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What's Tropical about Nick Joaquin's *Tropical Gothic*? Heat and Corporeality in "The Summer Solstice" and "The Dying Wanton"

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Abstract

Since their first publication in magazines like *Graphic* and the *Philippine Free Press*, and their subsequent re-publication under the collection title *Tropical Gothic*, Nick Joaquin's classic short stories from the 1940s have been mainly appraised within a gothic framework. While critics have read the doublings and monstrous excesses of these stories as expressing a postcolonial resistance to colonial modernity, or a desirous anxiety for a pre-colonial Philippines, this paper discusses tropicality as a further localization of such gothic elements. By adopting a new materialist approach to ecological imaginaries, this article argues that the discourse of the tropical in Joaquin's aesthetics exercises an agentic role in re-locating temperate climactic markers within the Philippines. After briefly tracing the broader intellectual history of the tropical and the gothic, the discussion turns to the tropical gothic as a distinct category for the refiguration of gothic tropes within a material and tropical aesthetics. By drawing on feminism materialisms, this article makes a case for understanding tropical heat in "The Summer Solstice" and "The Dying Wanton," as a source of animation and motility. Further attention to transcorporeality in these stories reveals the transformative power of the tropical on human bodies in their more-than-human aspects. By departing from sociohistorical frameworks, this paper invites further consideration of Joaquin's contributions to a Philippine materialist and environmental poetics.

Keywords

Climate, Corporeality, Equatorial, Hispanic, Sun

About the Author

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INTRODUCTION

In their introduction to the *Kritika Kultura* issue on the occasion of Nick Joaquin's centennial in 2017, editors Gary Devilles and Jocelyn Martin begin by observing the "lukewarm reception" to the movie *Ang Larawan* at the Metro Manila Film Festival, which they view as part of a broader sense of ambivalence towards national writers in the Philippines (413). The production was based on Joaquin's play "A Portrait of Filipino as Artist: An Elegy in Three Acts" (1951), which was recently republished in the Penguin Classics edition *The Woman Who Had Two Navels and Tales of the Tropical Gothic* (2017). Alongside the inclusion of *America Is the Heart* (2019) by Carlos Bulosan in the same series, the best of Philippine anglophone writing is becoming swiftly canonized as classics of world literature.

Interestingly, this outwards diffusion is balanced against a resistance to the Manila-centrism and literary elitism that Joaquin represents to later audiences. This, in turn, suggests that Joaquin's writing could be re-assessed on a broader rubric beyond the nation, for the critical potentialities afforded by what the first readers of his work have observed as "that type of style called ornate or, more properly here, lush" in its "heaped details" (Furay 152).

Employing the conceptual idiom suggested by the tropical gothic that frames his earliest and best-known work, this paper reads Joaquin's invocation of the sun and tropical heat within a new materialist framework. Despite their Hispanic subject matter and nineteenth-century setting, stories such as "The Summer Solstice" and "The Dying Wanton" can arguably be understood as re-locating a northern climactic frame to the Philippines, revealing yet another aspect of the author's ambivalent relationship to the American commonwealth and the formation of the Philippine nation.

Named a National Artist in 1976, Joaquin requires no introduction in the Philippines. The stories now collected as part of the Penguin classics volume were first published in

Philippine magazines such as *Graphic* and the *Philippine Free Press* in the 1940s. In the 1950s, Joaquin immersed himself in films, pulp fiction and musicals. He also turned to journalism under the nom de plume, Quijano de Manila, an anagram of his name. From the 1960s, Joaquin also wrote revisionary accounts of the nation's history, "often swimming against the currents of ethno-nationalist and Marxist historiographies" (Rafael, "Introduction" xxii). Described as shying away from the limelight (DeVilles and Martin 413), he took long walks in Intramuros and immersed himself in the minutiae of his beloved city (Sarah Joaquin, qtd. in Mojares "Biography of Nick Joaquin."). As the consummate Manileño, his richly layered urban writing can be found in the essay collection *Language of the Street* (1980), though it is *Almanac for Manileños* (1979) that represents Joaquin's most exuberant and sustained attempt at redefining the Julian calendar and western horoscope in terms of the historical events, Catholic feast days, and the daily business of the city's denizens. The volume comprises a breviary for the lived materialities of Manila and Philippine life, textured by the generous inclusion of pre-Catholic myths and natural iconography, themselves preceded by the tropical aesthetics of his earlier short stories.

Joaquin's short stories and poems were first collected in book form in *Prose and Poems* (1952), edited by Teodoro M. Locsin. A number of the poems in the volume, such as "Verde Yo Te Quiero Verde" and "O Death be Proud" feature a curiously materialist sensibility to natural beauty and decay. Death, in the latter poem, is saluted as "the edible apparatus / we eat, and that shall eat us by and by" (198, lines 11-12). But it was not till 1972 that the term "Tropical Gothic" was first applied to describe his fiction. Published by the University of Queensland Press, no explanation is given in the general editor's introduction for titling the short story collection as such. The aim of the Asian and Pacific Writing series, however, was to bring "the world's most exciting and dynamic new literature" from these regions to "larger audiences in Europe, Africa and America" (vii), and the collection's nine

stories include seminal works such as “Guardia de Honor” and “The Woman with Two Navels.” The Penguin edition re-sequences the same set, adding “Three Generations” and “A Portrait of the Artist as Filipino.”

Gothic elements prevail in these short stories, ranging from the mystic mirror, in front of which the young Doña Agueda invokes a glimpse of her future husband in “May Day Eve,” to the ghostly ruins of Intramuros where a secret cabal gathers in “The Order of Melkizedek.” The European tradition of Gothic writing began in the mid-eighteenth century as a response to Enlightenment rationality, appearing distinctly anti-modern in choosing the chivalric ages for their setting, which in *Tropical Gothic*, is rendered as a pre-1898 Hispanic Philippines filled with the great houses, dancing, and decadence of the *principalía*. Yet the stories freely range in time period and setting to include the bombed ruins of Manila in 1945 and post-war Hong Kong. By exercising the temporal spectrality of the Gothic as a genre, Joaquin’s fiction “retains traces of instability where further disorientations, ambivalence and dislocations can arise” (Botting 3). These derive, in good part, from how a “discontinuous culture of conquest has produced a certain schizophrenia in the Philippine sense of identity” (Sharrad 355). Such spatial and temporal instabilities are rendered ecologically as the juxtaposition of northern climactic markers with the ever-present tropical heat. In “Doña Jerónima,” the archbishop turned castaway returns to Manila “in decay, terribly altered, terribly aged, mere skin and bones and wild eye” after being “burned black as coal” (131).¹ Against the agentic nature of the sun, the “cold wind singing with bells” (130) that concludes “Guardia de Honor” is impressionistically sketched, a temperate film superimposed on the tropical city, where references to “summer’s dust and doves” (112) are indicative of dislocation and spectrality. In “May Day Eve,” the allusion to the northern hemispheric spring festival as “this mystic May eye” is subverted as “this moist tropic eve,” where

¹ Page references throughout the essay are taken from the Penguin Classics volume published in 2017.

sleepless revelers stream out to swim in the Pasig and gather fireflies (53). More than simply local color, these climactic evocations can be appraised as an ecological conduit that condenses the historical ambivalences of a postcolonial Philippines.

Though there is no study of tropicity in Joaquin's work to date, scholarly responses employing a Gothic framework abound, with critics noting how the monstrous and the female are symptomatic of an ideological instability between pre-Catholicism and modernity (Reyes & Selman 477). For the most part, researchers understand Joaquin's gothic mode as an engagement with history. In her reading of the comic Gothic in "Cándido's Apocalypse," Marie Rose B. Arong detects a critique of Philippine modernity as conflated with American influence through the portrayal of a Hispanic past that is, to some degree, satirized (119). Scholars have also read Joaquin's focus on the unruly excess of bodies and hauntings of the past as the postcolonial gothic and a form of resistance against colonial modernity and discipline (Holden 363), while the frequent doubling and mirroring has been interpreted as the Lacanian unconscious of the unfinished 1896 revolution (San Juan x-xii). In "Telling Times: Nick Joaquin, Storyteller," Vincente L. Rafael observes how these early short stories, written and published from the 1940s to 1960s, indicate that "pressed between the Filipino American and the Pacific Wars, three generations of Filipinos struggled to survive" (125). Post-1945 Manila was a city bombed beyond recognition. For Joaquin, choosing the past as his subject matter was less about reconstructing what was irretrievably lost, than "regaining the capacity of remembering itself to reconstitute the remembering self" (125). As Rafael explains, it is the act of storytelling—the passing of a story from one historical moment to another—that allows for "the experience of lingering on the ever-shifting threshold that divides and joins the old world with the new" (129). By reinstating a vanished past, Joaquin's fiction performs a spectral manoeuvre, where a re-doubled temporality encapsulates the liminal historicity of the Philippines as locus.

This threshold, my paper argues, crucially allows for the inscription of tropicality as a crucial aspect of the gothic in Joaquin's early short stories. Writing at a time where the nascent imaginary of the Philippine nation was overshadowed by the American commonwealth, Joaquin's aesthetic treatment of tropicality can be read as inflecting, and undermining colonial notions of the torrid zone and tropical hygiene. By attending to the agentic presence of tropical heat on corporeality in "Summer Solstice" and "The Dying Wanton," tropicality can be understood as registering the climactic locality of the Philippines and animating the gothic inversion of historical progress. When read against a broader theoretical discourse of the tropical gothic and a tropical aesthetics, the famed baroque contours of Joaquin's early fiction reveal how thematic treatments of monstrosity and the female can be energized by feminist materialisms and new materialist concepts of transcorporeality.

Materialist Agency in the Tropical Gothic

Tropicality as a discourse emerged alongside European voyages of exploration and conquest to Africa, the Americas and Asia. While the tropics denote, geographically, the middle latitudes of the Tropic of Cancer in the northern hemisphere and the Tropic of Capricorn in the southern, the historian David Arnold observes that environmental otherness in European thought since the fifteenth century arose from a growing distinction between temperate and tropical zones (*The Problem of Nature* 142-3). The first voyagers to the "torrid zone" marveled at the paradisiacal abundance of flora and fauna. The German traveler and naturalist, Alexander von Humboldt, is mentioned by Arnold as playing an important role in inventing the tropics as a scientific object and an aesthetic domain. By invoking the "grand and imposing spectacle" of America's rainforests and vast plains in the register of affirmative

tropicality, Humboldt's remarks meld Romantic sensibility with rational Enlightenment inquiry (qtd. in Arnold *The Problem with Nature* 147). From the mid-eighteenth century onwards, however, tropicality was conceived of negatively in terms of extreme weather, dangerous wildlife and vulnerability to disease brought on by the climate. The humidity and heat of the tropics were invariably regarded as injurious to Europeans, giving rise to the field of tropical medicine (Arnold, *Warm Climates and Western Medicine* 15). On a continental and zonal scale, the French anthropologist Pierre Gourou extended a regional analysis of Tonkin paddy fields to conclude that humankind's control over nature in tropical regions, and consequently industrialization and state control, was significantly slower compared to temperate climes (Clayton and Bowd 217).

Hence from its inception, the climactic features of tropicality, to wit, its heat and high humidity under an equatorial sun, were perceived as debilitating and excessive. Poised against a civilizational discourse centered on European modernity, the unruly natural life of the tropics was also quantified for extractive purposes in the Philippines. The naval expedition led by Alejandro Malaspina (1789–94) spent several months in Manila and was one of a number of imperial missions to investigate and catalogue the botany of Spain's vast overseas territories. During this period, botanical exploration was linked to the discovery and commodification of natural materials under a system of patronage (Bleichmar 19). After the ceding of the Philippines to America in 1898 as a colony, the tropical jungles of the archipelago were nationalized under the Insular Bureau of Forestry, headed by Geoffrey Pinchot, who was on leave from his duties as chief of the US Forestry Service in Washington D. C. (Bankoff 478). Though debates raged in the United States about the preservation of its own national forest reserves, the new colonial administration faced no obstacles in adopting a stance of utilitarian conservation (Bankoff 479). On board the *USS General Alava*, Pinchot conducted a six-week, twenty-three-hundred-mile forestry survey, taking in the Visayas to

reach Mindanao, and returning via the Sulu archipelago and Sandakan in Borneo, before heading north to Luzon. While expressing great wonder at the lushness of the jungle that came down to the shoreline and the girth of tropical timber, Pinchot's goal was to draw up a set of general rules for merchantable timber (Bankoff 482).

Natural forces in European gothic literature are similarly regarded as destructive and malevolent (Botting 4). The negative treatment of tropicality could be seen as dovetailing with the negative aesthetics that underlies gothic texts, where the loss or absence of subjectivity due to a shocking or thrilling experience is subsequently recovered, after the restoration of order and self-presence (Botting 7). However, more recent conceptualizations of the gothic in relation to empire have sought to explain gothic instabilities using postcolonial means. By isolating and analyzing images of Self and Other, a postcolonial critique of the gothic re-assesses the construction of difference in the context of colonial politics (Smith and Hughes 4). Though early gothic writing often consolidated orientalist treatments of the East, the rise of imperial gothic as a critical discourse traces the representation of Britain's colonies in terms of Victorian ideologies of race, savagery and civilization (Brantlinger 14). In the wake of new materialist approaches aimed at decolonializing the effects of empire on the environment, recent scholarship has harnessed diverse intellectual traditions on tropicality and the gothic to register the anti-imperialist tendencies of cultural production in tropical and subtropical regions.

In the introduction to an *eTropic* issue on the Tropical Gothic, Anita Lundberg, Katarzyna Ancuta & Agnieszka Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska note the many resonances between the tropical and the gothic that give rise to the amalgamated term. "Opposing imaginaries of solar and gloom in one concept," the tropical gothic has emerged from the climactic terrain of the equator with the jungle as a primary locus in popular imaginaries and "a liminal terrain of mystery, monstrosity and feral desires" (2). Yet as the editors rightly observe, tropicalizing

the gothic is a dual process, “through which the dominant Gothic forms are adapted, transformed or resisted” while being “an opportunity to revisit our conceptualization of Gothic and examine its transcultural potential” (3). The gothic need not be seen as the domain of any one culture, and many artistic and literary productions consciously hybridize local and foreign influences (3). Though the editors contest the notion that the tropical gothic evolved from a European or North American predecessor, the concept provides “a space of reflection upon the unique social, historical, political, cultural and environmental conditions of the tropics” (4). Like our ongoing discussion of Joaquin’s stories, this necessarily requires a reappraisal of the literary figuration of the tropical and the gothic with an awareness of colonial injustices within these concepts, while seeking to read subject matter, setting and aesthetic representations in a resistant and generative manner. In the context of the Americas, tropicalization reverses North Atlantic discourses that seek to exoticize and hypostatize the Southern other in stereotypes, and advances self-identified topicalization (Edwards and Vasconcelos 2). By contrast, the black modernism of the transatlantic African diaspora recaptures the tropical terrain through bright colors, visionary scenes, and a sense of cultural nationalism, thus creating a tropical aesthetics centered on the “naming of place” (Noël 16).

Nevertheless, how does one assign or recognize agency in climactic discourse as a non-human element, even when situated within a tropical gothic as an affirmative framework? Writing about the social phenomena of folklore, Resil B. Mojares observes that a tale is always located within the ideological configuration of its specific historical locus, even as a properly historical reading does not mean “stripping and casting away layer after layer to arrive at an “original” place. Instead our task is to understand all the places along the way” so as to arrive at “a view of material and mental transformations over the long duration” (*Waiting for Mariang Makiling: Essays in Philippine Cultural History* 4). Arguably, something similar is at play in Joaquin’s writing, which reinvents the colonial histories of the

Philippines while registering the vivid materiality of the tropical setting. A new materialist approach to Joaquin's work offers a post-human ontological reorientation which recognizes agency and motility in matter. By moving away from a Cartesian-Newtonian understanding of materiality, in which nature is conceptually and practically dominated by "a specifically modern attitude or ethos of subjectivist potency," a new materialist ontology "sees its task as creating new concepts and images of nature that affirm matter's immanent vitality" (Coole and Frost 8). Such thinking is post-Cartesian rather than anti-Cartesian. Instead of a dualist model that opposes vitalism and mechanism, new materialists subscribe to a pluralist concept where subjectivity is imbricated in material interactions (Coole and Frost 9). This, in turn, allows us to further discuss the animating effects of tropical heat and brightness, along with other associated material processes such as decomposition and perspiration in Joaquin's tales of the tropical gothic, themselves a form of condensed resistance against a northern climactic frame.

In "The Summer Solstice," tropicality as a material condition is expressed primarily as a corporeal experience of intense heat and discrepant impulses, while in "The Dying Wanton" this morphs into sheer horror at the sight of Currito's decaying but still living body devoured by worms. By advocating for the motive power of the tropical sun, my argument departs from corporeality within a biopolitical framework centered on questions of sovereignty and bare life (Agamben 42), as well as an environmental materialism defined by climate change as a governing rubric. This paper does not dispute the importance of critiquing the effects of state violence on its members and the "the relationships between violence (ecological, cybernetic, psychological, physical, symbolic, racial, and so on) and the imagined integrity/disintegration of the body as both an ontological and material space" in a moment of ecological crisis (Estok 269). In fact, as Lily Rose Tope has argued in a commentary on "Doña Jeronima," nature is not opposed to historical discourse in Joaquin's

writing, and we can observe a convergence between ecocritical and postcolonial approaches in their joint critique of exploitation (138). Indeed, some of the most trenchant discussions of the material histories of climactic factors in Philippine ecocriticism are based on extreme weather events, such as when the large-scale destruction of Super Typhoon Yolanda invites a deeper historical understanding of US fossil-fueled war technologies (Santa Ana 63). Yet as Stacey Alaimo observes in her survey on materialist feminisms, to define environmentalism only in terms of natural degradation brought about by human actions is to fixate, somewhat dangerously, on anthropocentric agency (258).

Instead of a focus on human corporeality, Alaimo calls for the “imagining (of) human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world” (238). Transcorporeality emphasizes “the extent to which the corporeal substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from ‘the environment’” (238). If nature is “always as close as one’s own skin,” then it becomes difficult to relegate nature to the background as inert matter (238). In an essay on the weathering effects of climate on the human body, Astrida Neimanis and Rachel Loewen Walker extend Alaimo’s theorizing of transcorporeality to conceive of weather and other environmental elements as a temporal and spatial transit through the material body. “A transcorporeal orientation” presents a refinement on a post-human orientation because it “foregrounds the bleed between the weather and our corporeal selves” to heighten the agency of nonhuman nature (563). The weather is not simply an external and alien experience which we can exclude by going indoors or shutting the windows. For Neimanis and Walker, thinking about the weather transcorporeally means attending to “mutual worlding through material overlap and transit, incorporations and excorporations of all kinds” (565). Besides experiencing heat and cold, or the wind’s movement, such “weathering” on our corporeal bodies over the years comprises a material memory with a marked temporal durability. Though the authors have climate change as their

primary context, their theorization of “a transcorporeal stretching between present, future, and past, that foregrounds a nonchronological durationality” (561) could also be applied to tropicality in Joaquin’s stories, and how the material bodies of various characters express the climatic locality of the Philippines. What is often interpreted as mythic or archetypal in Joaquin’s fiction, when reappraised against the disciplining of the natural world under a colonial and modern rubric, emerges interestingly as an affirmation of tropicality. As this paper will go on to discuss, the agential nature of tropical heat, and its effects on the corporeal, give rise to a locationality that is uniquely Filipino in its erection and dismantling of Hispanic Manila as a historical locus.

Sun Symbolism and Agentic Tropicality in “The Summer Solstice”

Of the short stories collected under the label “Tropical Gothic” in both editions to date, “The Summer Solstice” is distinctive for the central role it accords to the tropical sun. Though the title refers to the temperate four seasons, the palpable intensity of the heat in the story’s opening lines immediately locates readers in the tropical zone. It is the feast of St. John in the grand household of the Moretas and Doña Lupeng awakes “faint with the heat, a sound of screaming in her ears” (39). Before she can investigate, her three sons have crowded around her, reinforcing this initial depiction of her role as both mother and mistress of the household. As she makes her way out, the household is revealed to be in disarray: the children’s nurse is making breakfast instead of the cook and the driver is preparing the wrong carriage. Besides the mysterious shrieking, the omnipresent heat of the tropical sun dominates the scene. Even at seven in the morning, the house is a “furnace” and no defense against the weather, with

“the windows dilating with the harsh light and the air already burning with the immense, intense fever of noon” (39).

Doña Lupeng soon discovers that the source of the screaming is Amada, after stumbling upon her drooling and half-naked servant in bed. She is informed, gravely, that she is possessed by the spirit of the Tadtarin, a fertility goddess. Without any incredulity, the driver, also Amada’s husband, proclaims: “It is the day of St. John: the spirit is in her” (40). As the day’s festivities continue, readers learn that the Catholic feast celebrating the birth of St. John the Baptist coincides with the three-day festival marking the life, death, and rebirth of the Tadtarin. The former is commemorated with a procession in the boiling heat of the day, while the evening rituals symbolizing the resurrection of the next goddess are accompanied by wild female-only dances on three nights, which are also claustrophobically warm after sunset. But the main dynamic of “The Summer Solstice” concerns Doña Lupeng’s growing dissatisfaction with her husband’s sometimes patronizing behaviour towards her. After meeting a nephew, recently returned from Europe, she is both fascinated and repulsed by his Byronic adoration and self-abasement before women. Despite her best attempts at restraint, Doña Lupeng develops a smoldering sense of resentment, and against her husband’s wishes, joins in the Tadtarin revelries on the last night. Forced to escort his wife, Don Paeng loses her in the crowd and ends up with torn clothes and scratches on his face. The story culminates with Doña Lupeng victorious when he is forced to admit that he worships her, an attitude that he expresses amply in his savage kissing of her foot, after crawling across the floor “like a great agonized lizard” (52). Grimacing in pain, Doña Lupeng is symbolically transformed into a goddess herself, her loose hair “streaming fluid and black in the white night where the huge moon glowed like a sun” (52).

The earliest reactions to Joaquin’s gothic inversion of sun and moon; day and night; and the assumed hierarchy of the sexes, deplored “the portrayal of lust, perversion (whether

sexual or otherwise) and all such sordidness” with “The Summer Solstice” singled out for “wallowing” in such qualities (Furay 148). Later critics interpret Doña Lupeng’s defiance of her husband and dancing with the female crowd as a subversion of “two important myths held by Filipinos: the superiority of the male and the superiority of the upper class” when an aristocratic female “discovers her body by dancing in a lower-class festival” (Zialcita 215). Though Fernando Zialcita sees this as part of quest for self-definition, a less centrist and classist treatment of the pre-modern is to be found in responses that locate “The Summer Solstice” in relation to the gothic. For Tyra Delos Reyes and Xavier Selman, the pre-Catholic in Joaquin’s writing represents the anxious but subconscious desire of the modern Filipino for an authenticity “which once was, but can no longer be” (477). The monstrous, emergent through a female figure like Doña Lupeng, is “a symbolic figure that is in essence reactionary to cultural and historical specificity” (481). Her transformation at the end of the story is interpreted as a possession similar to Amada’s, but in light of the aristocratic woman’s earlier disgust, is treated as an attraction to the pre-Catholic and a disruption of the modern at the same moment. To extend the argument at hand, if the monstrous can be regarded as an aspect of the gothic, then the Filipino tropical gothic expresses an aporia between a modern and unitary Filipino identity and the undeniable influence of Spanish and American colonialism.

Reyes and Selman provide an ample analysis of the power and presence of tropical heat by describing it as “as an elemental, independent force” that is no longer exclusively associated with masculinity (483). As a “ubiquitous element” (483), it affects both Don Paeng and Doña Lupeng, but its significance, in their argument, derives firstly from the structural contrast between the sun as associated with the iconography of St. John and the heat that permeates the night and reinstates the Tadtarin as a female principle. By contrast, I argue that the elemental, climatic force of tropicity exists prior even to the juxtaposition of pre-Hispanic beliefs and Catholic practices. Just as the tropical heat can be assumed to

provide the motive force for the agricultural cult of the fertility goddess, it is the corporeal experience of equatorial temperatures that destabilizes northern hemispheric seasonal markers. In European and temperate climes, the Christian nativity of St. John the Baptist is traditionally celebrated in association with the height of summer and marks the six months prior to the birth of Jesus at Christmas. In many parts of Europe, St. John's fires are lit to welcome the renewed heat and light of June (Weiser). Superimposed on the Philippines, where the mean temperature across the year varies but three degrees between 25.5 and 28.3 °C (PAGASA), the notion of summer signals a temporal and geographical disjunction. When husband and wife ride out in their open carriage to observe the procession bearing aloft the image of the Precursor, the "Lord of the Summer" is invoked through a metonymy of solar descriptors. He is described at first as "fine, blonde, heroic...very male, very arrogant" and "the Lord of Light and Heat—erect and goldly virile above the prone and female earth" (41). But in St. John's presence, the "animals reared and roared and the merciless fires came raining down from the skies": an image that would be diabolical if it were not stunningly bright and replete with the joyous shouts of young men. Like the beginning of "The Summer Solstice," the motive force of this event is not the anthropomorphic saint, but the omnipresent heat. Recalling the vitality and lushness of tropicality as an affirmative discourse, the final descriptor assigned to St. John is a paganistic epithet, "the noon god" (42).

This extra-human dimension in Joaquin's tale forms the basis of a tropical aesthetics. Through the subversion of temperate climate markers, tropicality emerges as Philippine locality. First hinted at in the chiasmus of the driver's declaration about Amada—"It is the day of St. John: the spirit is in her"—there is no incredulity about substituting the spirit of the Tadtarin for the Christian saint, and none at the fact that his wife's body could be inhabited by an otherworldly force. When questioned by Doña Lupeng, Entoy insists that he has no authority as a husband because at such moments "she is the wife of the river, she is the wife

of the crocodile, she is the wife of the moon” (41). In place of the sun as the primary source of motility that varies from season to season, here the Tadtarin tropicalizes fertility.

Throughout the rest of the story, an enveloping heat persists even after dusk to express this superseding of temperate solar references. Joaquin’s eloquent prose invokes qualities of potency and perpetuity in relation to tropicality: “It was a heat without gradations: that knew no twilights and no dawns; that was still there, after the sun had set; that would be there already, before the sun had risen” (45). The most striking subversion occurs in the closing lines of the story, when Doña Lupeng is worshipped by her husband and all but transformed into a tropical goddess against the backdrop of “the huge glittering moon” and “rapid flashes of lightning” (52). Any notion of summer as a season is triumphantly displaced by the final image of a “white night” where “the huge moon glowed like a sun” and “the pure heat burned with the immense intense fever of noon” (52). Tropical heat is located within a broader discourse of tropicality as agentic and all-pervasive, overriding even temporal distinctions between day and night.

Characterized firstly by the undermining of a northern climactic frame, Joaquin’s tropical aesthetics can be seen as inheriting and extending an earlier tendency, among *Ilustrados*, for invoking tropicality as a referential frame for their travels in Europe. In “Romancing Tropicality ‘Ilustrado’ Portraits of the Climate in the Late Nineteenth Century,” Filomeno V. Aguilar Jr., traces how José Rizal and his contemporaries resisted the assumed superiority of European landscapes and natural features. Arriving in the Iberian Peninsula in 1886, Antonio Luna regarded the arid terrain as a desert compared to the lushness of the Cordillera Mountains in the Philippines and reminisced about “the pure air of our forests and our jungles, where neither the rays of the sun nor the rain penetrate” (qtd. in Aguilar Jr. 425). In the *Brindis*, Rizal’s commentary on the paintings “El Spoliarium” and “Virgenes Cristianas Expuestas al Populacho” becomes an occasion to emphasize “the magnificence

and awesomeness of tropical nature in his distant homeland” (423). For both Ilustrados, Philippine tropicality is engendered as a primary frame of reference, albeit at times as a romanticized or even a fantastical discourse. In a detailed study on storm representations in the Brindis and Rizal’s letters, Isa Lacuna observes how Madrid is figuratively and spectrally invoked. Rain “is as fine as *matang tinapa* [smoked fish eyes]” and the streets are full of “puddles of water like *lubluban ng calabao* [carabao pools]” (Lacuna’s translation; 188). By “conjur[ing] tropical weather in a place most unhomey to it,” Rizal is attempting to translate Madrid into familiar terms for his family, resulting in “a wonderfully frankensteined creature that marries both the temperate and the tropical into one” (189).

In “The Summer Solstice,” Joaquin’s refiguration of the summer sun in terms of tropical heat may be seen as a similar attempt to re-centre a Philippine climactic idiom, with the added complexity of conjuring the Hispanic past in English as the new colonial, and later, Philippine idiom. In a later essay, “The Filipino as English Fictionist” (1978), Joaquin laments the foreignization of English as a literary language for Filipino writers, which to some extent is due to the perception that American colonization was exceptional, so that the Philippines has to “assert its roots outside American culture” (118). Instead of viewing the 1900s as an irreparable “break” with the past, Joaquin thinks that the “Filipino writer in English should offer justification of himself as a valid, as a vital, link in the chain of history” (119). Specifically, he sees Filipino writing in English as continuing the print culture (Joaquin calls this the “visual culture”) of the Filipino writer in Spanish, even as writers in other Filipino vernaculars adopt the specificities of time and place, as well as the nuances of feeling made available in print narrative.

The fiction of Joaquin’s immediate predecessors and contemporaries depicted the natural world primarily as a rural setting to explore the flourishing and failure of romantic relationships. Stories such as “Midsummer” and “Heat” by Manuel E. Arguilla are highly

stylized tableaux with an anthropocentric focus on the beginnings of love. “How My Brother Leon brought Home a Wife” features more strongly evocative descriptions of the tropical sunset, where “along the saw-tooth rim of the Katayaghan hills to the southwest flamed huge masses of clouds” (97) and “high up overhead the sky burned with many slow fires” (99-100). These expressions underscore the unspoken desire of Leon for Maria, as observed vicariously by Baldo, allowing environmental features to enter the text as figurations of the human psyche. In comparison, “Dead Stars” by Paz Marquez Benitez makes more extensive use of “the golden streamer” of the tropical dusk to symbolize the forsaken love between Alfredo and Esperanza. More interestingly, the story prefigures some of Joaquin’s deeply biomaterialist idiom when Esperanza’s clothes are cleaved by the wind around her “straight, slender figure” to convey a “thoughtful, sunny temper” (7-8). With stories such as “The Woodsman” by Consorcio Borje, the realist genre of American nature writing is extended into a Philippine locale, while “Sea and Land and Time” by Juan Cabrerros Laya ecologically locates the familiar tale of a *kababayan*’s return and reunion “under the peaceful trees” (181) in a romantic mode.²

By contrast, Joaquin’s writing in *Tropical Gothic* seeks to destabilize the distinction between a bounded human world and the encroaching presence of the tropics. His writing departs from a romantic inflection of the natural world, with human activity at the forefront, to bring forth a tropical aesthetics that responds to questions of materiality and historicity in-situ. As we have seen in “The Summer Solstice,” Joaquin’s tropical aesthetics, centered on the subversive and agentic nature of tropical heat, inflects a nineteenth century household in Manila, but swiftly exceeds it, as a reflection of the relational “link” of literary English across different time periods. Tropicality as an affirmative discourse is less related to mimetic

² Aside from Arguilla’s stories, all others referred to in this paragraph can be found in *Philippine Short Stories (1925 – 1940)* and *Philippine Short Stories (1941-1955)*, both edited by Leopoldo Y. Yabes.

realism than the assertion of locationality. Conjured spectrally to express the Philippines as a palimpsest of Spanish and American coloniality, Joaquin's tropicality is also subtended by an attempt to express the reflexive temporality of Philippine history.

Hence the tropicality of Joaquin's gothic fiction may be treated as extension of what scholars have noted about his engagement with the past in his fiction. Terming this a "baroque mode or mentality," John D. Blanco understands such writing to be a product of "the experience of modernity as the immanence of disaster and disenchantment" that typified the urban Manila experience between the Philippine revolution and World War Two (7). The elision of one climactic idiom by another that this paper has observed corresponds more broadly to what Blanco calls "an evasive and multiple experience of modernity that extends to the very origins of the Spanish conquest, and that has existed coterminously yet in counterpoint with it up to the present" (7). At the level of style, this impulse to tropicalize the gothic is also what lends Joaquin's *Almanac for Manileños* its especial boldness in freely equating European and Philippine mythologies. In an ornate reconfiguration of the cult of the moon that concludes the entry for November, Quijano de Manila asserts that "the dangerous Mariang Makiling is obviously a 'sister' of the huntress goddess Diana" and that the rituals of the Tadtarin are "our own witches' sabbaths" (271). To bear both Filipino and Catholic, the final line reads most audaciously as worship, not of woman-as-ideal, but of the tropical Philippine moon: "Our Mother, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name!" (271).

Tropical Transcorporeality and Transformed Bodies in "The Summer Solstice" and "The Dying Wanton"

Aside from depictions of tropical heat and its agentic force, tropicality in "The Summer Solstice" takes the form of transcorporeal effects, when the experience of equatorial heat

leads to a permeability of biotic boundaries. While analyses of erotic and monstrous impulses in gothic writing are overwhelmingly human-centric in featuring a larger sociohistorical or psychoanalytical analytic, my argument asks if we could consider the effects of tropical heat on corporeality as part of an affirmative discourse of Philippine tropicality.

The discourse of tropical hygiene proliferated in the late nineteenth century in the form of guidebooks and medical advice aimed at preventing disease and maintaining the health and comfort of the body. In the preface to *Tropical Medicine* (1907), Thomas W. Jackson notes the growing need for knowledge on tropical pathology and hygiene in America, owing in no small part to its recent colonial expansion in the West Indies, Hawaii, and the Philippines, where such an educational mission befits the role of the Americans as “the ‘keepers’ of our brethren, black, brown, yellow and white” (v). Determined to safeguard the American homeland and American bodies from “the threatening possibilities of the importation of disease” (2), the book’s general introduction surveys areas such as “Appropriate and Nourishing Food” and “Appropriate Clothing and Provision for Its Sanitary Washing.” In *Colonial Pathologies*, Warwick Anderson traces the history of sanitation in the American colonial period, where tropical hygiene undergirded a larger discourse of progress and modernization within the Philippines as an apprentice-nation (3). In the wake of America’s first tropical war in 1898, American masculinity was characterized by the qualities of self-mastery and restraint, which required segregation from the brown and un-disciplined Filipino social body (4) and the contaminating spread of tropical diseases (38). Aspects of such tropical hygiene can be detected in Doña Lupeng’s white day frock, the expected afternoon siesta and Don Paeng’s evening bath. “Head bursting with the heat” (46), his wife refuses the last two as she broods.

Despite mimicking the “hygienic modernity” (Anderson 3) of their American counterparts, the Moretas are in fact deeply implicated in the localized “dynamics of social

production” where folklore leads to the “demystification and subversion” of the dominant social order (Mojares 4). Throughout “The Summer Solstice,” the growing heat exerts a noticeable and transformative effect on the bodies present, both male and female. In place of the lassitude and indolence associated with tropical heat, the men carrying the image of St. John are youthfully fervent: “their hot bodies glowed crimson as they pranced past, shrouded in fiery dust” (41). Yet more than simply influencing outward behavior, the agential nature of tropicity leads to a breaching of class and gender hierarchies, in the raw imagery of corporeality. When Doña Lupeng instructs the half-naked cook to get up, Amada’s only response is to stare, before “spreading out her big soft arms and legs” and “noisily quaking with laughter” (40). No longer a servant, organicity and fluid porosity are the qualities emphasized by the woman’s physicality, with “the mute mirth jerking in her throat; the moist pile of her flesh quivering like brown jelly” (40). Possessed by the Tadtarin spirit, which itself is an extension of tropical, fertile heat, Amada’s transformation can be interestingly framed in relation to material feminism’s treatment of matter as “material-semiotic, intercorporeal, performative, agential, even literate” (Alaimo 244). As opposed to sociocultural discourses that treat human corporeality as bounded, “material feminisms open out the question of the human by considering models of extension, interconnection, exchange, and unravelling” in order to foreground exchanges between human corporeality and the more-than-human world (Alaimo 244). In “The Summer Solstice,” the focus on corporeality demonstrates the transcorporeal influence of tropicity. When Amada joyfully giggles and drools open-mouthed, the agency of tropical heat leads to a powerful if paradoxically self-possessed state of being that is beyond language in her muteness. Centered in somatic materiality, she disrupts imperial notions of containment and segregation. In this state of blissful dissipation, the once-cook embodies the tropical neurasthenia that the American

administrators so feared (Anderson 132); joyful debilitation inverts the process of colonialization and substitutes a Filipina body that espouses tropicality.

Against the requirements of tropical and social hygiene, discreet bodies coalesce and meld into each other. Amada's brows are "sweat-beaded" and in the story as a whole, the motif of perspiration represents leakiness and permeability. When the young nephew, Guido, gazes adoringly at Doña Lupeng to expound on "holiness and mystery of what is vulgar," his face is "moist with sweat" under a "long day that refused to end" (44). At the end of the story, in an obvious parallel, Don Paeng admits defeat, sinking to the floor, "breathing hard and streaming with sweat, his fine body curiously diminished now in its ravaged apparel" (51). While the subversion of male superiority forms a central theme in the story, the culminating image is of a human body metamorphosized as the non-human, as he "graspingly clawed his way across the floor, like a great agonized lizard" (52). Tropicality here is transcorporeal, an active principle that is less violation of corporeal boundaries than an insistence that human bodies are part of a continuum with the natural environment. To adapt Neimanis and Walker's understanding of bodies in different "climates" of history as a "sensibility of ourselves as weather bodies in thick time" (562), the "hysterical female horde" with their image of the Tadtarin can also be interpreted as an extension of tropicality. The processing arrives with "a sound of sea-waves steadily rolling nearer" and after the goddess symbolically dies, the women begin "wailing softly, unhumanly—a hushed, animal keening" (48). Rendered in Joaquin's flamboyant, metaphorical prose, the tropical gothic affirms a deep connection between the materiality of religious devotion, agricultural fertility, and the tropical environment.

To further discuss the agential nature of tropical heat and its transformative effects on the body, we turn to "The Dying Wanton." Set in 1613 in Manila, the plot revolves around Currito Lopez, a soldier in the Spanish regiment who is notorious throughout town for his

rowdy and indecent behavior. Regarded as a “lost soul” by all, this wanton is nevertheless known to the pious Doña Ana de Vera, who is in charge of the wardrobe of the “Santo Rosario” Madonna. While going about her routine of disrobing and robing the statue, Doña Ana is first surprised and then accustomed to seeing Currito, also praying with his rosary in a corner of the chapel. One day, before he sets out with the troops to Cavite, Currito humbly implores her blessing for this perilous mission, which she freely gives. Along the way, the ship is wrecked by a storm and while some saved themselves by swimming ashore, Currito included, the “natives who had been impressed into service” turned on their “cruel masters” (19), hurling rocks or pushing them off cliffs till all were dead or dying. By a supernatural dilation of time, Currito does not expire immediately but experiences a divine vision of the Virgin, repents bitterly, and survives long enough to convey his miraculous experience to the crew of another Spanish ship.

At first glance, the story reads as a modern retelling of a Catholic miracle tale, but on closer inspection, Joaquin’s story ironically abjures any direct and unquestioning belief in divine intervention. Though Doña Ana receives a sign of Currito’s death and his redemption in a dream, she does not recognize the muddy hem of the “Santo Rosario” Madonna and mud-stained boots of the Child as additional evidence. Instead, she blames the lady who last attired the Virgin, exclaiming “how impious, how sacrilegious of a carelessness” (30). Despite her piety, Doña Ana is revealed as no less churlish than others and the earlier scene of divine intervention is superseded by small-minded judgement. This final scene is Joaquin’s addition to a 1613 pious legend originally recorded in Spanish by the Dominican historian, Fray Diego de Aduarte. As Florentino H. Hornedo outlines, Currito’s character is based on the peninsular Don Francisco Lopez, who had died on the coast of Mindoro in October 1613. Lopez similarly kept up a private devotion to the Virgin and lived for thirteen days after being shipwrecked without food and water (298).

The power of the tropical sun is powerfully visualized, in Joaquin's version, as a visceral description of Currito's decaying and worm-infested body. In Hornedo's translation from the Spanish, all the rescue crew could see of Lopez was "a body covered with worms, a frightful corpse which was wound all over" (306). "His face and body was horribly swollen, and was monstrously disfigured" while "the rotting flesh became infested with worms which could be removed by the handfuls, which were coming in and out of the wounds" (304). By contrast, Joaquin's version amplifies details of advanced decay and ironically, the sense of motility and organic life of a decaying corpse:

But its body was bloated, its face horribly mutilated, and the entire carcass, from head to foot, a single enormous, greyly gaping, hotly odorous wound, swarming with flies and oozing pus and a foul oil and so thickly matted with worms you could scoop them out by the fistful, as the most flesh seemed to have been scooped out indeed, having fallen away in so many places the skeleton already glittered triumphant through the last decayed rags of mortality. But this pile of rot moved its eyes and opened its mouth, calling Salgado by name; proclaiming itself Currito Lopez ; and asking did Salgado not know him? (28)

How should we read this odd placement of body horror in this contemporary reworking of a Catholic miracle tale? An initial response might classify this as a gothic trope of excess, with a view to its reintegration within a divine and social order, given Currito's testimony and repentance for a life of hedonism. As Paul Sharrad has also noted, the wanton's presence in the Philippines is a result of the military and political structure of the time (357). However, as this essay has suggested thus far, the materiality of biotic processes is crucial to the tropicity of the gothic, because it also demonstrates the climactic locality of the Philippines,

refigured as ecological imagining. Joaquin's extended description of Currito's protracted dying registers quite the opposite: the life that has been extended, by way of religious devotion, for thirteen days, melds into a buzzing scene of saprophytic activity. If we invert the human-centric focus on Currito's dying, it becomes possible to otherwise interpret this evocation of a "hotly odorous wound" and living "pile of rot" as more-than-human life. Such a scene presents a significant reversal of discourses of tropicity, where "the abundant and tiresome insects, the rapid processes of putrefaction and decay, and the offensive smells of swamps and rotting vegetation added to the acute, indeed palpable, sense of tropical danger" (Arnold, *Warm Climates* 15). Certainly, the rotting corpse in a grave is "where humanity not only comes into contact with this form of monstrous nature but also becomes monstrous and othered through the process of decomposition" (Kniss 73). But for ecocritics, the corpse also implies a transcorporeal permeability between the human and non-human, where the afterlife is understood as part of the continual life cycle of the body in its broader microbial processes (Kniss 69). Like Don Paeng, Currito is a body transformed by the climactic heat to express the energetic, animated materiality of the tropical, superseding any easy understanding of Catholic Hispanic rule as totalizing and hegemonic.

One might object to this line of thought by referring to Currito's extended encounter with the Virgin whose face first "blazed with so fearful an anger she seemed the wrath of a storm made manifest" (23). Through the intercession of whispered prayers from Doña Ana and others across the world, he does not expire, but lives long enough to repent, upon which the Madonna and Child arrive again with "a fragrant music that roared with the sea and whispered with the palms...a monstrous typhoon of fragrance made audible" (27). Praying "to be dissolved and thundered out as pure sound or pure fragrance," Currito encounters a "total wisdom" that is God (27). In an astounding turn, his request for immediate death is denied and he is left with a decaying but living corpse that speaks his story. These metaphors

of the tropical storm highlight once again the material agency of tropical locality. More crucially, Currito's sins that earlier cause his body to putrefy and sprout worms are transformed into a living testimony of corruptibility as life—a fitting biotic document for Currito who exceeds human-centric moral distinctions between good and evil. Against the Catholic belief in the incorruptible body as a sign of sanctity (Bouley 2), the extended co-existence of non-human life with Currito's sentience proposes a divergent conceptualization of tropicity as teeming with organic, saprophytic processes rather than decomposition. Writing just after the American period, Joaquin's depiction reads both as a grotesque satire of the white colonizer's sanitized physique and a carnivalesque reinvention of the tropical Filipino body.

Currito's un-dead state bears a curious resemblance to zombie life. As Rune Graulund explains in "The Zombie Tropocalypse," the origins of the zombie in African mythology prior to its transatlantic transfer into the Haitian context of slavery, oppression and religious syncretism make it "indigenous to the hot and sweltering tropics" (28). Now a figure that has migrated into popular culture and cinema as a global monstrosity, the tropical zombie departs from the gloomy setting of most gothic filmsets to feature "vistas of lushly opulent forests and fields (30). For Graulund, the zombie is part of an entropic disaster narrative distinct from apocalyptic treatments, and the continuous return of the undead indicates a vitalism of excessive life, "albeit in increasingly disorganised forms that gradually break down any kind of human order" (37). Rather than returning from the dead, Currito's testifying voice emanates from a more-than-human entity, a "heap of ripe carrion save that its eyes moved and sounds rattled in its throat" (28). Ostensibly bespeaking the miracle of a life prolonged, Currito is in fact filled with non-human life when he is denied beauty, but not sanctity. In his exultant final moments, the wanton in his embodied sordidness de-valorizes Hispanic imperialism and is inhabited by the living terroir of the tropical Philippines.

To conclude, tropicality and the tropical are not simply ornamental features of Joaquin's early fiction. Though he was not intentionally ecological, Joaquin's apprehension of the tropical as part of Philippine climactic locality comprises a distinct mode of the tropical gothic, as distinct from European gothic and its later iterations in the Americas. The tropical aesthetics of "The Summer Solstice" and "The Legend of Dying Wanton" reside not only in a subversion of northern and temperate climactic markers, but in the scripting of agency within an affirmative discourse of tropicality. Hence the tropical gothic in Joaquin's fiction tropicalizes the gothic, so that representations of human physicality go beyond social imaginaries to express tropical materiality through the transcorporeal nature of transformed, more-than-human bodies. During his writing career, Joaquin confronted the fraught nature of a Philippines caught between American influence and the spectral nature of a Hispanic and pre-colonial past. Tropicality, then, represents a charged resignification of heat and corporeality to effect a biotemporality fully expressive of Philippine history—itsself part of Joaquin's many-hued and eclectic mythologies of the Philippines as a beloved locale.

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