Indonesian West Papua (Chao, 2022a), where the theft of sovereignty by settler-colonial regimes over Indigenous bodies, landscapes, and livelihoods is as much of the past as it is of the present. I write this commentary with the cautionary words of Unanga scholar Eve Tuck and diasporic settler of colour Wayne Yang (2012) in mind. That “decolonization is not a metaphor” and that even the most well-meaning of endeavours to this end can unwittingly dissolve into tokenistic gesturing or dissipate into performative posturing, in ways that ultimately entrench, rather than meaningfully unsettle, the status quo.

In the current epoch, when the ethics, values, and uses of anthropology are increasingly being interrogated within and beyond the field (e.g. Jobson 2020; Teaiwa and Joannemariebarker 1994), engaging with the matter of decolonization can seem like an insurmountable challenge. Indeed, it can be paralysing – and necessarily so. To take decolonization seriously destabilizes the most fundamental infrastructures and institutions of knowledge production, together with the literal grounds upon which these infrastructures and institutions are built – the land, and consequently, who gets to own and be owned by it. It requires in turn taking seriously the forms of power, privilege, and positionality that “we” are willing to reckon with, become responsible for, and relinquish. It brings us to ask: in an age when colonial racial capitalism (Koshy et al. 2022) and its multiple afterlives continue to haunt the worlds we inhabit and interpret, what is good anthropology and what good is anthropology?

This commentary does not presume to offer answers or solutions to the momentous question of how one might truly decolonize “the field” – both in the sense of the scholarly disciplines within which we conduct research (in my case, anthropology) *and* the places and peoples who make this research possible. Instead, I outline a number of strategies that are being deployed within the field of anthropology and consonant social science disciplines as tentative stepping-stones towards achieving the bigger task of decolonization. In the spirit of anti-colonial thinkfeel (Escobar 2019), these strategies invite us to ask critically, creatively, and collaboratively: What counts as knowledge and who gets to produce it? What classifications and stratifications in ways of knowing shape our experience and interpretation of our and others’ worlds? What elisions, omissions, or silences partake in this interpretation? What determines who makes it into the canon, according to whom, and with what consequences?

In the space of Indigenous knowledges, Métis anthropologist Zoe Todd (2016), Māori scholar Makere Stewart-Harawira (2013), and others, have called out the elision of Indigenous ways of knowing and being within scholarly discussions and debates surrounding climate change in an age of planetary unravelling. Achieving meaningful conceptual collaborations towards the ends of social and environmental justice thus demands a critical consideration of the race and gender politics of citation within the discipline, a point powerfully articulated by Black feminist anthropologists Anne-Maria Makhulu and Christen Smith (2022) in their recent Colloquy #CiteBlackWomen. This requires work *in* the world to overcome the structural and historical factors that predispose some knowledge systems to assert primacy or supremacy over others – through organized activism, sustained protest, the slow grind of policy reform, and the sweeping force of revolution.

For those of us not equipped or prepared to do this work, there is always the possibility of simpler but no less meaningful acts towards decanonization as decolonization, such as turning to one's bibliography (Chao, 2023). Flick through a draft-in-progress. Read the names. Consider the geographies and positionalities represented. Think about the (im)balance and its causes. Highlight on the page individuals cited in the text itself. What places and powers are you foregrounding or backgrounding? Again, why so? Ask yourself, as my Samoan colleague Dion Enari (Chao & Enari 2021, see also Chao, 2022b) invited me to ask myself: whose voices and knowledge am I drawing from? How is this represented in my citations and acknowledgements? Whose voices are missing from the conversation, and why? What makes me decide to cite one scholar over another? What meanings and categories grow organically out of my research, and which are imposed? What impression of ownership over concepts and ideas am I creating in the process? What is this knowledge for and whom does this knowledge serve? I continue aspects of this conversation in Part Two of this special issue by considering the spaces of teaching and theory-making as decolonial praxis.

Goa, the Tropical Lusosphere, or (De)Constructing Portuguese-ness Elsewhere
— R. Benedito Ferrão

It had not been the first time that Chief Minister Pramod Sawant had called attention to what he deemed the deleterious effects of colonialism in Goa. One of the longest held European colonies in the world, Goa was under the Portuguese from 1510 to 1961; the region's violent annexation by post-British India may have ousted the Portuguese but also circumvented and denied Goan self-emancipation, resulting in an ongoing colonialism. Strikingly, in 2021, Sawant declared that it was necessary to rebuild temples allegedly destroyed by the Portuguese, so as to "preserve Hindu Sanskriti and Mandir Sanskriti (Hindu culture and temple culture)" (Express New Service, 2021, par. 6). Yet, a year later, despite exhortations by Sawant's

administration to “citizens, NGOs, and historians” to provide evidence of the destruction of temples so they could be reconstructed, Goa’s Department of Archaeology reported that none had been forthcoming (Kamat, 2022, pars. 3-5). Not to be undone by this lack of corroboration, again in 2023, Sawant stepped up his belated anticolonial rhetoric. Again linking his retributive aspirations to his belief that the colonizers had destroyed Hindu temples, the politician declared at a public event that 60 years after their departure, “the time had come to wipe out signs of the Portuguese” in totality (TNN, 2023, pars. 1-2).

As someone with a Portuguese name from a Goan family, this gives me pause. Lusophonic familial appellations mark Goans of Catholic heritage, who are a minority. The Chief Minister’s statement is chilling, because there is no mistaking what the postcolonial remnant “signs of the Portuguese” are: it is us. In what follows, I seek to demonstrate the political purpose of constructing Goan Catholic identity as “other” in the contemporary moment while also considering how Portugueseness, as it develops beyond the metropole and in the tropical lusosphere, is an explicitly Goan identity.



The Crossing by R. Benedito Ferrão, 2023.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to which Sawant and his administration belong, is also the one currently at the helm of the Indian nation-state. Presently run by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the party’s Hindu-supremacist and right-wing authoritarian fundamentalist (or Hindutva) praxis has escalated in the first decades of the 21st

century across India (Kalhan, 2023, p. 379). Resolved to establish a Hindu Rashtra (or state) in India, the Hindu right has been supported financially by the diaspora (Kalhan, 2023, p. 338). In the meanwhile, contemporary postcolonial India, which is the world's largest democracy ironically, has seen a rise in the persecution of minorities, including (but not limited to) Muslims, Dalits, members of tribal communities, and Christians (Hassan, 2023). These subjects are regarded as impediments to the making of the Hindu Rashtra because of their identitarian divergence. As Saba Mahmood articulates it, minorities are those whose "difference (religious, racial, ethnic) poses an incipient threat to the identity of the nation that is grounded in the religious, linguistic, and cultural norms of the majority" (2015, 32).

Aligning himself with his party's national politics around the creation of a Hindu Rashtra, Sawant's crusade against remainders of colonial history execrates Goan Catholics, defined as they are by their Portuguese names. Simultaneously, such malignment of minorities has as much to do with religious chauvinism as it does with statecraft (or, perhaps, the deflection of its actual practice). As Vivek Menezes apprehends, the bogeyman of the Portuguese past is a distraction in Goa "where governance has effectively collapsed" (2023, par. 1). Evidently, the conflation of Iberian colonialism and Catholic identity in Goa functions as a convenient scapegoat. When Goan Catholicism is simply viewed as a product of Portuguese colonialism, one in which early converts are thought to have expressed no agency or choice, then Goan Catholics who continue to be of the faith postcolonially are easily construed as, both, colonial remnants (even apologists) and the other to a once-secular state that now hurtles towards exclusionary religious monolithicism.

Although the roots of Catholicism in Goa may be pinned to the arrival of the Portuguese in South Asia a half-millennium ago, the religion has developed into a distinct regional form, one akin to, yet cleaved from, its Iberian likeness. Nowhere is this more tangible than in the construction of early churches in Goa by Goans. Builders of these churches imbibed European aesthetics from the sixteenth century on but remade them to employ locally sourced materials and for the edifices to endure tropical climatic conditions (Kandolkar, 2021). Moreover, such architectural developments were not solely discernible in Catholic church design, as domesticated European Renaissance influences even featured in Goa's Brahmanical temple forms in the seventeenth century (Kanekar, 2018, 254). In the case of churches, their displays of Goan domestications and reworkings of European built forms serve as indices of the localization of the faith and the instantiation of new ideas. Not just simulacra of Portuguese culture, they exist as their own manifestations of Goan ingenuity and agency within a colonial milieu. To state this differently, nothing in Goa, even if inspired by or contributed to by Portuguese colonialism, is Portuguese. In its tropical lusopheric form, it was and always will be Goan.

Colonial Persistence through Archaeology, Heritage and Architecture in Africa
— Ashton Sinamai

Coloniality is the persistence of colonial infrastructure, which benefits the imperial centres in multiple ways. Decoloniality, on the other hand, is a difficult concept to master in practice, but is supposed to unravel this coloniality through an epistemic disobedience from the periphery. But it is the proverbial ‘blind man and the elephant’ story where one describes the elephant according to the part of the body that one touched first. Multidisciplinary approaches that examine all facets of the discourses are few and far between. The papers of this two-part special issue which examine decolonization/decoloniality across many fields of research in/from the tropics could be a beginning of rigorous engagement with decoloniality. I believe decolonization begins with an inclusive academic environment that allows voices from other knowledge systems to contribute to debates in the humanities and social sciences – in the tropics and further throughout the world. The decolonial approach has potential to create more equitable spaces from which interpretations can be multivocal. The problem that decoloniality has had is the elitist approach which recognizes the need to open academic spaces to all, but often does not question the very power structure that exists between the academy and communities that require access to these debates. Subjectivity of knowledge does not only exist at the knowledge system level, but it also exists at the level of practice where most experts on decoloniality research and write within, and are informed by, a western knowledge system.

At another level, the problem with the imperial academic fort is that it speaks to other knowledge systems but does not listen to any of them. It is as if indigenous people’s histories end and begin with colonialism. This unilinear chronology emphasizes colonisation as the most important event in the life of African communities, and yet many communities see a continuation of their history throughout the colonial period (Mignolo, 2007). Even though three generations of my family lived under the British colonial yoke, it didn’t take away their Karanga identity (even when the colony renamed them Shona) but enhanced it through the fear of their being subsumed by the unknown. Decoloniality often assumes that, at a personal level, people became ‘colonial’ and lost their identity as a people. Decolonial processes should thus examine how people think about themselves before, during, and after colonialism, and disrupt the unilinear histories that centre colonialism as the end or start of epochs. In this way, it can reclaim African narratives and use them in every field of study, including the disciplines of archaeology, heritage management, architecture, museum studies, and beyond.

The colonial history of Africa largely depends on the archive, totally ignoring the African narratives about colonialism which can enrich the archive. For example,

much of my life was lived a few kilometres from Great Zimbabwe, an ancient city of a state that existed from 1100AD to around 1540AD. My grandmother's people were custodians and lived at the site until the land, now called Zimbabwe (after the same ancient site), was appropriated by the British colonial government in 1893. They were evicted and denied access into their sacred landscape, yet they kept all the stories that linked them to the place. Knowledge imparted by my grandmother in my young life was absent in the academy when I became a student of archaeology. The way she captured landscape with her stories and how those places remain vivid in my mind makes me understand the cultural landscape of Great Zimbabwe and other sites better. The dry archaeological interpretations I was taught have become appendages that I use to interpret the Great Zimbabwe cultural landscape not because of decolonial theories but because of narratives imparted to me by my grandmother. This is not because decolonial theories are not important, but because they tend to be too global to understand my grandmother's world and seek to universalize the colonial experience. From my experiences of being 'multi-knowledged', I realize that at a personal level, I am not only dealing with the historical trauma of forced evictions and denial of religious rights, or internalized inferiority and violence (Adams, 2022, p.7), but also the coloniality of western modernity with its misplaced environmentalism, individuality, and its focus on *thingifying* landscapes and the heritage within.

The Niger Delta Narrative as Decolonial Ecology
— Stephen Ogheneruro Okpadah

I write this short piece from the positionality of an indigenous scholar from the Niger Delta region of Nigeria who has researched extensively on the intersection of theatre and climate justice. I am an African scholar of Urhobo descent, whose people migrated from the ancient Benin empire. My people are predominantly farmers, hunters, and fishermen. The forests and waterbodies of the delta served as our source of food and income. As an indigene of this ethnic group, I have observed the massive disruption of the flora, fauna, air and water, of my community by internal and external colonialists and how my people have been displaced from their source of livelihood. Today, the Niger Delta is a site of environmental devastation characterized by oil spillages and gas flaring. It is unrecognizable.

I write from the position of a scholar who is conducting research on the decolonization of climate justice frameworks in an environmentally degraded Niger Delta through the medium of creative narrative, with special reference to how theatre can serve as a tool to decolonize climate justice. From the last decade of the 20th century, the works of creative artists from the tropics have accelerated the quest for the decolonization of environmental justice. This means the expunging of colonial colouration(s) from environmental justice frames instituted by neocolonists to soothe

their mercenary interests with little or no consideration for those who are vulnerable to environmental degradation. Countries in the tropics have been massively affected by colonial/neocolonial policies that barely improve, and often continue to degrade, the living conditions of people and places impacted by environmental colonialism. These policies have done little or nothing to accelerate the journey towards environmental justice.

The crisis of environmental exploitation and degradation is entwined with capitalism and colonialism. The colonial presence persists in Africa in a new form that promotes investment and development. Resource extractivism began in the Niger Delta in the guise of the development of oil producing communities. According to Ikelegbe and Umukoro (2016, p. 29), “the colonial oil companies promised the host oil producing communities to provide all basic social amenities for them. In fact, the gospel was that of a fully fledged development.” The Nigerian government in conjunction with the oil companies instituted a series of ingenuine environmental justice frameworks. The payment of climate finance by the extraction companies to the government and some elites in the host communities promotes a neocolonial environmental justice framework. It furthermore promotes the dispossession, possession and exploitation of the lands, rivers and landscape of the people, and holistically, their economic, social and spiritual space. To let go of one’s lands and water bodies is to be disconnected from one’s roots, the graves of one’s ancestors, and one’s identity. This politics of dispossession and exploitation is what gives rise to the Niger Delta narrative project.

Niger Delta narrative is a culmination of creative works that emanate from the deltaic landscape and focus on the environmental crisis and policies in the region. These narratives, in various forms, are geared towards decolonizing neo/colonial environmental policies, structures and systems. The new century ushered in the influx of this corpus of creative works. These works discuss environmental degradation and colonialism. Plays, novels and poems capture the scourge of oil spillages, their impact on women and young children, the acceleration of armed militancy as a result of the crisis, black soot, ocean encroachment, and environmental pollution induced ill-health. Dramatists, theatre directors, poets and novelists in the Niger Delta observed the potential of the creative text in creating awareness of environmental colonization and in resisting Westerncentric policies and structures. In my research, I examine environmental degradation in the Delta region and explore the decolonial praxis of environmental justice in the novels, dramas and poems by authors whose works emanate from the delta, and which focus on the environmental crisis and policies. Foremost in my research is the participation of the local artists, inclusion of delta people’s opinion, and advocacy for climate justice.

Caribbean Decolonization through a Radical Decolonial Aesthetic**— Hannah Regis**

This commentary is written from my position as a Caribbeanist and Black Atlantic scholar, though I have also completed research that centres on Indigenous Studies inspired by my mixed maternal heritage. My maternal ancestry is infused with currents of Indigenous and Afro-Caribbean cultures, though the main strain is Indo-Caribbean. I do not speak on behalf of any specific community, but I do acknowledge that the legend of this mixed and betwixt family heritage, in part, inspires my work. My investigations into Caribbean articulations of being and becoming, counter-archival engagements, theories of embodiment and cultural memory are rooted in ancestral and current mythologies, and the ritual practices of people and groups which form the modern Caribbean civilization. My interest also emerged out of a literary engagement with Caribbean haunting and spectrality, followed by an attendant concern with mythical folkways of defining and intervening into a historically violent history of conquest in the Indies. My contribution pays special attention to the aesthetic strategies and conceptual pathways fashioned by Caribbean thinkers whose meaning systems are not constituted within a Western/Eurocentric framework that values the human in relation to capitalist systems of production and consumption. Rather, I look to the conceptual modalities fashioned by several Caribbean cultural critics which transcend the commoditization of the person and of space, while shaping a symbolic decolonial repository towards achieving new futures.

Apart from the decimation of Indigenous communities and the nightmare of the slave ship journey, post-independent societies in the Caribbean witnessed the rise of neocolonial hierarchies whereby colonial ideologies and institutions were preserved. The resultant psychic disenfranchisement is characterized as spirit theft which intimates that the most successful and upwardly mobile may in reality be the most diseased. In this current world order, there is also the re-emergence of spiritual ways of being human. This begins with the eradication and evaporation of the divine spirit from the land and the sea — an alienation of humans from other life forms (Regis, 2020). Extractivism, mass deforestation and its social impacts are thus also at the forefront of a present-day, decolonial imaginary. Within the context of the Caribbean, and in the interest of cross tropical exchanges of ideas, it is necessary to consider the complex, subversive world-shaping paradigms (rhizome, Ceremony of Souls, vodun, tidalectic, myalism) fashioned by Caribbean creative writers who envisage radical alternative world views outside the hegemonic narratives by bringing to light the stunning viability and theoretical richness of spiritual cosmologies, permeable and interconnected spaces, plural ontologies, liminality and ritualistic pathways that resonate deeply with the psyche of Caribbean people (Glissant, 1989; Brathwaite, 1983; Harris, 1995; Lamming, 1992; Brodber, 1988). This explains why a focus on

decolonial aesthetics should not be read as an attempt to compensate for the shortcomings of socialist, emancipative movements. On the contrary, a radical decolonial aesthetic must involve the re-purposing of folk-based creativity while materializing alternative ways of generating cultural engagement. Many of the essays gathered in this special issue, which forms Part One of the two-part collection, explore the speculative potential of decolonial thought for contemporary world-making processes that are rooted in the multivalent mythic traditions of Caribbean and other peoples of the tropics. In Part Two of this twin special issue, I outline in more detail the decolonial theories that arise from the specifics of the Caribbean tropics.

Decolonial Queer Ecologies of the Transatlantic

— **Gregory Luke Chwala**

I write from the positionality of a decolonial, queer scholar of the environmental humanities whose work most specifically examines the ways in which fictional texts and imaginary worlds offer decolonial solutions. As an American queer white settler, I recognize my privilege and commit to a responsibility to upend colonialism and its continuing pernicious effects on today's 21st-century global economy. Settler colonialism especially continues to impact regions in the tropics, but over the last several decades, creative writers of the tropics have offered up imaginative worlds influenced by cultural histories and repositories of knowledge that posit ways to deconstruct colonialism and build new directions forward. These new ways of imagining the world suggest alternative paths for understanding human relationships with the more-than-human and the dynamic gender and sexual identities that exist across all lifeforms, the recognition of which is a decolonial act. By creating new narratives, creative writers and scholars can negotiate the complexities of the Human to liberate us from the shackles of coloniality. The imagination is a powerful tool that can be used to challenge inequalities and injustices. Asking "what if" allows writers and readers to imagine and implement what we might become tomorrow. My work considers what queer ecologies bring to the process of decolonization and posits that queer ecologies are a necessary element in the production of decoloniality.

Decolonization, simply put, is the undoing of colonialism, but also a broader and deeper intellectual practice. I use the term as Walter D. Mignolo (2011, p. 143) uses it to mean "delinking" from the "logic of coloniality." Nevertheless, this often involves violence. As Frantz Fanon (1963, p. 1-2) contends in *The Wretched of the Earth*, violence is often symptomatic of decolonization, for justice often requires dismantling and resisting constructions of the colonized world. This is the core of his decolonization theory which continues to inspire human rights and social justice, not unlike the goals of queer ecologies. However, this analogy is not the only

relationship between these formations. Decolonization theory and queer ecologies notably share an urgency in deconstructing and dismantling human boundaries and obstacles that specifically exploit a separation of select human beings from their right to be a part of, and interact with, their environments.

One cannot commit to decolonization without acknowledging queer ecologies because the ways in which the Western concept of nature has influenced colonization is deeply ingrained in a discourse of sexuality and gender, and it is likewise impossible to have queer ecologies, even ecocriticism, without a commitment to decolonization because, as Greta Gaard (1997) notes, erotophobia and ecophobia are so deeply intertwined. To queer ecology means to scrutinize the intersections and boundaries of sexuality/gender and environment to understand the biosocial constitution of the material, nonhuman world, and our experiences and perceptions of what constitutes it. Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson (2010, p. 5) explain: “Queer, then, is both noun and verb in this project: ours is an ecology that...calls into question heteronormativity itself as part of its advocacy around issues of nature and environment — and vice versa.” Our epistemologies and ontologies need a framework for critiquing the ways in which our environment is queer and complex: interconnected, adaptive, erotic, diverse, sexual, and always evolving toward something new and different in a way that best benefits the overall ecological system in which we live. We need to reexamine ecologies. A queer ecocritical framework promotes decolonization and a movement away from a postcolonial condition — that which will help us decolonize ourselves from the Human and its damaging conceptualizations of nature. Queer ecologies offer a decolonial option which can transform our understanding of not only how nature and culture influence one another, but also how sexuality and diverse gender identities are inherent to and have always been a part of life.

Queer ecologies aim to undo and recognize the damage caused by distancing the nonhuman environment from the Human and to develop a sexual politics that considers “the natural world and its biosocial constitution” (Mortimer-Sandilands & Erikson, 2010, p. 5) to understand how sex influences discourses on nature, and environment on sexuality. Queer ecologies destigmatize the relationship between conceptions of nature and those who identify as queer by exploring the ways that ecological diversity, coalition building, empathy, and queer agency rewrite colonial notions of nature and subvert the logic of coloniality that has produced the patriarchy, heteronormativity, racism, and capitalist exploitation that has resulted in exclusion, oppression, division of the Human from naturalized environments, and environmental destruction. Queer ecologists address “nature trouble” by reclaiming the term *nature* from the logic of coloniality. Reexamining the relationship between land and colonized bodies initiates this reclamation, and coalition building puts it to action. In Part Two of this special issue, I outline some of the theories, and their

specific spaces of the tropics, as a way to offer a preliminary framework of decolonial worldmaking via queer ecologies.

Tropical Knowings and Decolonizing Ways

The act of positioning ourselves in this introduction to a special issue on decolonizing the tropics is itself a small act towards decolonizing the academic canon, for it requires us to think about how we write and from what position. In thinking through the notion of 'decolonizing the tropics', it is necessary to contemplate this further. In writing or speaking or performing from the tropics, is there a way to embody tropicality? Our academic disciplines (which discipline how we think and write) derive from the temperate zones. The term temperate also refers to a way of being – a temperate writing style, a cool and rational and objective stance. As colonialisms derive from this zone and its temperate epistemologies and ontologies, how can we think from our zone, the tropics, as a way to set forth our thinking and writing with feeling? Perhaps we need to embrace jungle text, or humid persuasion, or deltaic quandaries, or we could have monsoonal rants. Perhaps we can engage in going troppo.

This is to engage with critical ideas – which become both epistemological and ontological – of who writes and from what position(s); how the intersectionality of gender/sexuality is empowered or disempowered; what styles of discourse are allowed or disallowed; what lands and languages are privileged or silenced.

The works presented in this first issue, broadly address these concerns through the specificities of their research and presentation modes. In the following papers we encounter: literature, performance, language, dance, theatre, material culture, Gothic storying, popular media, graphic novels, ecology and the environment, myths and rituals, visual practices, and the nature of weeds. Each of the pieces arises from particular geographies of the tropical world, through different cultural epistemologies and ontologies, and via particular disciplinary and theoretical orientations. The following works lead us through the archipelagos of the Philippines and Indonesia, over to the Niger Delta in Africa, and across to South Asia – honing on several annexed states in India. India also connects across to the Caribbean, and further to Central and South America. The journey then moves to Oceania including the Pacific Island of Tahiti, further to Australia and Papua New Guinea, to the Solomon Islands, and to Sulawesi in Indonesia.

These works are presented under three broad groups according to their materialities of expression: performativity and performances, literatures and literary analyses,

material culture and (de)cultured nature. Brought together as a collection, they offer a nascent cartography of how we may make steps towards decolonizing the tropics.

Performativity and Performances

In his paper “From Aura to *Awra*: Toward a Tropical Queer Decolonial Performativity in the Philippines,” John Paolo Sarce undertakes an examination of how Walter Benjamin’s concept of aura is queered through tropical performances and discourses as *awra*. Rather than being degenerate, the term *awra*, regenerates the concept by unfastening it from the imperial lexis and Western epistemology, and queering it through the local tongue of the Philippine LGBTQ community. Exploring how the term is used in queer tropical performances provides an opportunity to theorize a queer decolonial performativity. Sarce analyses three popular media texts in order to demonstrate his point: Awra Briguela’s song “*Clap, Clap, Clap, Awra*,” Maymay Entrata’s dance “*Amakabogera*,” and the noontime TV game show “*Beklaban*” (*beki* gay, *laban* fight). He also shows how *awra* appears in quotidian experiences, and argues that these reincarnations of aura into *awra*, brings the concept into new contexts and politics.

Dede Pramayoza and Fresti Yuliza address language and theatre performances from West Sumatra, Indonesia. In “Recreolization as Decolonial Dramaturgy: *Tansi* Language in *Tonel* Performance, Sawahlunto City,” they explain how the city of Sawahlunto is a product of colonialism. It was established by the Dutch as a coal mining centre built off the labour of local Minangkabau people, and the forced labour of convicts sent from prisons around Indonesia: Chinese, Batak, Sundanese, Madurese, Bugis, Balinese, and Javanese. Some of the Javanese convicts had been anti-colonial dissidents. The multi-ethnic population developed a pidgin language which became the *Tansi* creole language. The contemporary theatre form of *Tonel* (stolen from the Dutch) is practiced by ethnic communities who speak *Tansi*. Through examining the theatrical communications that occur in *Tonel* performances, the authors demonstrate how changes in the *Tansi* language constitute processes of decreolization and recreolization. They argue that recreolization acts to delink *Tansi* culture from the continuing affects/effects of colonialism, and allows the *Tansi* community to build a new dramaturgy based in a practice of cultural decoloniality. This detangling from the colonial legacy is particularly important given the current project to develop Sawahlunto as a mining tourism city.

Princewill Chukwuma Abakporo and Stanley Timeyin Ohenhen take us to the Niger Delta and Lagos State in their article “Decolonizing Tropical Environments: Awakening Nigeria’s Indigenous Dance Theatre.” The paper is focused on showing that colonialism and neocolonialism is at the centre of ecosystem degradation in the tropics, including the African tropics. Imperialism, industrialization and militarism, and

their discourses of modernization and development, are, they argue, complicit in the toxicity and wasting of tropical bodies – both natural and human. In Nigeria, neocolonial discourses of development have been used to sustain polluting rights which have created precarious living conditions. The authors maintain that a return to Indigenous African knowledge is needed in order to create ways of thinking that imagine real sustainable futures outside discourses of development. Such knowledge is decolonizing and posthumanist. Local Indigenous dance theatre, which reaches communities, is particularly important in creating awareness of environmental toxicity and waste and can stimulate essential conversations, but it faces current impediments. Ultimately the paper argues that decolonizing the environment in the Niger Delta and Lagos State regions, which form the hub of oil extracting, producing and transporting industries, is urgent; and Indigenous dance theatre is likewise urgently needed in this process of decolonization.

In the paper, “Anti-Colonial Performance Traditions in Manipur: Perspectives from *Shumang Kumhei Theatre*,” R.K. Yaibiren Sana argues that many ‘ex-colonized’ countries continue to suffer under new forms of colonialism. In India, several states were annexed after the British colonials exited, such as the state of Manipur in the northeastern corner of India. Manipur continues to suffer under neocolonial forms of Hinduization and militarization. This has given rise to insurgencies, armed conflicts, and random killings by Indian military forces. Manipur is home to several Indigenous peoples, including the Meitei. The theatre of the Meitei people has arisen as an important decolonizing agent. The *Shumang Kumhei*, an open courtyard theatre form, promotes egalitarianism in its spatial arrangements, which is in contrast with traditional Western or Indian theatre structures. This is a theatre of and for the people, promoting self-determination, laughter, and peace building. Through the spatiality of the theatre, the content of its plays, and the style of its performances, the author shows how this Indigenous theatre becomes the medium of the Meitei people under dire situations of continuing colonial oppression.

Literatures and Literary Analyses

Jessica Faleiro’s piece, “Scheherazade: Goan Gothic as Decolonial Storying,” introduces us to the potential of Tropical Gothic² for decolonial practices. In a preliminary explanation, she sets up the subgenre of Goan Gothic which reveals distinct atmospheric traits in the Portuguese colonial background. Annexed by India in 1961, contemporary Goa suffers under an Indian rule that refuses to recognize Goa’s cultural heritage. While many Goans must leave the region for work, Goan beaches see an influx of Indian tourists (Ferrão, 2021). In her accompanying story,

² On the relation between Tropical Gothic, colonialism and decoloniality see Lundberg, Ancuta and Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska, 2019.

contemporary life is interwoven with tropical atmospherics, hints of mysticism, and Portuguese gothic architecture. The story outlines the experiences of a beautiful story teller who goes to a Tarot card reader to find her destiny; years later, this same cartomancer sees the story teller in a literary café telling the tale of a beautiful storyteller who was seduced by an Indian politician and held captive for many years in a colonial mansion deep in the Goan jungle – until her long black hair had turned white. The captured storyteller feels she is losing her mind, until she comes into relation with the creatures of the jungle, and the spirits of the house. As the author notes, a decolonial reading of this story allows us to feel its colonial and neocolonial sensibilities; but more importantly, storying in and of itself is a decolonial praxis, suggesting a way of reclaiming Goan selfhood.

In their paper, “Decolonial Re-existence through Animist Realism: Water Spirits and Shamanic Mantras in Janice Pariat’s *Boats on Land*,” Sampda Swaraj and Binod Mishra remind readers that the detrimental impacts that colonialism has wrought on Indigenous knowing has spurred decoloniality, and simultaneously called for a re-existence of cosmovisions. This requires an untangling from Eurocentric discourse and recognition of Indigenous knowledge systems. The authors contribute to this call through a close reading of two stories within the anthology *Boats on Land* by Janice Pariat who is known for her contributions to the literary trope of animist realism. Pariat is a Khasi author who writes through the animist philosophy of her community. The Khasi tribe live in the Meghalaya State of India, a tropical land of clouds, waterfalls, and rivers. Reading the stories along with animist beliefs in water spirits, and rituals involving shamanic rituals, the scholars critique colonial renderings of Khasi belief systems as satanic, supernatural, or psycho-pathological. They show how the Khasi demonstrate spiritual, ecological and cosmological ways of knowing and being that reveal animist wisdom as based in mutual coexistence and relationality between human and more-than-human realms. The authors offer their paper towards an Indigenous and Western engagement in creating mutually respectful epistemologies in the ongoing decolonial journey.

In their paper “Decolonial Myths and Demi-gods of the Tropics: The More-than-Human Worlds of Manasa and Olokun,” Sunu Rose Joseph and Shashikantha Koudur take us to the deltaic Sundarbans in the Bay of Bengal, and a futuristic Santo Domingo in the Caribbean. They undertake a simultaneous deep reading of Amitav Ghosh’s *Gun Island* and Rita Indiana’s *Tentacle*. Both novels respond to the current age of the Anthropocene and both move back and forth through spacetime. The authors argue that the incorporation of tropical myths and demi-gods, Indigenous to each of the books’ locational settings, offer different forms for climate fiction and contribute to the decolonizing of Western-centric strategies of narration. The inclusion of the myths and demi-gods, and their reinterpretation within the fictional worlds, offer alternate approaches of knowing and being. In *Gun Island*, we meet

Manasa, an ancient folk deity from nature worshipping traditions. She is a *nagini*, the matron of snakes and venomous creatures. In *Tentacle*, Olokun, the Yoruba orisha water spirit, through his/her various incarnations, saves the Caribbean islands. Reading back and forth between the novels, the article reveals their posthumanist and decolonial alliances and demonstrates the power of the mythical deities to draw us into the interrelations of human and more-than-human realms.

Anindita Ghosal and Arindam Modak's paper, "Imag(in)ing Decolonial Ecology: Exploring Tropical Eco-Graphic Narratives," takes us to Indigenous India and Central and South America. The authors offer a deep theoretical analysis of how graphic novels can be employed in acts of decolonizing the tropics, through decentring logocentrism and thus undermining inherent power structures. Their aim is to imagine, through storied images, practices of decoloniality with ecocriticism. The three eco-graphic novels they examine are: *Martina and the Bridge of Time*, which is a deeptime Indigenous history of Panama; *Dengue*, set in a tropically diseased posthuman Uruguay; and *Bhimayana*, which incorporates traditional Gond tribal art from India. Illustrated panels from each narrative give the reader a sense of the different artistic styles which add richness to the essay. The authors argue that decoloniality and ecocriticism are engaged in acts to unleash literature from anthropocentric discourses, while graphic narrative is engaged in the decanonization of literary genres by integrating visual images with verbal text. Their paper demonstrates ways of exploring the affinities between decoloniality, ecocriticism, and graphic narrative from the tropics.

In "Decolonial Metatextualities: Strategies of Resistance in Three Contemporary Novels of Oceania," Mylène Charon and Temiti Lehartel introduce us to the works of Indigenous writers from the Pacific Island of Tahiti and the island/continent of Australia. Tahitian novelist Chantal Spitz' *L'île des rêves écrasés*; Aboriginal Wiradjuri writer Tara June Winch's *The Yield*; and Aboriginal Eualeyai/Kamillaroi author Larissa Behrendt's *After Story*. Charon and Lehartel argue that the three novels inscribe decoloniality through their Indigenous characters, each of whom, in the course of the stories, become writers. Through the characters, the novels demonstrate how racialized peoples claim their rights as knowers and storytellers and thus subvert the coloniality of knowledge which is central to the epistemological dimension of postcolonizing relationships. They undertake a decolonial metatextual analysis by reading the Indigenous characters' texts as they unfold within the novels, and furthermore argue that the novelists demonstrate a political use of metatextuality revealing how their First Nations' characters are racialized, marginalized, and inferiorized in postcolonizing countries; yet, also how the Indigenous characters are legitimate knowers and storytellers who reflect on Western literature (with irony), on the situations of their marginality, and draw on ancestral knowledges and languages.

To decolonize is to critically reflect on persisting colonial legacies and to centre Indigenous perspectives in strategies for decolonizing knowledge.

Material Culture and De/Cultured Nature

Kulasumb Kalinoe's paper, "Decolonising' Tropical Collections: Cultural Material from Papua New Guinea in Museums," uncovers the fraught relations of 'artefacts' and other Indigenous cultural heritage items. She takes us to Papua New Guinea and its diaspora living in Australia, and further to museum collections of the former colonizer countries (Germany, Britain, and Australia), and galleries in major art centres. Kalinoe points out that most tropical collections were acquired through unjust means by government administrators, missionaries, and artefact dealers during colonization. The call for the decolonization of museums, in which source communities are demanding the repatriation and restitution of their cultural material draws attention to cultural heritage issues. One issue is the manner in which objects in collections are exhibited and managed, which often reveal continuing colonial attitudes; such attitudes must be deconstructed. Another issue is that the establishment of museums and museum displays in origin countries should be studied through cross cultural Indigenous comparisons in order to detangle Indigenous museum practices from colonial conventions. Kalinoe argues that the decolonization of Papua New Guinea collections must be undertaken through the vision, values, and voices of the people – her research amongst diasporic communities in Australia adds to the Papua New Guinean voices. Material culture is not only woven into relations of Indigenous communities, the objects themselves also weave these relations. Objects have affect and power.

In "Weedy Life: Coloniality, Decoloniality, and Tropicality," Rosita Henry, Helen Ramoutsaki, Debbi Long, Greg Acciaioli, Simon Foale, Celmara Pocock, Kristin McBain-Rigg, and Michael Wood explore colonial ontology through the bodies and notions of weeds as they arise in tropical and subtropical Australia, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Indonesia – with a seed of a connection back to colonial Sri Lanka. The photographic essay, in both its form and content, offers a way to engage in decolonizing practices in the tropics. The contributors reflect on the relationship between colonization and decolonization through a visual focus on life forms – various species of plants and 'weedy' fish – that have been considered unproductive from (some) human points of view. They note that not only are 'weeds' good to think with, but they share many of the (continuing) colonial characteristics that define tropicality, such as being wild and untamed, and thus, requiring cultivation or eradication. If, in the colonial imaginary, nature needs to be cultured, then in a decolonial imaginary, nature may need to be decultured. In vignettes ranging across suburban backyards, Indigenous village gardens, a rap video, tourist sites, coral reefs, inland lakes, and logged rainforests, the authors offer readers a way to

celebrate alliances and *mésalliances*, between endemics and ‘weeds’, as they regeneratively live together in patterns of complex diversity. The authors guide us on how we can begin to dissolve the praxis of separation, exclusion, and even eradication, rooted in colonial ontology.

Towards Decoloniality and Tropicality

The last essay in this collection spreads weedy tendrils out towards the second part of the twin or twined issues. And thus, from these collected works under the theme ‘Decolonizing the Tropics’, we move into Part Two of the special issue which engages with theories of ‘Decoloniality and Tropicality’.

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